

# IDLENESS AND THE VERY SPARING HAND OF GOD: THE INVISIBLE TIE BETWEEN HUME'S *DIALOGUES CONCERNING NATURAL RELIGION* AND SMITH'S *WEALTH OF NATIONS*

BY  
PAOLO SANTORI 

*In the eighteenth-century Scottish and British cultural context, idleness was a central issue for religion, literature, art, and philosophy. This paper analyzes the reflections of David Hume and Adam Smith on idleness and commercial society. Hume advanced his most provocative view on the subject in his Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion (1779), where idleness is represented as the endowment made by the “very sparing hand” of the “author of nature” to humanity. My argument is that Smith’s view on idleness that was advanced in the Wealth of Nations (1776) is connected to Hume’s Dialogues, as Smith’s invisible hand defeats idleness through a combination of self-interest, the propensity to exchange, and the division of labor. The broader aim of this study is to add to the philosophical relationship between the Scottish philosophers.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

In a letter to Adam Smith (1723–1790), David Hume (1711–1776) commented on Smith’s situation in 1754, “As you are now idle (I mean, having nothing but your Class to teach: Which to you is comparative to Idleness)” (Hume 2020, p. 290). In a later letter, dated 1759, Hume explained why he agreed to continue *History of England*: “It is chiefly as a resource against Idleness, that I shall undertake this Work: For, as to Money, I have

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Paolo Santori: Tilburg University, Department of Philosophy, Netherlands. [P.Santori@tilburguniversity.edu](mailto:P.Santori@tilburguniversity.edu). Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the conference “Tolerance, Sociability, and Solidarity” at the University of Lausanne in March 2019, as well as at the Charles Gide Workshops at TELUQ University (Canada) of the same year. The author also presented a refined version at the Conference on Modern Philosophy of the University of Prague in September 2020. He would like to particularly thank Jimena Hurtado, Michele Bee for guidance on this project, and Margaret Schabas, Robert Sugden, and Luigino Bruni for their comments. Thanks are also due to the two/three anonymous referees of this journal for their helpful questions and suggestions.

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enough: And as to Reputation, what I have wrote already will be sufficient, if it be good: If not, it is not likely I shall now write better” (Hume 1847, p. 163). In another 1766 letter to Smith, Hume praised his condition: “Cui bono? Why should I forgo Idleness and Sauntering and Society; and expose myself again to the Clamours of a stupid, factious Public? I am not yet tir’d of doing nothing” (Smith 1987, p. 89). These passages demonstrate that references to idleness to describe their personal conditions were a recurring topic in Hume and Smith’s correspondence. However, this paper will show that, for both thinkers, idleness was also a philosophical issue of utmost importance.

Hume and Smith enjoyed a beautiful and long-lasting friendship (Rasmussen 2017). A large and growing stream of literature seeks to reconstruct the intellectual relationship between the two (Haakonssen 1989; Manzer 1996; Marshall 2000; Levy and Peart 2004; Rasmussen 2017; Berry 2018; Fry 2018; Matson, Doran, and Klein 2019; Trincado 2019; Schabas and Wennerlind 2008, 2020). Comparing Hume’s and Smith’s thought is in fact fundamental to obtaining an accurate picture of Scottish Enlightenment, the birth of political economy, and, above all, modernity.

The present study aims to contribute to the literature focusing on the role of idleness in Hume’s and Smith’s thought. Both philosophers conceive of human beings as naturally inclined to idleness and describe the negative effects of idle life. The industriousness typical of commercial society is indicated by Hume and Smith as the antidote to the excesses of idleness. At the same time, as shown by their correspondence, both praise an idle life *under certain conditions*.

Hume considers idleness in all his major works, but a particularly comprehensive account of idleness and commercial society is imbued in a theological argument in his posthumous *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion (DCNR)* ([1779] 1935). The argument developed there seems to be connected to many parts of the first book of the *Wealth of Nations (WN)* ([1776] 1981). Smith, who read the *DCNR* long before 1779, could have had Hume’s ideas in mind when developing his economic theses. Hence, my present study aims to show the plausibility of this philosophical connection grounded on the topic of idleness. In doing so, I add to the understanding of Hume and Smith’s intellectual relationship, i.e., the tie uniting the *DCNR* and the *WN*.

It is not a new thesis that idleness is a fundamental concept to understanding the birth of political economy (Hundert 1974; Marshall 2000; Davis 2003) and eighteenth-century culture (Jordan 2003; Adelman 2011; Fludernik 2017). What is less obvious is that idleness holds a central role in Hume’s and Smith’s philosophies and constitutes a bond between them. Hume and Smith linked idleness to the luxury of the upper classes and the poor attitudes towards work of the lower classes (Brewer 1998). However, both thinkers significantly extended their considerations to the human condition. In the eighteenth century, the discourse on idleness was no longer confined to the highest and lowest classes (Fludernik 2017).

In his series of essays published in the London newspaper *The Universal Chronicle*—later published as *The Idler*—Samuel Johnson (1709–1784) lists many definitions of idleness: “ease and pleasure as opposed to duty and business” (#1: 15 April 1758, pp. 4–5); “the common desire of mankind” (#1, pp. 3–4); “equivalence of idleness and indolence” (#9: 10 June 1758, p. 30); “*vis inertiae*: inactivity, stupor, languor, drowsiness” (#9, p. 31); and “calm repose vs. business” (#19: 19 August 1758, p. 59) (Fludernik 2017, p. 142). In what follows, I will show that all these elements are central to Hume’s and Smith’s philosophies. For now, Johnson’s portrait legitimizes my

choice to use “idleness” and “indolence” as synonyms when analyzing Hume’s and Smith’s thoughts.

The paper is structured as follows. The next section sketches the role of idleness in the eighteenth-century British and Scottish cultural context. In the third section, I describe the topic of idleness throughout Hume’s thought, highlighting a tension between Hume’s main works and some important parts of the *DCNR*. The fourth section analyzes idleness in Smith’s thought, focusing on the passages of the *WN* that seem naturally connected to the *Dialogues*. I then advance a possible interpretation of Hume’s and Smith’s ideal dialogue on idleness as a theological matter.

## II. BACKGROUND: IDLENESS IN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY BRITISH AND SCOTTISH SOCIETIES

Idleness is a multifaceted concept. Long before the eighteenth century, idleness was a central concern for Christianity. The church fathers and medieval Christianity mostly interpreted idleness and indolence as a manifestation of the sin of sloth, *Acedia* (Lyman 1989; Sadlek 2004). British and Scottish modernity also received idleness through the influx of Protestant ethics described by Max Weber (Calvinism, Puritanism), which condemned idleness in favor of industriousness: “The real moral objection is to relaxation in the security of possession, the enjoyment of wealth with the consequence of idleness and the temptations of the flesh, above all of distraction of a righteous life.... Waste of time is thus the first and in principle the deadliest of sin” (Weber 2005, p. 104). Among the most well-known examples of this attitude is the *Homily Against Idleness*, part of the *Books of Homilies*, which, since the sixteenth century, has been an important part of the ceremony of the Church of England along with the exhortation of homilies by the Presbyterian-Puritan priest Richard Baxter (Weber 2005). The religious atmosphere that Hume and Smith absorbed in the eighteenth century was filled with the condemnation of idleness and indolence.

A minor stream of philosophical and religious thought about idleness is represented by Christian Epicureanism. Pierre Gassendi (1592–1655), among others, adopted Augustine’s motto: “*Vitam beatam in voluptate, hoc est, tranquillitate mentis et indolentia corporis, sitam esse*” (the good life consists of pleasure, peace of the mind, and absence of physical pain) (Force 2003, p. 51). Rather than being a vice, a certain degree of indolence was a central element of conducting a good life. Something similar was present in Michel de Montaigne’s (1533–1592) essay *Of Idleness*, where widespread negative judgment was reverted to praise of an idle life. Montaigne aimed to return to Rome’s *otium*, but he went even further when he inexorably connected idleness to a good life (Krause 2000). Montaigne was more Pyrrhonian than Epicurean (Popkin 1979), and it is hard to list him among the Christian authors, even if he declared himself a Christian. What is certain is that his ideas regarding idleness strongly refuted the widespread spirit of condemnation.

Idleness was also present in art and literature. The series of engravings entitled “Idleness and Industry” (Paulson 1974; Shesgreen 1976) by William Hogarth in 1747 present a clear example of the general spirit of condemnation of idleness. Twelve scenes describe the contrast between the industrious worker, awarded for his efforts with a good

job, a beautiful family, and social prestige, and the idle worker, who obtains evils from his idle attitude. Plate One shows two young apprentices learning work from their master. The engraving reinforces the attitudes of both young people: one is focused on his work, and the other has a lost gaze.

Eighteenth-century British literature was embedded in the mindset of British society, whose members defined themselves through the avoidance and firm condemnation of an idle life (Jordan 2003). Idleness could be attributed to women, lower and upper classes, different races, and foreign countries but not to the English bourgeois class, whose excellence lay instead in its industriousness. The British mentality was also central to Scottish literature, as shown by the ironic poem *The Castle of Indolence* (1748) by James Thomson.

Sarah Jordan (2003) shows the tensions emerging in the literature: British and Scottish writers highlighted the double hypocrisy of the social disapproval of idleness. On the one hand, behind the hypocritical censures, idleness remained the real driving force of society, whose upper classes extensively indulged in leisure. This was represented, for example, in the comedy *The School for Scandal* (1777) by Richard Brinsley Sheridan (Fest 2014). The characters from the upper classes, free of any encumbrances from working activities, indulged in scandals, gossiping, jokes, and intrigue. On the other hand, the moral censure, as argued by working-class writers (Jordan 2003, ch. 2), was a means to extract as much labor as possible from poor workers. The reaction of Romantic authors, such as William Coleridge, William Wordsworth, and Mary Wollstonecraft, also praised idleness against the excesses of industrial life (Adelman 2011; Packham 2012). This could be read as an additional outcome of such eighteenth-century hypocrisy.

Given this background, it is not surprising that idleness was also a concern for many contemporaries of Hume and Smith. Bernard de Mandeville set the stage for the discussion on the role of idleness in society. This is not only because his “hive” prospered thanks to the exchange between the industrious bees and the ones who lived an idle and dissolute life but also because he opposed idleness regarding labor as far as the poor working class was concerned. He believed that poor people should not be schooled because it would distract them from daily labor. In his essay “On Charity and Charity Schools” contained in *The Fable of the Bees*, Mandeville stated that “Going to School in comparison to Working is Idleness” (Mandeville in Jordan 2003, p. 39).

Another association formed in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was between the rural aristocracy (landowners) and idleness. Landowners’ idleness resulted in uncultivated fertile lands, provoking the critical judgment of the bourgeoisie. In the words of Lord Kames:

The country, growing in population, affords not corn sufficient for its inhabitants; and yet waste land abounds which some skill and much industry would fertilize. Is it not deplorable that in the best cultivated shires large patches of land should produce nothing but broom and whins, not from barrenness but from indolence? Can greater encouragement to industry be wished than a ready market for everything the soil produced? (Home 2014, p. x)

This quote from Lord Kames expresses another attitude shared by British and Scottish authors. Similar ideas can be found in Anthony Cooper (2000, p. 91), George Robertson (1830, ch. “On the Motives to Industry”), James Stuart (1805, pp. 140–142), and the

anonymous pamphlet *Reasons for Improving the Fisheries and Linen Manufacturers of Scotland* (1727, in Seki 2003).

Class analysis on idleness had a precise goal: understanding the incentives that could stir people out of their natural idleness toward an industrious (working class) and entrepreneurial (landowning) mindset. The common element of idleness in these two classes lies in the consumption of luxury goods. For the poor working class, this belief was translated into the utility of poverty (UP) thesis (Shovlin 2008; Martin 2015). The UP thesis proposed that the wages of the working class should be kept low, allowing workers to satisfy their basic needs but to obtain few other pleasures (Rotwein in Hume 2017; Soule 2000). The reason lies in human psychology: members of this class work hard to obtain the necessities of life, but as soon as their income rises, their natural idleness leads to less effort in their labor and the waste of surplus money on luxury goods. In the next section, I describe how Hume harshly contradicted this view.

Idleness was more than a class-related attitude. Francis Hutcheson, Smith's predecessor in the chair of moral philosophy at Glasgow, clearly expressed this view. Hutcheson stated that idleness is not limited to aristocratic luxury or lower-class attitudes. When rightly regulated by sensation and reflection, the affection or self-love grounded on our moral senses is not vicious, as Mandeville asserted, but rather coincides with public affections directed to the public good. However, "we should find that without these Principles in our Nature, we should feel the one half at least of our present *Pleasure* or *Pains*: and that our Nature would be almost reduced to *Indolence*" (Hutcheson 1769, p. 78). Unregulated self-love brings indolence, while regulated affections can tone down this anthropological trait. Unlike Hutcheson, Hume and Smith show that indolence is undermined by man's endowment of natural sentiments, which generally produces good consequences in human interactions. Nevertheless, they share with Hutcheson the idea that idleness cannot be considered an attribute only of particular social classes but that it constitutes an anthropological feature present in all human beings.

As well, idleness was analyzed from a historical genealogical perspective. A common belief of eighteenth-century philosophers was that idleness and ingenuity were two character traits from precommercial societies: "Their aversion to every sort of employment they hold to be mean, makes them pass the greater part of their time in idleness or sleep" (Ferguson 1767, p. 137). Then, "as they grow busy and employed, they grow regular and good. Their petulance and vice forsakes them with their idleness and ease" (Cooper 2000, p. 214). The emergence of commercial society is the antidote to natural human idleness. Hume's and Smith's philosophies of history echo this idea.

The context roughly sketched here shows that idleness was not a marginal topic in the cultural context in which Hume and Smith developed their ideas. It is not surprising, then, to find that both philosophers are constantly concerned about the consequences of idleness for personal and social life.

### III. HUME ON IDLENESS: FROM THE *TREATISE* TO THE *DIALOGUES CONCERNING NATURAL RELIGION*

Indolence is a recurrent topic in Hume's works. I will develop two intertwined patterns of Hume's argumentation, one concerning indolence as a natural feature of human

beings and the other on the remedies of indolence related to the advent of commercial society. Smith, who carefully read the *DCNR*, seems to address the same arguments in his own economic view of idleness in the *WN*. The two patterns converge in the *DCNR*, where Hume proposed his longer and more developed dissertation on indolence. Until the *DCNR*, Hume solved the problem of idleness within the broader context of his theory of spontaneous order (Paulson 1974; Sugden 1989), one of the characteristic features of Hume's theory. What is less known is that he changed his view on idleness, and implicitly on his former positions, in the *DCNR*. This section is devoted to highlighting this tension in Hume's thought.

A particular line of thought regarding indolence connects the *Treatise of Human Nature* ([1739–1740] 1896), the *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* ([1748] 2007), and *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* ([1751] 2006). Hume conceived indolence as a natural quality or habit that generally undermines the application to work or business of any sort. Indolence reduces the amount and concentration of effort that are usually put into action. In the *Treatise*, Hume is careful to express a negative judgment on indolence:

[M]ost of the qualities, which are attributed to them, may be divided into two kinds, *viz.* such as make them perform their part in society; and such as render them serviceable to themselves, and enable them to promote their own interest. Their *prudence, temperance, frugality, industry, assiduity, enterprize, dexterity*, are celebrated, as well as their *generosity and humanity*. If we ever give an indulgence to any quality, that disables a man from making a figure in life, 'tis to that of *indolence*, which is not suppos'd to deprive one of his parts and capacity, but only suspends their exercise; and that without any inconvenience to the person himself, since 'tis, in some measure, from his own choice. (Hume 1896, p. 388)

Despite the human indulgence of this habit, idleness must be condemned: “Yet indolence is always allow'd to be a fault, and a very great one, if extreme” (Hume 1896, p. 388). Through unconfutable reasoning, Hume shows why indolence must be judged negatively:

Suppose a quality, that without being an indication of any other good qualities, incapacitates a man always for business, and is destructive to his interest; such as a blundering understanding, and a wrong judgment of every thing in life; inconstancy and irresolution; or a want of address in the management of men and business: These are all allowed to be imperfections in a character; and many men would rather acknowledge the greatest crimes, than have it suspected, that they are, in any degree, subject to them. (Hume 1896, pp. 388–389)

Similar passages can be found in the two *Enquiries*, where it is argued that man's indolence, “hating the bustle of the world and drudgery of business” (Hume [1748] 2007, p. 41), “incapacitates him for business and action” and naturally produces “sentiments of pain and disapprobation” (Hume 1854, p. 38). Moreover, the first *Enquiry* reveals the inherent risks of the identification of indolence with the Stoic *otium*, which could be an attempt to further connect indulgence to man's natural bad habits (Hume [1748] 2007). What are, according to Hume, the remedies for this problematic feature of human beings?

The Scottish philosopher did not see the cultivation of personal character as an antidote to indolence. Instead, he considered the cure to emerge as the outcome of spontaneous processes. In John G. A. Pocock's words, "It is part of what made Hume a great historian in the eighteenth century that he saw commerce and passion as dynamic forces contributing both to the construction of political society" (Pocock 2016, p. 497). As he made clear in the *Treatise*, social order—commerce, justice, morals—all emerge as spontaneous outcomes of two human features: self-interest and limited benevolence (Harrison 1980; Sugden 1989; Skinner 1993). I focus on commerce because it is strictly related to the qualities mostly undermined by idleness, such as "prudence, temperance, frugality, industry, assiduity, enterprize, dexterity" (Hume 1896, p. 388). Commerce exposes the operation of this spontaneous order in two respects (Lyon 1970; Berry 2018; Diaye and Lapidus 2019; Matson, Doran, and Klein 2019; and Schabas and Wennerlind 2008, 2020).

First, Hume stressed that men's avarice, vanity, and pride—all manifestations of self-interest—cause them to put more effort into their labor: "there are few persons ... who are not desirous of shewing themselves to the world, and of acquiring the love and approbation of mankind" (Hume 1854, p. 69). Modern commentators know that the "achievement motive" is very influential in the economic sphere (Lyon 1970; Hundert 1974): "If the employment you give him be lucrative, especially if the profit be attached to every particular exertion of industry, he has gain so often in his eye, that he acquires by degrees a passion for it, and knows no such a pleasure as that of seeing the daily increase of his fortune" (Hume 1987, p. 180). This passage from the essay "Of Interest" (1752) clearly argued that people's working attitude is aroused by the possibility of a constant and secure gain related to the effort they put into their daily work. Idleness is defeated by the influence of various forms of self-interest.

Unsurprisingly, Hume disagreed with the UP thesis. He believed that it is wrong to identify luxury with the deplorable commodities only the upper classes used. Luxury goods are neither deplorable nor laudable commodities (Hume 1987, pp. 164–165); they can produce very positive effects on the working class. Luxury goods, in fact, represent the objectification of that "achievement motive" that brings men to put great effort into their work:

Every thing in the world is purchased by labour; and our passions are the only causes of labour. When a nation abounds in manufacturers and mechanical arts, the proprietors of land, as well as the farmers, study agriculture as a science, and redouble their industry and attention. The superfluity, which arises from their labour, is not lost; but is exchanged with manufacturers for those commodities, which men's luxury now makes them covet. (Hume 1987, p. 159)

The possibility of gaining incentivized industry and attention are two qualities opposite to idleness. In his essay "Of Taxes" (1756), Hume also acknowledges that excessive wealth and luxury may bring the working class to "indulge themselves in idleness and riot" (Hume 1987, p. 455).

The second spontaneous element that counterbalances idleness was inscribed in the features of commercial society. In the essay "Of Commerce" (1752), Hume distinguishes the bulk of workers into two classes: husbandmen and manufacturers. Workers in the first category are devoted to the cultivation of land, and those in the latter to the production of commodities. This division of labor is beneficial, although

where manufacturers and mechanic arts are not cultivated, the bulk of the people must apply themselves to agriculture; and if their skill and industry increase, there must arise a great superfluity from their labour beyond what suffices to maintain them. They have no temptation, therefore, to encrease their skill and industry; since they cannot exchange that superfluity for any commodities, which may serve either to their pleasure or vanity. A habit of indolence naturally prevails. (Hume 1987, p. 158)

Hume praised the division of labor in commercial society since it eliminated the negative effects of indolence. The division of labor acts on internal commerce as well as foreign commerce.

If we consult history, we shall find, that, in most nations, foreign trade has preceded any refinement in home manufactures, and given birth to domestic luxury. The temptation is stronger to make use of foreign commodities, which are ready for use, and which are entirely new for us, than to make improvements on any domestic commodity, which always advance by slow degrees, and never affect us by their novelty. The profit is also very great, in exporting what is superfluous at home, and what bears no price, to foreign nations, whose soil or climate is not favourable to that commodity.... And this perhaps is the chief advantage which arises from a commerce with strangers. It rouses men from their indolence; and presenting the gayer and more opulent part of the nation with objects of luxury ... raises in them a desire of a more splendid way of life. (Hume 1987, p. 160)

By favoring internal trade, international trade offsets the natural idleness of human beings. Does this imply that in commercial society, there is no room for idleness?

The answer is negative. In his second political discourse, "Of Refinement of the Arts" (1752), Hume explains that individual happiness depends on action, pleasure, and indolence. Pierre Gassendi's and Michel de Montaigne's ideas echo loudly in Hume's analysis. The three features are rooted in human nature. Indolence, however, is perfectly balanced by the other two elements:

In times when industry and the arts flourish, men are kept in perpetual occupation, and enjoy, as their reward, the occupation itself, as well as those pleasures which are the fruit of their labour. The mind acquires new vigour; enlarges its powers and faculties; and by an assiduity in honest industry, both satisfies its natural appetites, and prevents the growth of unnatural ones, which commonly spring up, when nourished by ease and idleness. Banish those arts from society, you deprive men both of action and of pleasure; and leaving nothing but indolence in their place, you even destroy the relish of indolence, which never is agreeable, but when it succeeds to labour, and recruits the spirits, exhausted by too much application and fatigue. (Hume 1987, p. 164)

The philosophical argument implies a historical argument, as often happens in regard to Scottish philosophy. Men of primitive societies, where commerce was underdeveloped, were characterized by the disequilibrium of action, pleasure, and idleness. Idleness spread in the feudal world, not only among the upper classes. In the *History of England* ([1754] 1826), Hume explains, "As much as an industrious tradesman is both a better man and a better citizen than one of those idle retainers who formerly depended on the great families; so much is the life of a modern nobleman more laudable than that of an ancient baron" (Hume [1754] 1826, p. 479). The more

society advances, the more indolence is reduced and constrained such that it can contribute to personal well-being.

All things considered, Hume's position on idleness in the *DCNR*, published posthumously, is surprising. It seems to envisage a turning point in his thought, or, perhaps, a tension that remained silent in his previous works. The *DCNR* is referenced as Hume's last work even if he worked on it long before his last years in Edinburgh (Hendel 1925; Kemp Smith in Hume 1935; Hume 1971; O'Connor 2011; Tweyman 2012). What is sure is that it is "the centrepiece of Hume's philosophy of religion" (O'Connor 2011, p. 23). In the *DCNR*, it is argued that God has not bestowed man with enough propensity to industry and labor, leaving him at the mercy of his natural idleness. Hume went even further in arguing that all human and natural evils can be traced to a coupled lack of industry and idleness. The interaction between other human wants, including self-interest, mitigates but does not eliminate human inaction caused by idleness. To better understand Hume's turning point, it is worthwhile to further evaluate the argument developed in the *DCNR*.

Idleness was considered in the *DCNR* within the broader question of theodicy. Theodicy, i.e., how an almighty God can allow a world full of evils, was fundamental during the eighteenth century. "Almost every learned Englishman and still more every learned Scotsman, it would seem, at some stage of his career felt impelled to publish his views on 'The Origin of Evil'" (Viner 1972, p. 58). The *DCNR* has three main protagonists: Cleanthes, Demea, and Philo. It has long been debated which character best represents Hume's position: the theist a priori Demea, the theist a posteriori Cleanthes, or, more plausibly, Philo, the sceptic, sometimes atheist, sometimes weak deist.<sup>1</sup>

In chapter XI, Philo sets out his views on theodicy in contrast to both Christian revelation and the theist and deist arguments. In these pages, a form of atheism is advanced. Not only is it a form of respect of the "non-existence of the Christian God" (Williams 1936, p. 77), but it also discloses a moral atheism "relative to all forms of theism" (O'Connor 2011, p. 16). The strongest point of Philo/Hume's argument relies on four proofs showing that worldly evils are incompatible with an almighty and benevolent God or deity. These arguments persist undisputed in the remaining chapters of the *DCNR*. In my view, this is the decisive proof that Hume endorsed Philo's position or, more cautiously, was not able to evade the atheism at which his reasoning arrived. Readers of the early version of the text argued that it is wrong to identify Hume's position with Philo's. Since 1751, Hume had tried to make clear that Cleanthes was the true "hero of the Dialogue" (Hume 1971, p. xcvi). However, I maintain that this was due to the fear that "most of Hume's contemporaries would have considered his criticism of natural religion offensive both to religion and morality" (Coleman 2007, p. xiv). Hume was often accused of being an atheist throughout his life (Coleman 2007, p. xxxix). Hume, however, refused to be identified as an atheist, finding the category of "sceptic" more appropriate for his true thought (Coleman 2007, p. xxxix). In other words, Hume's skepticism seems undeniably closer to Philo's atheism than to Demea's or Cleanthes's religious beliefs. Reading the dialogues gives the same impression.

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<sup>1</sup> "Deism" is the belief in a supernatural source of the universe who regulates human destiny, while "theism" affirms that there is a personal creator and designer of the universe who is good and cares about human destiny individually.

Philo/Hume's third argument regarding evil and God's benevolence is related to idleness. What exactly was Philo's reasoning? Philo asks:

Is the world, considered in general, and as it appears to us in this life, different from what a man or such a limited being would, *beforehand*, expect from a very powerful, wise, and benevolent deity? It must be strange prejudice to assert the contrary. And from thence I conclude, that, however consistent the world may be, allowing certain suppositions and conjectures, with the idea of such a deity, it can never afford us an inference concerning his existence. (Hume in Coleman 2007, p. 80)

He then goes on to explain the reason for such a strong statement: "There seem to be *four* circumstances, on which depend all, or the greatest part of the ills, that molest sensible creatures; and it is not impossible, but all these circumstances may be necessary and unavoidable" (Hume in Coleman 2007, p. 80). Hume implies that our experience shows us that the world is full of evils; hence, nothing can convince us that a benevolent God or his Providence is at work. Philo is in fact rejecting Cleanthe's a posteriori arguments for God's existence since he already refused Demea's a priori argumentation in previous chapters. This is perfectly coherent with Hume's theoretical philosophy, in which he questions not only the principle of causality by refusing to find a priori connections in nature but relies on experience to identify some regularities in nature. What does experience teach about the human condition?

Every animal has the requisite endowments; but these endowments are bestowed with so scrupulous an economy, that any considerable diminution must entirely destroy the creature.... The human species, *whose chief excellency is reason and sagacity*, is of all the others the most necessitous, and the most deficient in bodily advantages.... An indulgent parent would have bestowed a large stock, in order to guard against accidents, and secure the happiness and welfare of the creature, in the most unfortunate concurrence of circumstances.... In order to cure most of the ills of human life, I require not that man should have the wings of the eagle, the swiftness of the stag, the force of the ox, the arms of the lion, the scales of the crocodile or rhinoceros; much less do I demand the sagacity of an angel or cherubim. I am contented to take an increase in one single power or faculty of his soul. *Let him be endowed with a greater propensity to industry and labour; a more vigorous spring and activity of mind; a more constant bent to business and application.* Let the whole species possess naturally an equal diligence with that which many individuals are able to attain by habit and reflection; and *the most beneficial consequences, without any alloy of ill, is the immediate and necessary result of this endowment.* (Hume in Coleman 2007, pp. 82–83; my italics)

Who was supposed to endow man with the aforementioned characteristics? Hume is careful to mention God because he wants to critique not only the God of revealed religion but also the deist conception of an "author of nature" or "nature," which was gaining momentum in his times. By analyzing the consequences of nature's operation, Hume directly mentions idleness as a "vice or infirmity" typical of humanity:

Almost all the moral, as well as natural evils of human life arise from idleness; and were our species, by the original constitution of their frame, exempt from this vice or infirmity, the perfect cultivation of land, the improvement of arts and manufactures,

the exact execution of every office and duty, immediately follow; and men at once may fully reach that state of society, which is so imperfectly attained by the best regulated government. But as industry is a power, and the most valuable of any, nature seems determined, suitably to her usual maxims, to bestow it on men with a *very sparing hand*; and rather to punish him severely for his deficiency in it, than to reward him for his attainments. She has so contrived his frame, that nothing but the most violent necessity can oblige him to labour; and she employs all his other wants to overcome, at least in part, *the want of diligence, and to endow him with some share of a faculty*, of which she has thought fit naturally to bereave him. (Hume in Coleman 2007, pp. 83–84; my italics)<sup>2</sup>

This passage presents three main issues that merit further analysis. First, it seems strange to affirm that, together with moral evils, natural evils are connected to idleness. How can earthquakes, pandemics, hurricanes, and other natural disasters be connected to idleness? If we follow Anthony Waterman's (2017) interpretation of the term "natural evil," under which he includes human instincts and feelings, the choice does not appear strange at all. However, I suggest an additional interpretation. What Hume, through Philo, is suggesting could be related to man's engagement with natural evils. Idleness can lead people to underestimate possible future natural evils, thus neglecting necessary precautions. To use a modern example, Amartya Sen (1999) describes how the devastating effects of famines are related more to problems with the democratic system than to natural evil itself.

Second, I cannot help but underline Hume's interesting choice of employing the term "very sparing hand" to describe the operation of nature. Given the chronological, historical, and lexical connection between the very sparing hand and Smith's invisible hand employed in the *WN*, one can legitimately wonder whether a conceptual connection exists between the two arguments. Perhaps we see here one more source of Smith's invisible hand, to add to the ones present in the literature (Eatwell, Milgate, and Newman 1987; Hirschman 1997). Let me get this point straight. It cannot be proven with absolute certainty that Smith developed his own idea of the invisible hand in response to Hume's thesis. However, the same can be argued for many other sources

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<sup>2</sup> This marks a strong difference from what Hume wrote in the Essay XVI, "The Stoic": "There is this obvious and material difference in the conduct of nature, with regard to man and other animals, that, having endowed the former with a sublime celestial spirit, and having given him an affinity with superior beings, she allows not such noble faculties to lie lethargic or idle; but urges him, by necessity, to employ, on every emergence his utmost *art* and *industry*. Brute-creatures have many of their necessities supplied by nature, being clothed and armed by this beneficent parent of all things: And where their own *industry* is requisite on any occasion, nature, by implanting instincts, still supplies them with the *art*, and guides them to their good, by her unerring precepts. But man, exposed naked and indigent to the rude elements, rises slowly from that helpless state, by the care and vigilance of his parents; and having attained his utmost growth and perfection, reaches only a capacity of subsisting, by his own care and vigilance. Every thing is sold to skill and labour; and where nature furnishes the materials, they are still rude and unfinished, till industry, ever active and intelligent, refines them from their brute state, and fits them for human use and convenience. Acknowledge, therefore, O man, the beneficence of nature; for she has given thee that intelligence which supplies all thy necessities" (Hume 1987, pp. 146–147). And, later in the same essay, he added: "But know, that nature has been indulgent to human weakness, and has not left this favourite child, naked and unendowed. She has provided virtue with the richest dowry; but being careful, lest the allurements of interest should engage such suitors, as were insensible of the native worth of so divine a beauty, she has wisely provided, that this dowry can have no charms but in the eyes of those who are already transported with the love of virtue" (Hume 1987, p. 153).

of Smith's invisible hand: Smith never referred to it as an "ironic and useful joke" (Rothschild 1994, p. 319); it might have been a reaction to James Steuart's "artful" hand of government (Menudo 2019, p. 197), or to Galiani's "Supreme Hand"—"I bless the Supreme hand every time I contemplate the order with which everything is constituted to our utility" (Galiani [1750] 1803, p. 92); he could have read it in Richard Cantillon's works (Thornton 2009), heard it in Calvinist sermons or commentaries of the Glasgow edition of John Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, published in 1762 (Harrison 2011), or even read it in Ovid (Rothschild 2013), Horace (Harrison 2011), or Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (Rothschild 1994)—just to mention a few among the numerous possible sources.<sup>3</sup> There are also two other references to an invisible hand in *History of Astronomy* and *Theory of Moral Sentiments*. As in the confrontations with these other authors and traditions, the connection with Hume's very sparing hand is aimed mostly at shedding further light on Smith's economic theory in contrast with other authors. The comparison between Hume/Philo's account and the *Wealth of Nations* points precisely in this direction.

Third, Hume mentions "all the other wants" that nature employs to undermine idleness in favor of industry. This is coherent with the spontaneous order emerging from man's self-interest and limited benevolence that, as I outlined above, naturally reduces man's indolence. Nevertheless, the *DCNR* sees these spontaneous mechanisms as palliative rather than definitive solutions to the problem of idleness and its related consequences. The conclusion of the passage is quasi-tragic: "But it is hard; I dare to repeat it, it is hard, being placed in a world so full of wants and necessities; where almost every being and element is either our foe or refuses its assistance; we should also have our own temper to struggle with, and should be deprived of that faculty, which can alone fence against these multiplied evils" (Hume in Coleman 2007, p. 84). In the *DCNR*, there are no arguments that definitively refute this outcome and thus defend the existence of an "author of nature" as "all that belongs to human understanding, in this deep ignorance and obscurity, is to be skeptical, or at least cautious; and not to admit of any hypothesis, whatever; much less, of any which is supported by no appearance of probability. Now this I assert to be the case with regard to all the causes of evil, and the circumstances, on which it depends" (Hume in Coleman 2007, p. 80). There is no remedy for man's natural indolence, which, even tempered by other wants, remains an attribute to one's conduct and life. This, according to Hume, should prevent us from affirming a plan in nature and conceding too much to spontaneous order.

At the end of this section, it would be unfair to say that Hume changed his mind about the natural remedies to idleness provided by the advent of commercial society. Rather, the *DCNR* marks a tension in Hume's reflections on this specific yet central topic and creates an invisible link with the *WN*. The very sparing hand of nature implicitly evokes the invisible hand. The next section analyzes this link within the framework of Smith's philosophical reflection.

<sup>3</sup> I refer here to just the principal authors and loci where "hands" appeared. If, leaving aside the expression "invisible hand," one wants to trace the origin of the meaning of the invisible hand and what it stands for, history becomes much more complicated, including the unintended consequences story—Mandeville, Vico, and so on.

#### IV. SMITH ON IDLENESS: THE *WEALTH OF NATIONS* AFTER THE *DIALOGUES CONCERNING NATURAL RELIGION*

One event seems to have partially undermined Hume's and Smith's camaraderie, and it was related to the publication of the *DCNR* (Phillipson 2010; Ross 2010; Kennedy 2011; Hanley 2012). As reported by Dennis Rasmussen (2017, p. 187), "It is possible that Hume shared *DCNR* with Smith in the early 1750s ... though it seems more likely that Smith did not see it until the early 1760s."<sup>4</sup> We are certain that when his health was deteriorating, Hume appointed Smith to publish his manuscript. In a personal letter, Hume bequeathed to Smith "all [his] manuscripts without exception, desiring him to publish [the] *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*" (Hume in Rasmussen 2017, p. 188).

Smith expressed perplexities, and reneged on the promise to shepherd the *Dialogues* into print as Hume lay dying. The cautious philosopher may have feared being accused of heresy or at least being considered sympathetic to Philo/Hume's "problematic" position on theology. Hume understood and replied, "Both on account of the Nature of the Work, and of your Situation, it may be improper to hurry on publication" (Hume in Rasmussen 2017, p. 189). Despite attempts to persuade him to publish the work, Hume ultimately excluded Smith, instead attempting to involve their common friend, the editor William Strahan, and then his nephew David Hume, who eventually published the *DCNR* in 1779.

When Hume died, Smith wrote a beautiful memorial (*Letter to Strahan*). Nevertheless, he harbored doubts about the manuscript of his "most excellent, and never forgotten friend" in another letter directed to Strahan: "The work 'tho' finely written I could have wished had remained in Manuscript to be communicated only to a few people. When you read the work you will see my reasons without my giving you the trouble of reading them in a letter. But [Hume] has ordered it otherwise" (Smith in Hume 1888, pp. 347–348). He then added, "The manuscript should have been most carefully preserved and upon my decease restored to [Hume]'s family; but it should never have been published in my lifetime" (Smith in Hume 1888, p. 348).

As such historical premises demonstrate, Smith was aware of Hume's argumentations in the *DCNR*. It cannot be denied that the major reason behind his refusal to publish his friend's work was his extreme caution, especially as far as theological issues were concerned (Kennedy 2011). However, I will show how the *WN* addresses indolence throughout the whole book, stressing clear connections to the *DCNR*.

In both Hume's and Smith's philosophy, man is depicted as needing the cooperation of fellow citizens to satisfy multiple wants. Smith agreed that benevolence is insufficient to move men to care for one another in society. In his last days, Hume reviewed his statement on the limited benevolence of humanity. In one of his last letters, he asked the editor to remove from his *Philosophical Works* the words "*that there is such a sentiment in human nature as benevolence*" (Hume 1888, p. 342; italics my own). Smith added a

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<sup>4</sup> Rasmussen refers to two letters of Hume directed to Gilbert Elliot, one dated 1751 and 1763, and one directed to Hugh Blair dated 1763, all containing parts of the manuscript and revised versions. He speculated that Hume may have shared with Smith the revised version of the manuscript *at least* in 1763 (Rasmussen 2017). For the purpose of this argumentation, it is important that Smith knew of the manuscript before he arrived in Toulouse, where he worked on the *WN*.

new and different element to Hume's economic reasoning, i.e., "the propensity to truck, barter, and exchange." According to Smith, this propensity makes humans more interested in communication with each other:

Man has almost constant occasion for the help of his brethren, and it is vain for him to expect from their benevolence only. He will be more likely to prevail if he can interest their self-love in his favour, and show them that it is for their own advantage to do for him what he requires of them. Whoever offers to another a bargain of any kind, proposes to do this. Give me that which I want, and you shall have this which you want, is the meaning of such offer; and it is in this manner that we obtain from one another the far greater part of those good offices which we stand in need of. (Smith 1981, p. 26)

That "the propensity" facilitates this encounter of interests was also explained by Smith in the *Lectures of Jurisprudence* ([1762–1763] 1978) with regard to the more basic propensity to persuade: "the offering of a shilling, which to us appears to have so plain and simple a meaning, is in reality offering an argument to persuade one to do so and so as it is for his interest" (Smith [1762–1763] 1978, p. 352; Lewis 2000; Fleischaker 2004; Schliesser 2013). In terms of Philo/Hume, "the propensity" is the means through which Nature puts men's wants in communication "to overcome, at least in part, the want of diligence" (Hume in Coleman 2007, pp. 84). How does this happen? Smith proves his point by connecting three key elements (propensity, self-interest, and division of labor) of his economic anthropology: "And thus the certainty of being able to exchange all that surplus part of the produce of his own labour ... encourages every man to apply himself to a particular occupation, and to cultivate and bring to perfection whatever talent of genius he may possess for that particular species of business" (Smith [1776] 1981, p. 28). Before being the cause of the division of labor, the *propensity* is the cause of man's dedication to work (Foley 1983; Henderson and Samuels 2004). What Smith implicitly replied to Philo/Hume is that nature did not directly bestow man with the propensity to work hard and refuse idleness. The operation of nature is different. Man is bestowed with a fundamental *propensity* that facilitates the communication of different interests, which arouses his motivation to work. In other words, if self-interest is the main drive behind human actions, the *propensity* creates the channels in which self-interest finds its fullest expression. Hence, Philo/Hume's third argument about evil proving God's inexistence is confuted, and the spontaneous economic order can arise unimpaired by idleness.

To better understand this point, it could be useful to analyze the reverse of Smith's argument. Let us imagine men without the *propensity*. They will not see any advantage coming from work, or, more precisely, their natural tendency for idleness will override self-interested motives encouraging the application to work. This will bring us to the situation described by Philo/Hume. Conversely, Smith's propensity creates a common grammar enabling man's self-interests to communicate. As far as the butcher, the baker, and the brewer are concerned, "We address ourselves, not to their humanity but to their self-love, and never talk to them of our own necessities but of their advantages" (Smith [1776] 1981, p. 27). Through the propensity, man's self-love/self-interest (i.e., the possibility of obtaining gains from trade) becomes effective and creates dedicated efforts

to work. The evil of human idleness is defeated by a combination of propensity and self-interest.<sup>5</sup>

Assuming that my reconstruction of the connection between the *DCNR* and the *WN* is right, Smith's argument should reverse the outcomes of Philo/Hume's reasoning. If the propensity counters idleness, then "the most beneficial consequences, without any allay of ill, are the immediate and necessary result of this endowment" (Hume in Coleman 2007, p. 83). Philo/Hume mention "the perfect cultivation of land," "the improvement of the arts," and the "exact execution of every office and duty." In summary, Philo/Hume says, "Men at once may fully reach that state of society, which is so imperfectly attained by the best regulated government" (Hume in Coleman 2007, p. 83). If one reads the first book of the *WN* through this lens, it is impossible not to observe an attempt to prove how the beneficial consequences listed by Hume derive from the propensity combined within the "division of labor" and "self-interest." In other words, the progressive operation of "the invisible hand" replaces "the very sparing hand" mentioned in the *DCNR*.

The introduction and first two chapters of the first book make the substitution clear. First, Smith affirms that "the annual labour of every nation is the fund which originally supplies it with all the necessaries and conveniences of life" and that, in this respect, "the skill, dexterity, and judgment with which its labour is generally applied" plays a decisive role (Smith [1776] 1981, p. 10). In chapter I, he remarks that "the greater part of the skill, dexterity, and judgement" of humankind (Smith [1776] 1981, p. 13) is the effect of the division of labor. To conclude the argument, he envisages the division of labor as the natural and gradual consequence of "the propensity" to interact with man's self-interest.

The division of labor is related to idleness in another respect. Specialization in one repetitive task blocks men from passing work to one another. According to Smith, this prevents the rise of man's natural indolence when he has to apply himself to different forms of labor, employing different tools and techniques many times a day:

A man commonly saunters a little in turning his hand from one sort of employment to another.... The habit of sauntering and of indolent careless application, which is naturally, or rather necessarily acquired by every country workman who is obliged to change his work and his tools every half hour ... renders him almost always slothful and lazy, and incapable of any vigorous application even on the most pressing occasions. (Smith [1762–1763] 1978, p. 491; Smith [1776] 1981, p. 19)

The idea that the division of labor fosters man's industry does not imply, according to Smith, that man must always apply himself to work. This is not only because the excessive division of labor has a problematic effect on man's "intellectual, social and martial virtues" (Smith [1776] 1981, p. 735). Too much industry and application can bring back the specter of idleness:

Excessive application during four days of the week, is frequently the real cause of the idleness of the other three, so much and so loudly complained of. Great labour, either of

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<sup>5</sup> For reasons of length, I cannot deal with the various interpretations of Smith's self-interest (Young 1997; Paganelli 2008; Slegers 2018; Maurer 2019; Werhane 2019), and neither can I consider the effect of other economic anthropological elements, such as the "desire to better one's conditions" (Paganelli 2009) or "the desire of deserved esteem" (Bee 2021) for idleness. However, I believe my argument holds even if one were to adopt these alternative perspectives.

mind or body, continued for several days together, is in most men naturally followed by a great desire of relaxation, which, if not restrained by force or by some strong necessity, is almost irresistible. It is the call of nature, which requires to be relieved by some indulgence, sometimes of ease only, but sometimes too of dissipation and diversion. If it is not complied with, the consequences are often dangerous, and sometimes fatal, and such as almost always, sooner or later, bring on the peculiar infirmity of the trade. If masters would always listen to the dictates of reason and humanity, they have frequently occasion rather to moderate, than to animate the application of many of their workmen. It will be found, I believe, in every sort of trade, that the man who works so moderately, as to be able to work constantly, not only preserves his health the longest, but, in the course of the year, executes the greatest quantity of work. (Smith [1776] 1981, p. 100)

This extraordinarily relevant passage pertains to workers' productivity, which is raised by balancing industry and idleness rather than removing the latter. All of the *WN* could be read as an attempt to address the problem of idleness. Another well-known example is related to the destination of funds toward productive labor that, as Smith declared, rendered his generation more industrious than their forefathers (Smith [1776] 1981, p. 335; Fleischacker 2009, p. 137). The same can be argued for the proportion between capital and revenue. Increased capital is connected to industry and decreased revenue to less idleness. As demonstrated by the history of Scottish cities, such as Glasgow and Edinburgh, "The proportion between capital and revenue, therefore, seems everywhere to regulate the proportion between industry and idleness" (Smith [1776] 1981, p. 337). Capital and funds fight idleness in the upper class (in the form of noblemen's revenue), middle class (entrepreneurs), and lower classes (workers).

Furthermore, idleness is related to unproductive labor. Smith praises frugality and parsimony because they allow funds to be destined for the sustenance of productive labor, while he condemns idleness in the rest of the book. As Jimena Hurtado rightly showed, Smith reacts to Mandeville, who, on the contrary, sees frugality as honesty, as a "mean starving Virtue" and "an idle dreaming virtue that employs no Hands" (Hurtado 2004, p. 15).

In summary, the *WN* seems to address Philo/Hume's argument, bringing Smith to adopt, with some differences, Hume's perspective—*DCNR* excluded—on the beneficial outcomes of commercial society. It is significant that in the third book of the *WN*, Smith describes his analysis as being in continuity with Hume's:

Thirdly, and lastly, commerce and manufactures gradually introduced order and good government, and with them, the liberty and security of individuals, among the inhabitants of the country, who had before lived almost in a continual state of war with their neighbours and of servile dependency upon their superiors. This, though it has been the least observed, is by far the most important of all their effects. Mr. Hume is the only writer who, so far as I know, has hitherto taken notice of it. (Smith [1776] 1981, p. 412)

I sporadically mentioned the *Lectures of Jurisprudence*. Was idleness also a central topic in Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759, henceforth *TMS*)? Richard Adelman (2011) argues that Smith imbues inactivity due to idleness with the repose and tranquility required by the work of sympathy and an impartial spectator. It partially resembles the idleness that Jean-Jacques Rousseau described as characterizing humanity before the emergence of commercial society (Paganelli, Rasmussen, and Smith 2018), even if

Smith found in the French philosopher's writing a stylistic exaggeration in the description of indolence (Smith 1982). As Smith pointed out in his letter to the *Edinburgh Review*, "Mr Rousseau, intending to paint the savage life as the happiest of any, presents only the indolent side of it to view, which he exhibits indeed with the most beautiful and agreeable colors" (Smith 1982, p. 251). For Rousseau, this good idleness is destroyed with the advent of commercial society, where the luxurious idleness/indolence of the few is fostered by the inhumane working condition of others—a point even Mandeville would have agreed with, although, like Smith, he would not have shared Rousseau's blame on commercial society (Hurtado 2004, p. 10).

Not surprisingly, Adelman (2011) underlines a tension between the *TMS* and the *WN*: "We could say that Smith's attempt, in the *Wealth of Nations*, to align human activities and desires with the model of the division of labor, encounters the problem of human nature as he had already expressed it in the *Theory*" (Adelman 2011, p. 30). I agree with Adelman that idleness for Smith is a central feature of human beings, and it is extensively considered in the *TMS*. I disagree with the idea that in the *TMS*, Smith held only a positive view about idleness, since there are few passages of the *TMS* where indolence is considered negatively (Smith [1759] 1984, pp. 57, 106, 153, 344). The *WN* could then be read as an attempt to find a balance between the idleness the *TMS* praises and the negative idleness the division of labor must defeat.

## V. CONCLUSION: A THEOLOGICAL READING?

At the end of this long journey, which started from the British and Scottish cultures and crossed Hume's and Smith's texts, I can affirm that one of my initial aims has been accomplished. This paper shows that idleness was a central topic for the two philosophers. However, the connection between the *DCNR* and the *WN* is less developed. While I tried to prove that there are links between the two works historically, linguistically, and conceptually, I have not advanced a philosophical interpretation capable of explaining why Smith addressed Hume's argument. Neither do I believe that the shared interest for the topic of idleness is enough to explain why the invisible hand tried to substitute the very sparing hand mentioned by Philo/Hume. In my view, the philosophical connection lies elsewhere.

Philo/Hume's advances imbued the theological discourse of God's Providence with the anthropological and social account of idleness. Hence, it seems natural to imagine that Smith's perspective in the *WN* could be interpreted as a theological yet implicit answer to the issue regarding theodicy raised by Hume. He seems to prove the existence of a benevolent deity through the perfect balance of human sentiments and their interactions in the social sphere, the market included. Throughout the *WN*, whose anthropological model begins in exact opposition to that expressed by Philo, Smith showed that nature and Providence endowed mankind with other propensities, thus fostering the idea of the faculty of work and industry, which Philo held to be scarce among human beings.

The theological roots and elements of Smith's economic thought have been analyzed extensively (Viner 1972; Hill 2004; Harrison 2011; Oslington 2011, 2017). His contemporaries (e.g., Francis Hutcheson, Joseph Butler, Josiah Tucker, William Paley, to

mention just a few) were very interested in theological issues, theodicy included (Moore 2000; Waterman 2002; Hill 2004; Neiman 2015; Heydt 2017; Blaney 2018; Oslington 2017; Hengstmengel 2019; Ballor and Van der Kooi 2022). In the *WN*, Smith referred to “wisdom, “work,” and “labour,” among other actions accomplished by nature as a “putative creator” (Smith in Waterman 2002, p. 909). Given Smith’s reluctance to publish the *DCNR* (Rasmussen 2017) and its general cautiousness in expressing theological beliefs contrary to the Presbyterian Kirk (Kennedy 2011), it is not surprising to find no explicit references to Philo/Hume’s thesis. All things considered, the question emerges spontaneously: What theological argument did Smith advance implicitly to address Philo/Hume’s thought?

I believe that Smith’s position references natural theology (Oslington 2017) or deism (Hill 2004). Moral sentiments and human propensities are balanced by Providence to secure social prosperity. According to my reading, a common theme of the *WN* and the *TMS* is the endowment of natural sentiments, which, during human interactions, tend to produce good consequences. In the *TMS*, sentiments of sympathy and resentment produce codes of morality and justice (Smith [1759] 1984, pp. 85–91; Sugden 1989). In the *WN*, the sentiments of self-love and natural propensity are the impulse to truck, barter, and exchange, which produce, via the invisible hand, the wealth of nations (Smith 1981, chs. I–II). Here, there is little space for evil; Smith proposes a natural religion with the implicit assumption that the universe is (or seems) designed to lead to good outcomes through spontaneous processes. From this perspective, propensity, self-interest, and division of labor are tools that Providence combines to guarantee the wealth and prosperity of commercial society. All the negative effects of human behavior are caused by excesses of moral sentiments or, as Jacob Viner underscored (1972, p. 79), by the fragility of human reason, idleness included. Smith could not have been convinced by the atheistic outcome reached in chapter XI of the *DCNR*. There, the unavoidable evil of idleness seriously questioned the existence of God/nature. Throughout the *WN*, where idleness is removed by the advent of commercial society, Smith could have tried to reply to the conundrum raised by his old friend, justifying God/nature not only regarding His work—the invisible hand vs the very sparing hand—but also His existence. This is not to say that Smith expressed his own personal religious beliefs in the economic argument developed in the *WN*. In contrast, I claim that the anthropological and economic ideas expressed there could be read through theological lenses.

The connection with Hume’s *DCNR*, where arguments regarding God’s providence and commercial society are profoundly intertwined, seems to sustain my claim. My advice for future studies on the philosophical relation between Hume and Smith is not to be idle and adopt just one hermeneutical perspective but rather to be industrious and look at them from interdisciplinary angles.

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