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The 'New View' of Adam Smith in Context

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ABSTRACT

The so-called 'new view' of Adam Smith that emphasizes his religious context is one of many attempts by historians of economics and other intellectual historians to rescue Smith from various causes into which he has been recruited. This paper discusses the 'new view', including why and when it arose, and some of its antecedents. The 'new view' is actually a very old view, and the most common reading of Smith's work in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The paper then responds to Colin Heydt's recent attempt to rebut the new view, concluding his target is ill-defined and largely misunderstood, and his arguments are weak.

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1. Introduction

The 'new view' of Adam Smith that emphasizes his religious context is one of many attempts by historians of economics and other intellectual historians to rescue Smith from various causes into which he has been recruited. It arose at a time when Smith was mostly neglected by scholars outside economics, though during these years a caricature of Smith was worshipped in British Thatcherite and North American Reaganite political circles. This was the era of Adam Smith ties and pocket books of quotations from the great founder of free market economics. Older (and as I will argue) better-grounded theological readings of Smith were tarnished by association with readings that invoked a Smithian 'magic of the market', and an 'invisible hand' to fix all societal ills. Secular readings of Smith became an act of political resistance to such caricatures.

Colin Heydt's (2017) recent attempt in the *Journal of the History of Ideas* to rebut the 'new view' of Adam Smith raises important questions about the distinctive character of the 'new view', why it has risen to prominence over the last 30 years, and the basis of criticism of the 'new view'. This paper sets the debate about the 'new view' of Adam Smith in a larger context by considering these questions, before responding to Heydt's specific criticisms of the view that Smith's moral philosophy depends in some way on religious commitments. It is not intended, however, to be a full survey of the 'new view' scholarship on Adam Smith.

2. What Is the ‘New View’ of Adam Smith?

The ‘new view’ terminology comes from James Alvey (2007) but the ‘new view’ turns out to be a slippery beast to tie down. Gordon Graham (2016) helpfully distinguishes, first, the question of Smith’s personal religious beliefs; second, the theological dimensions of Smith’s work, and third, the question of Smith’s philosophy of religion. ‘New view’ scholars, and Colin Heydt in his rebuttal, are mainly concerned with questions of the second type, about the theological context and content of Smith’s work. As Gordon Graham rightly argues, such questions need to be answered with reference to Smith’s works, read in full textual and historical context, resisting assertions of hidden purposes or hidden meanings.

Many of the authors Heydt cites merely flesh out the neglected eighteenth-century religious and theological context of Smith’s work. The context emphasized by these authors is not always Christian, for instance Lisa Hill (2001), D. D. Raphael and Alec Macfie’s highlighting of the Stoic background of Smith’s thought in their introduction to *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (Smith 1859), and Gloria Vivenza’s (2001) work on the wider classical background. The same is true of Knud Haakonssen’s (1981) retrieval of the Protestant natural law background of Smith’s work. Richard Kleer’s emphasis on teleology in Smith’s thought does not make it necessarily Christian, concluding ‘the principle of a divine author of nature cannot be removed without impairment to Smith’s moral theory’ (Kleer 1995, 300) and ‘Smith did build his analytical framework around a teleology of divine origin’ (Kleer 2000, 16). Some authors focus on Smith’s personal religious position, such as Brendan Long (2007) who sees Smith as a committed orthodox Christian (a view criticized by Gavin Kennedy 2011, 2013), while others consider Smith’s status before God unknowable and beside the point anyway. Anthony Waterman is included by Heydt among the proponents of the ‘new view’, yet Waterman (2002) is careful to avoid any suggestion about Smith’s religious beliefs or intentions, merely arguing that his work can be read as an Augustinian theodicy of markets. Paul Oslington (2011a, 2017) focused on the theological context of Smith’s work, without any interest in whether he was an orthodox Christian or otherwise. Peter Harrison’s (2011) historical work on the natural theological background of the invisible hand terminology is difficult to characterize as some sort of hostile Christian takeover of Adam Smith.

3. Relationship to Previous Views of Adam Smith

If we take sustained attention to the eighteenth-century religious background of Smith’s work to be the common element in the ‘new view’ writers that Heydt cites, then it is actually a very old view. Smith’s early readers attended to this background, and some went further to express strong views about the theological content of Smith’s work. Dugald Stewart (1795), his first biographer, was clear about the importance of the religious context, including the connection to Newtonian natural theology. Similarly clear about the theological context of Smith’s work was Robert Malthus, whom Donald Winch (1996, 373) described as the co-founder with Adam Smith of the discipline of political economy. Richard Whately, in his inaugural Drummond lecture (the Drummond Chair at Oxford was the first chair in political

economy at a British university), offered a strongly theological reading of Smith's assertion of unintended beneficial consequences of self-interested behaviour: 'Man is, in the same act, doing one thing by choice, for his own benefit, and another, undesignedly, under the care of Providence, for the service of the community' (Whately 1832, 94). Whately also placed Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* and *Wealth of Nations* above William Paley as works of natural theology. Thomas Chalmers, one of the most influential nineteenth-century British writers on political economy (and whose St Andrews lectures on political economy preceded Whately's at Oxford), took Smith to be suggesting that the transformation of self-interested behaviour into the greatest economic good was providential, writing:

Such a result which at the same time not a single agent in this vast and complicated system of trade contemplates or cares for, each caring only for himself – strongly bespeaks a higher Agent, by whose transcendental wisdom it is, that all is made to conspire so harmoniously, and to terminate so beneficially. (Chalmers 1833, 238–9)¹

4. Heydt's Criticism of the 'New View'

Heydt's article focuses on Adam Smith's moral philosophy, arguing that it does not depend on natural religion and that this is decisive evidence against the new view of Adam Smith. As he puts it, 'The crux of the debate, however, is whether or not the God of natural religion is essential, in one or more ways, to Smith's moral theory' (Heydt 2017, 73). He claims to

demonstrate here that Smith took positions at odds with a commitment to natural religion's importance for morality. In particular, I show that it is hard to square Smith's alleged support of natural religion with his account of conscience, his natural-rights theory, and his omission of piety from his catalogue of virtues. (Heydt 2017, 74)

His arguments, which are considered in detail below, draw on Smith's texts, but Heydt pays particular attention to

standard or default uses of religious ideas in eighteenth-century moral philosophy ... I focus on identifying what we should expect a moral theorist of this era to say if he were committed to the importance of natural religion for morality, and what Smith's omission or rejection of these standard claims tells us. (Heydt 2017, 74)

Before considering his arguments in more detail it is helpful to further contextualize Heydt's reading of Smith, placing it in a larger story of the fortunes of contextual theological readings of Adam Smith's major texts.

5. Why Now?

It is the reading Heydt offers of Adam Smith that is a historical aberration, not the 'new view' authors that he cites. This story begins, as we have seen in the previous section, with Smith's early readers attending to the theological context of Smith's works, and often reading them theologically. An important moment in the movement away from this was the isolation by David Ricardo (1817) of an analysis of value, distribution and growth in Smith's *Wealth of Nations* which Ricardo systematized and

corrected in his *Principles of Political Economy and Taxation* – an approach later labelled the ‘Ricardian vice’ by Joseph Schumpeter (1954). The elevation of Smith as the founder of the new science of political economy also contributed to the decontextualization – for instance in the work which has a reasonable claim to be the first history of political economy, James Ramsey McCulloch’s *Sketch of the Rise and Progress of the Science* (McCulloch 1825). The focus, as would be expected from a disciple of Ricardo, is very much on the progressive clarification of the model of value, distribution and growth.² Smith’s context and his work besides the *Wealth of Nations* were largely ignored by McCulloch and other tellers of the story of the rise of political economy and its gaining a position of huge cultural influence in early nineteenth-century Britain.

This isolation of the economic elements of Smith’s work, and elevation of Smith as the founder of political economy in Britain, meant that the moral philosophical and theological elements of Smith’s work receded from view. Further contributing to this was the separation of political economy from moral philosophy and theology that took place in the middle years of the nineteenth century, documented by Anthony Waterman (1991) and Oslington (2017), who agree on the dating of the separation but differ on the reasons. Economists no longer took a professional interest in these matters, including in their reading of Adam Smith, and few outside economics read Smith. The exception was perhaps historians of moral philosophy who included Smith among the ‘British Moralists’ responding to Hobbes’s question of how a society of egoists could exhibit harmony. Like the economists reading Smith, the religious context was dispensable, and perhaps an embarrassment, for moral philosophers telling a particular story of theoretical progression.

Remnants of the earlier attention to Smith’s religious context continued on the edges of the economics profession in the late nineteenth century, among characters as diverse as Cliffe Leslie in Britain and Thorstein Veblen in the United States. Cliffe Leslie wrote that:

Natural theology makes the first part of Adam Smith’s course of moral philosophy, and its principles pervade every other part. The law of Nature becomes with him an article of religious belief; the principles of human nature, in accordance with the nature of their Divine Author, necessarily tend to the most beneficial employments of man’s faculties and resources. (Leslie 1870, 27)

And this dependence on theology was part of the reason for his rejection of Smith’s political economy. For Veblen it was important in interpreting Smith that the reader recognize that the ‘ultimate term or ground of knowledge is always of a metaphysical character. It is something in the way of a preconception, accepted uncritically, but applied in criticism and demonstration of all else with which the science is concerned’ (Veblen 1899 III, 241). For Veblen as for Leslie this put Smith’s political economy under suspicion. Similar views were held by late nineteenth-century German scholars such as Hasbach (1891) for whom Smith’s outmoded theological commitments and laissez-faire economics were connected. Even Leslie Stephen (1899), whom Heydt relies on for his argument about the importance of the question of the relationship between religion and morality in the nineteenth century, suggests, ‘There can in any case be no doubt that Smith was a sincere theist’, and reads him in this light.

For most of the twentieth century, interest in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* continued to be slight and Adam Smith was known almost entirely through economists' decontextualized readings of the *Wealth of Nations*. Reaction against such readings of Smith was begun by the great economist and intellectual historian, Jacob Viner – a secular Jew who became convinced as he read Smith and other eighteenth-century British writers that the theological background, especially the doctrine of providence, was indispensable in understanding their political economy. Viner's lecture at the University of Chicago celebrating the sesquicentenary of the publication of the *Wealth of Nations* was a key event in the retrieval of the theological context of Smith's work, stating:

In his *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Smith develops his system of ethics on the basis of the doctrine of a harmonious order in nature guided by God, and in an incidental manner applies his general doctrine with strict consistency to the economic order. In his later work, the *Wealth of Nations*, Smith devotes himself to a specialised inquiry into the nature of economic order. (Viner 1927, 200)

He later wrote:

Modern professors of economics and ethics operate in disciplines which have been secularized to the point where the religious elements and implications which were once an integral part of them have been painstakingly eliminated ... [scholars] either put on mental blinders which hide from their sight these aberrations of Smith's thought, or they treat them as merely traditional and in Smith's day fashionable ornaments to what is essentially naturalistic and rational analysis ... I am obliged to insist that Adam Smith's system of thought, including his economics, is not intelligible if one disregards the role he assigns in it to the teleological elements, to the 'invisible hand'. (Viner 1972, 81)³

Viner's last PhD student at Princeton was Donald Winch who became the leading advocate and practitioner of contextual reading among historians of economics, and contributed greatly in the last decades of the twentieth century to reconnecting historians of economics with the wider world of the history of ideas. His book *Adam Smith's Politics* (Winch 1978) signalled a move back to contextual readings of Smith. In his later *Riches and Poverty: An Intellectual History of Political Economy* (Winch 1996) he pointed to the importance of the theological context but did not feel equipped to deal with it, referring instead to the work of Anthony Waterman and others who had the training in theology that he lacked. The same approach was taken in his brief biography of Smith (Winch 2004) and in his commentary on the history of Smith biography (Winch 2014).

The publication of the Bicentennial Glasgow edition of Smith's works beginning in the mid-1970s added further impetus to the rediscovery of the breadth of Smith's work in its original context. The edition included recently discovered student notes from Smith's Glasgow lectures in the 1750s, published as *Lectures on Jurisprudence* (Smith 1978). These lectures were the basis of both the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* and *Wealth of Nations*. Scholars involved in the Glasgow edition such as Andrew Skinner, Alec Macfie, D. D. Raphael and Ian Simpson Ross contributed greatly to recovering Smith's original Scottish context.

The 'new view' is a continuation of the recovery of the theological context and dimensions of Smith's work begun by Jacob Viner, Donald Winch and the scholars

associated with the Glasgow edition. It is not of course the only tendency in recent readings of Smith that is continuous with the emphasis on reading Smith's full corpus and reading it in its eighteenth-century Scottish context. It is debatable though whether the 'new view' is the best label, as it is actually the recovery of the dominant earlier reading of Smith.

Heydt's criticism of the 'new view' then fits into the story as a protest against this recovery of the theological reading of Smith's work.

6. Assessment of Heydt's Criticisms of the 'New View'

Consider now the coherence and strength of Heydt's criticisms of the 'new view'. One of the most curious features of Heydt's article is his focus on natural religion, when most of the 'new view' writings he cites are about natural theology.⁴ Compare Heydt's characterization of the 'new view' as suggesting Smith is 'a strong supporter of natural theology' (Heydt 2017, 73) and also that 'Smith's moral philosophy incorporates providentialist thought' (Heydt 2017, 73 fn. 2) with Heydt's explanation that his paper was about Smith's commitment to 'natural religion's importance for morality' (Heydt 2017, 74). Natural theology and natural religion are not the same thing.

It is true that Smith upholds 'pure and rational religion, free from every mixture of absurdity, imposture or fanaticism such as wise men in all ages of the world wished to see established' (Smith WN V.i.g.8, 793), as part of an argument he makes in the *Wealth of Nations* about competition as a purifying force in religious markets, but the identification of this with 'natural religion' is dubious at best. Smith consistently avoids the term natural religion in both the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* and the *Wealth of Nations*, which would be very strange if he was in fact an adherent of natural religion, as Heydt claims. The term was in common use among his contemporaries, for example in the titles of his friend David Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (Hume 1779) (a work Smith agreed to arrange publication of after Hume's death – and later withdrew, to Hume's disappointment) or Lord Kames's *Essays on the Principles of Morality and Natural Religion*.

Heydt's confusions about natural theology and natural religion are on display in the passage where he summarizes the tenets of natural religion that Smith holds to:

For God's existence, proof comes both from a priori argument (e.g., various cosmological arguments) and argument from design, with the latter drawing from physics (e.g., appropriations of Newton) and natural history. God's essence was distinguished into communicable and incommunicable properties, that is, properties (e.g., wisdom) that we find to some degree in created beings and properties (e.g., metaphysical independence) that only God possesses. Finally, the operations of God known through natural reason included creation and preservation, and the major question raised by providence was how to understand and assign responsibility for evil (i.e., provide a theodicy). (Heydt 2017, 76)

We might compare Heydt's summary with David Fergusson's account of 'the dominant theology of moderate intellectuals in the era of the Scottish Enlightenment'. Fergusson summarizes this as follows:

The role of God as creator and sustainer of the world is emphasised. The signs of the divine presence are evident in the natural world; in this respect, the design argument is

widely assumed to be valid. The beneficial role of religion in civil society is stressed. Religion contributes to social order and harmony. When purged of irrational fanaticism and intolerance, faith exercises a cohesive function through the moral direction and focus it offers human life. As benevolent and wise, God has ordered the world so that its moral and scientific laws contribute to human welfare. The prospect of an eschatological state in which virtue and felicity coincide, moreover, provides further moral motivation. (Fergusson 2007, 5; see also Fergusson 2006)

Smith fits this picture much better than Heydt's summary of natural religion that Smith was supposedly committed to.

The theological traditions in which Smith stood were this moderate Calvinism of the Scottish enlightenment, together with the British scientific tradition of natural theology. Protestant natural law thinking was also important for Smith, as it was for his predecessors in the moral philosophy chair at Glasgow, Gershom Carmichael and Francis Hutcheson, but it was less theological than the other two traditions. Smith's moderate Calvinism is universally agreed, but his attachment to British scientific natural theology is more contested. The evidence for Smith's adherence to both includes close connections between moderate Calvinism and Newtonian natural theology in the Scottish enlightenment circles in which Smith moved, Smith's advocacy and use of Newtonian methods, the student notes we have of Smith's Glasgow lectures indicating they began with a lengthy discussion of natural theology, and the prevalence of the language and thought forms of this tradition of natural theology in Smith's published works (Oslington 2011b, 2017).

As John Gascoigne (1988), John Hedley Brooke (1991), Peter Harrison (2015) and others have pointed out, this tradition of natural theology was not about trying to prove the existence of God. Instead, it legitimated scientific endeavour in a culture where theology was the master discourse, provided a common language for theologians and scientists, and facilitated the deployment of science in defence of the existing social order. Smith nowhere in his published work attempts to prove the existence of God, or indeed any other theological doctrine, though we get many comments about how Smith's arguments cohere with the existence of God, and doctrines such as divine providence. For example:

The happiness of mankind, as well as all other rational creatures, seems to have been the original purpose intended by the author of nature, when he brought them into existence ... By acting according to the dictates of our moral faculties, we necessarily pursue the most effectual means for promoting the happiness of mankind, and may therefore be said, in some sense, to co-operate with the Deity, and to advance as far as in our power the plan of Providence. (Smith *TMS* III 5 7, 166)

The idea of that divine Being, whose benevolence and wisdom have, from all eternity, contrived and conducted the immense machine of the universe, so as at all times to produce the greatest possible quantity of happiness, is certainly of all the objects of human contemplation by far the most sublime. (Smith *TMS* VI ii 3 5, 236)

Or, in relation to morality, Adam Smith wrote, 'the governing principles of human nature, the rules which they prescribe are to be regarded as the commands and laws of the Deity' (Smith *TMS* III 5 3, 163).

Heydt misreads the role of the doctrine of creation within the British scientific tradition of natural theology. The doctrine of creation was the basis for this tradition

of natural theology (for unless God had created the world it was pointless seeking knowledge of God though scientific endeavour), rather than something natural theology sought to establish. Eschatology is part of Fergusson's picture that is absent from Heydt's, and one that is very important for his moral philosophy and political economy. Rewards and punishments in the future life are continuous with and reinforce features of our present existence (Oslington 2011b). One of many passages that could be quoted in this respect comes from Smith's discussion of justice in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*:

When we thus despair of finding any force upon earth which can check the triumph of injustice, we naturally appeal to heaven, and hope, that the great Author of our nature will himself execute hereafter, what all the principles which he has given us for the direction of our conduct, prompt us to attempt even here; that he will complete the plan which he himself has thus taught us to begin; and will, in a life to come, render to every one according to the works which he has performed in this world. And thus we are led to the belief of a future state, not only by the weaknesses, by the hopes and fears of human nature, but by the noblest and best principles which belong to it, by the love of virtue, and by the abhorrence of vice and injustice. (Smith *TMS* III 5 10, 169)

Heydt also misunderstands the role of theodicy within this tradition. As Surin (1986) and Newlands (2012) and the above writers on the British scientific tradition of natural theology have argued, theodicy did not arise directly from the doctrine of providence but from the new philosophical and political context in which the doctrine of providence was placed in the seventeenth century. The decline of the Augustinian idea of evil as privation of the good and the demand for a certain kind of rational justification of religious belief were important elements of this new context. Heydt needs to pay more attention to the context in which the debate over theodicy arose in the seventeenth century rather than assuming theodicy was a timeless problem which was either ignored or suppressed in previous centuries.

Perhaps some of Heydt's confusion about whether his argument is about natural religion or natural theology comes from Raphael and Macfie's comment in their edition of the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (Appendix II, 399, which Heydt 2017 cites on page 77): 'Smith never abandoned natural religion', which in turns reflects an earlier comment in John Rae's *Life of Adam Smith* that Smith 'died as he lived, in the full faith of those doctrines of natural religion which he had publicly taught' (Rae 1895, 429–30). Neither Raphael and Macfie nor Rae offer strong textual or other evidence for their suggestions.

To the extent that the object of Heydt's rebuttal is well-defined, let us now examine this rebuttal. It is essentially an argument from silence – that certain things would be expected if Smith was a 'strong supporter of natural religion', but Heydt finds they are absent, so Smith cannot be a supporter of natural religion. Therefore, Smith's moral philosophy is not based on natural religion, and the 'new view' is rebutted.

However, Heydt's argument from silence is weak, for the usual reason of the evidential asymmetry between establishing acts and omissions in works of any author. The possible reasons for an omission are more numerous and obscure because we don't have actual words in a text before us, just speculated words. Heydt's argument from silence is especially weak because misunderstandings of the British scientific

tradition of natural theology discussed above make his speculation of what Smith should have said implausible.

Another problem is that Heydt attempts to isolate Smith's moral philosophy and look for a specifically religious element in it. He does not seem to understand that the revealed doctrines of creation and providence ground Smith's natural theological investigation of the world. Natural theology is the substructure of Smith's moral philosophy, rendering Heydt's search for a specifically religious element in the superstructure of his moral philosophy a vain search.

The Glasgow edition of Smith's works was largely designed to make it difficult to commit this sin of isolating parts of Smith's system, a sin that historians of economic thought have committed frequently. Glasgow editors Andrew Skinner (1996) and Ian Simpson Ross (2004, 2010) particularly emphasized the dangers of isolating one part of Smith's system, and of interpreting Smith without due regard to his eighteenth-century Scottish context. Heydt's attempt to isolate Smith's moral philosophy from Smith's larger system does not accord well with the standard accounts of T. D. Campbell (1971) or D. D. Raphael (2007). Nor is Heydt's account consistent with the recent work of Thomas Ahnert who concludes that Smith and other members of the moderate party within the Scottish Kirk 'reasserted the importance of Christianity for secular morality, rather than diminishing it' (Ahnert 2015, 13).

These misunderstandings of the British scientific tradition of natural theology affect Heydt's discussion of the absence of theological justification for particular aspects of Smith's moral philosophy. His search for a design argument for the existence of God in Smith (Heydt 2017, 77–8) is destined to be in vain if Smith assumes the doctrine of creation, including the creation of human nature and conscience, rather than divine creation being something that his moral philosophy is directed towards demonstrating.

Similarly weak are Heydt's arguments (Heydt 2017, 82–4) about Smith's naturalization of conscience casting doubt on the doctrine of creation being the foundation of his moral theory. In any case, conscience does not play much of a role in the argument of the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, and the main discussions were only added to Book III of later editions.

Heydt's search for an appeal 'to God's authority and God's design of our nature ... in the justification of natural rights' (Heydt 2017, 86) is also in vain. If God's design of nature is a premise of Smith's work, then Smith can reason normatively from nature to morality without having to constantly refer back to the premise of design. Something of Smith's procedure is indicated by the title of the important chapter 5 of Book III of the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, 'Of the influence and authority of the general Rules of Morality, and that they are justly regarded as the Laws of the Deity'. The chapter contains much of this sort of normative reasoning from nature, with Smith taking care to distinguish the distinctives of human nature and society in making his arguments. When religion comes into the argument it is to reinforce the conclusions of the naturalistic analysis.

Heydt's clinching argument for the non-religious character of Smith's moral philosophy is the absence of piety from Smith's discussion of the virtues in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*. Smith added Part VI 'Of the Character of Virtue' to the 1790 sixth

edition of the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* for reasons discussed by D. D. Raphael, who comments, ‘Smith does not regard ethics as dependent on theology. And so there was no need for him to include any discussion of theology in his book on the theory of ethics’ (Raphael 2007, 94). Raphael means dependent in the sense of Smith invoking theology to justify particular moral injunctions, something which Heydt seeks and Smith never does. Ryan Hanley (2009), who places Part VI ‘Of the Character of Virtue’ of the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* at the centre of Smith’s moral defence of commercial society, finds nothing unusual about the absence of piety from the list of virtues. Including piety in the list would devalue it if piety is the crown of virtue. Smith’s refraining from theological justification of the particulars of his moral philosophy is perfectly consistent with natural theological grounding of the whole enterprise. The particulars of Smith’s moral philosophy are properly derived from observation of human nature and society, not from theology. Separate duties to God, and listing piety as a virtue would be redundant.

As Hanley points out, a naturalistic account of religious belief and religious institutions is perfectly compatible with religious belief and participation in religious institutions. It is also compatible with criticism of the corruptions of religion. Hanley argues, rightly in my view, that Smith shares something of Hume’s naturalism but not his scepticism. The two friends also differed about the reach of their naturalism, as Hanley suggests ‘Smith thought religion natural to human beings – a conviction that distances Smith from the way in which Hume thought about religion’ (Hanley 2015, 39). We have to be careful of conflating the views of these two friends, especially on matters of religion. Context and questions were shared but not always conclusions.

Heydt expresses surprise that the absence of piety from Smith’s list of virtues has not been noticed before (Heydt 2017, 92), but the reason it has escaped attention is that it is unexceptionable for an author for whom theological commitments frame and ground moral philosophy. Listing piety as a virtue would be at best redundant.

More broadly, one could multiply examples of moral philosophers, even devoutly Christian moral philosophers, who saw no need to invoke theology in deriving moral philosophical propositions. A striking example is the contemporary conservative Catholic philosophers Germain Grisez et al. (1987) who in their (admittedly controversial) account of natural law ethics explicitly exclude duties to God from their moral philosophy and exclude piety from their list of virtues. Believing that we owe a duty of worship to God (as Smith perhaps does – I am not making any claim about his personal faith) does not imply that piety should be included among the virtues.

What seems to have got Heydt into trouble is his move early in the section which deals with the absence of piety from the list of virtues, to equate duties to God with virtues. He writes, ‘if you accept natural religion, even in its most pared-down permutations, then you must believe we owe duties of knowledge and worship to God. The habit of performing those duties is the virtue of piety’ (Heydt 2017, 91). Heydt cannot conceive of ‘any other viable roles for God in morality’ (Heydt 2017, 92).

For Smith an additional consideration in the omission of piety from the list of virtues may have been his reluctance to recommend common forms of piety that he and his readers would have been familiar with. Smith is dismissive of ‘the futile mortifications of a monastery’, instead lauding the more active habits of those who

‘invented, improved, or excelled in the arts which contribute to the subsistence, to the conveniency, or to the ornament of human life’ (Smith *TMS* III 2 35, 134). Another example of his disdain for conventional monastic and ecclesiastical forms of piety is his attack on

...whining and melancholy moralists, who are perpetually reproaching us with our happiness, while so many of our brethren are in misery, who regard as impious the natural joy of prosperity, which does not think of the many wretches that are at every instant labouring under all sorts of calamities, in the languor of poverty. (Smith *TMS* III 3 8–11, 139–40)

Including piety in his list of virtues may not have conveyed the message Smith wished.

7. Conclusions

The first purpose of this paper has been to better understand the ‘new view’ of Adam Smith (and Heydt’s attempted rebuttal of it) by placing it in the history of Smith scholarship. It has not been a survey of ‘new view’ scholarship, nor do I believe the ‘new view’ is the most helpful label for the recent recovery of the theological dimensions of Smith’s work. The ‘new view’ is the recovery of an older view – and really just a contextual reading that pays proper attention to the theological context.

The second purpose is to examine Heydt’s prominent attempted rebuttal of the ‘new view’. My conclusion is that Heydt’s target is ill-defined and largely misunderstood, and his arguments against a theological reading of Smith’s work are weak.

However Heydt’s suggestion, following Leslie Stephen, about the link between religion and morals being the main theme of eighteenth-century moral philosophy remains open, though if we are to consider this suggestion in relation to Smith, more precise attention is needed to the British scientific tradition of natural theology and its relationship to the moderate Calvinism of the Scottish enlightenment.

Notes

1. Further examples of early theological readings of Smith may be found in chapter 4 of Oslington (2017).
2. Further discussion of the early histories may be found in Winch (1971).
3. Viner’s reading of Smith is discussed in Oslington (2012b) where it is argued that Viner’s perspective continued fairly consistently from the 1920s through to his later work.
4. Natural theology seeks to understand God’s nature and activity from study of God’s creation, including human beings and human society. It contrasts with revealed theology where the source of knowledge is the Scriptures rather than creation. Natural religion is religion which arises in human society, contrasted usually positively with religion which is enforced by a church or priesthood. Further discussion of relationships between natural theology, revealed theology and natural religion may be found in chapter 2 of Oslington (2017).

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