

Article

On the Role of Pure and Rational Religion in Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations*

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Abstract

Adam Smith's system of natural liberty aimed at the happiness and virtue of humankind. Yet the Scottish philosopher also recognised that the system's internal dynamics could render it unsustainable unless the state intervened to preserve sociability and justice through the education of both the working and the middle and upper classes. This article argues that the educational programme envisaged in *The Wealth of Nations* entailed the triumph of a pure and rational religion, understood as the conviction that the Supreme Being valued and rewarded virtue alone, thereby reinforcing the sense of duty, together with an awareness of belonging to an impartially conceived, divinely ordered system, fostering humility.

Keywords: Adam Smith; commercial society; economic liberalism; alienation; education; deism; sociability; justice

1. Introduction

Adam Smith (1723–1790, Kirkcaldy, Scotland) published *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* in 1776, after a decade of solitary and sustained work. Its publication marked the completion of his thought in moral philosophy, the subject he had taught at the University of Glasgow for thirteen years (1751–1764). The course consisted of three parts, in the following order: lectures on natural theology, “in which he considered the proofs of the being and attributes of God, and those principles of the human mind upon which religion is founded” (Smith 1982a, Stewart I.18–20, where Smith's first biographer incorporates the testimony of John Millar); lectures on ethics; and, finally, lectures on jurisprudence. Whereas the second part of this course led to the publication of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), and part of the third to *The Wealth of Nations*, nothing has survived from the first. Nevertheless, from Smith's published works, as well as from the students' notes that have come down to us, the core of his religious ideas has been successfully reconstructed, supporting the interpretation of Smith as an optimistic deist (Montes Lira 2017, p. 59; Campbell 2010, p. 60; Schliesser 2020, p. 334; Hill 2020, pp. 61–62; Elton Bulnes 2006, p. 219; and concerning natural religion in general, Macfie and Raphael 1982, Appendix II, p. 400; for an opposing view, advocating a moral theism, see Fleischacker 2021; Cremaschi 2018).

Within this context, the paper begins by outlining the main features of Adam Smith's system of natural liberty, showing how economic autonomy was expected to lead to moral autonomy, and, consequently, to virtue, and how the system aimed at improving the living conditions of the working class. But Smith's initial optimism is then qualified by highlighting his early critique of alienation. In *The Wealth of Nations*, in a display of intellectual



Academic Editor: Kevin Schilbrack

Received: 17 May 2026

Revised: 19 June 2026

Accepted: 21 June 2026

Published: 24 June 2026

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honesty, the Scottish philosopher denounced the isolation and loss of virtue brought about by the division of labour, as well as the harmful effects of rural exodus, through which individuals fell into anonymity and thereby lost their moral bearings. He also recognised the dangers posed by luxury, a recurring concern in the Scottish Enlightenment, insofar as it undermined self-command. However well intentioned, then, the Enlightenment dream of a better and fairer society contained within its own dynamics severe internal limitations, ultimately risking the emergence of antisocial individuals.

In order to counteract this danger, Smith advocated the education of all social classes: both the working and the middle and upper classes, conceiving education as a public service (Skinner 1996, p. 191). In the case of the former, education would be partly sustained by the state on a semi-public basis (Smith 1981, WN V.i.f.54–5); in the case of the latter, access to liberal professions and to offices of honour, trust, or profit would depend upon passing some examinations (Smith 1981, WN V.i.g.14). In both cases, education was regarded as indispensable because of the immense public consequences of its success or failure. To be sure, education was essential if the system of natural liberty was to function properly and fulfil its promises of happiness and well-being. What this article argues (and thereby contributes to Smith scholarship) is that such education included the inculcation of a belief in a Supreme Being who delighted only in virtuous deeds, together with the contemplation of Nature as a divinely ordered whole. All this formed part of a deism conceived as a pure and rational religion—or, if preferred, as a “philosophical religion” (borrowing the expression from Hanley 2015, p. 44): a generalised form of wisdom, nevertheless mindful of human limitations. The central intellectual contribution of this work, as the following discussion seeks to demonstrate, is that this educational programme responded to the need for individuals to remain sociable and just, counteracting the tendencies towards faction, enthusiasm, and superstition generated by the division of labour and urban concentration.

2. The System of Natural Liberty

2.1. *The Enlightenment Dream of a Better Society*

Two hundred and fifty years ago, Adam Smith published a seminal work in the Western history of thought. Widely regarded as one of the earliest formulations of economic liberalism, *The Wealth of Nations* envisaged a society in which the “labouring poor” could finally attain happiness in this world.

That the majority of his contemporaries did not earn enough to live a decent life was a paradox forcefully denounced by Adam Smith. “All constitutions of government [...] are valued only in proportion as they tend to promote the happiness of those who live under them”, he argued (Smith 1982c, TMS IV.i.11), thereby implying that the improvement of the living conditions of the working class constituted the decisive criterion of any social system, not liberty alone (Hill 2020, p. 215; Campbell 2010, p. 205; Himmelfarb 1984, p. 63; see also, as a particularly illuminating instance, Smith 1981, WN II.ii.94).

The “utility of poverty doctrine” was held responsible for the situation. A widespread misconception according to which only a policy of low wages could induce workers to exert themselves (Winch 2005, pp. 76–77), it rested on a mistaken understanding of human nature and had consequently led to inefficiency and poverty. For Smith, by contrast, the natural measure of wages was determined by the dignified subsistence of the worker and his family (Smith 1981, WN I.viii.15). The basic necessities of human life were food, clothing, and shelter (Smith 1981, WN I.xi.c.2), yet mere subsistence on the barest provisions was insufficient: “No society can surely be flourishing and happy, of which the far greater part of the members are poor and miserable. It is but equity, besides, that they who feed, cloath and lodge the whole body of the people, should have such a share of the produce of their own labour as to be themselves tolerably well fed, cloathed and lodged” (Smith 1981,

WN I.viii.35–6). Needs were determined by the rules of decency, by the possibility of appearing in public without shame and of enjoying the respect of others: “By necessities I understand, not only the commodities which are indispensably necessary for the support of life, but whatever the custom of the country renders it indecent for creditable people, even of the lowest order, to be without” (Smith 1981, WN V.ii.k.3). If every respectable person wore a linen shirt, then a linen shirt constituted a necessity, and wages ought therefore to be sufficient to make such an item affordable. “That state is opulent where the necessities and conveniences of life are easily come at, whatever otherwise be its condition, and nothing else can deserve the name of opulence but this comeattibleness”, Smith concluded (Smith 1982b, LJ(A) vi.33).

Conceived as an alternative to the mercantilist and physiocratic systems, the system of natural liberty rested upon the economic autonomy of individuals, who, driven by their innate desire to better their condition, were left free to identify economic opportunities and pursue them through their industry (Smith 1981, WN II.iii.31; see also WN II.iii.36). This amounted to recognising that the legislator lacked the capacity to determine where preferences should be directed and where restrictions ought to be imposed, or, similarly, where demand for a service or product remained either unmet or already saturated. Using Haakonssen’s (1989, p. 79) terminology, the legislator possessed “system knowledge”, whereas “contextual knowledge” belonged to individual agents (Smith 1981, WN IV.ii.10, and WN IV.ix.51). Individuals themselves were best placed to know where economic opportunities existed, and the legislator’s role should therefore be limited to safeguarding freedom. As Smith explained, “in the great chess-board of human society, every single piece has a principle of motion of its own, altogether different from that which the legislature might chuse to impress upon it” (Smith 1982c, TMS VI.ii.II.17). This principle of motion was self-love, correctly understood as self-care or Stoic *oikeiosis* (Smith 1982c, TMS II.ii.II.1, and TMS VI.ii.I.1). Through the operation of the rule of law and the protection of private property, the system of natural liberty incorporated a natural structure of incentives (Smith 1981, WN III.iii.12): provided individuals laboured diligently, the system promised them the possibility of escaping poverty and achieving a decent standard of living.

However, when Adam Smith spoke of autonomy, he conceived it in a twofold sense: economic, as we have just seen, but also moral.

According to the Scottish philosopher, the dynamics of the system of natural liberty gave rise to independence and, thereby, to moral autonomy and virtue. To begin with, commerce (and thus commercial society itself) was firmly grounded in individuals’ capacity for sympathy and the pragmatic recognition of human equality: “Whoever offers to another a bargain of any kind, proposes to do this [show them that it is for their own advantage]. Give me that which I want, and you shall have this which you want”, explained Smith (Smith 1981, WN I.ii.2). Furthermore, whereas in earlier historic stages (particularly under the feudal regime) the magnificent rich maintained numerous dependants, who in return owed him gratitude and obedience, under the new state of affairs the working class owed nothing to anyone: “(T)hose tradesmen he employs do not think themselves any way indebted to him; they have given him their time and labour equivalent to what they have received of him; and tho they may reckon it a small favour that he gives them the preference in his custom, they will not think themselves so greatly indebted to him as if they had received a sum from him in a gratuitous manner” [(Smith 1982b, LJ(A) i.117–8); see also (Smith 1981, WN III.iv.12)]. This transformation radically reshaped the manners of the lower ranks of society. If dependence generated moral corruption, autonomy, by contrast, encouraged individuals to become industrious, frugal, honest, and civil: “Nothing tends so much to corrupt and enervate and debase the mind as dependency, and nothing gives such noble and generous notions of probity as freedom and independency. [. . .] Hence it is that

the common people of England who are alltogether free and independent are the honestest of their rank any where to be met with" [(Smith 1982b, LJ(A) vi.6–7); see also (Smith 1982b, LJ(A) vi.79), and (Smith 1981, WN II.iii.36 and WN V.iii.58)].

This alignment between happiness, virtue, and economic progress was ultimately secured by the portrayal of the private individual as a prudent person. Contrary to interpretations that posit an alleged *Das Adam Smith Problem* (take, for instance, Dickey 1986), the virtue of prudence in fact guaranteed both material and spiritual well-being and served as a bridge between *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* and *The Wealth of Nations* (see, for instance, Smith 1981, WN IV.ii.11; see also Macfie and Raphael 1982, p. 18; Griswold 1999, p. 206). The prudent individual was cautious in his undertakings (seeking security), industrious yet frugal in his tastes and expenditures (a point on which Smith would later insist in *The Wealth of Nations*), highly competent in his work, loyal to his friends, and sincere and modest in his dealings with others, in whose lives he did not interfere (Smith 1982c, TMS VI.i.6–13). And above all, since he was deeply concerned to earn the “confidence, esteem, and good will” of those among whom he lived, the prudent individual was also deeply sociable, meaning just and benevolent (see Griswold 1999, p. 213, who defends the doctrine of the unity of virtue in Adam Smith’s work; for an opposing view, see Fleischacker 2021, pp. 137–8).

Therefore, in Adam Smith’s vision, the system of natural liberty entailed the widespread diffusion of happiness and virtue. In the world of *The Wealth of Nations*, all economic agents had internalised each individual’s right to care for themselves and for those closest to them, and such self-care was regarded as perfectly natural and legitimate. The prudent man was individualistic, yet thoroughly just. If, in 1790, with the publication of the sixth and last edition of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Adam Smith denounced the sympathetic imbalance in favour of the rich and powerful as a source of moral corruption (cf. Smith 1982c, TMS I.iii.III), he nevertheless affirmed, immediately afterwards, that among the middle and lower classes the path to economic advancement coincided with the path of virtue.

2.2. Education as a Counterweight to the System’s Risks

Besides the freedom to pursue self-interest within the framework of the rule of law, the principal engine of progress in *The Wealth of Nations* was the division of labour. Notably, just as *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* opened with an explanation of the notion of sympathy, Smith’s economic masterpiece began by explaining what he understood by the division of labour and where its importance lay.

In simple terms, the division of labour consisted of the distribution of tasks, however minute, within a single chain of production, the paradigmatic case being the manufacture of nothing but the head of a pin. Understood in this way, it enabled remarkable increases in productivity through the greater dexterity acquired by the worker and the saving of time (Smith 1981, WN I.viii.44), as well as through the invention of machinery [(Smith 1981, WN I.i.5); see also (Smith 1982b, LJ(A) vi. 38, LJ(A) vi.29–30, and LJ(B) §213–7)]. The result was the country’s economic prosperity, with wealth gradually extending even to the lowest ranks of society [(Smith 1981, WN I.i.10); see also (Smith 1982b, LJ(A) iii.139)], together with a well-functioning system of social mobility (Smith 1981, WN V.i.b.7; Smith 1985, LRBL ii.144).

Nevertheless, although the division of labour was the engine of economic progress, it also came at a significant intellectual and moral cost for the working class. By fragmenting the production process into minute tasks, it led to the atrophy of the worker’s intellectual capacities. Moreover, an unused imagination resulted in the loss of the capacity to cultivate other-regarding sentiments (that is, an incapacity for social virtues, which

was exacerbated in the context of a society growing increasingly abstract, as explained by Berry 2013, pp. 90–91) and to display courage (an incapacity for the martial virtues). This was acknowledged by Adam Smith in what is now commonly referred to as the “alienation passage”:

In the progress of the division of labour, the employment of the far greater part of those who live by labour, that is, of the great body of the people, comes to be confined to a few very simple operations; frequently to one or two. But the understandings of the greater part of men are necessarily formed by their ordinary employments. [. . .] He naturally loses, therefore, the habit of such exertion, and generally becomes as stupid and ignorant as it is possible for a human creature to become. The torpor of his mind renders him, not only incapable of relishing or bearing a part in any rational conversation, but of conceiving any generous, noble, or tender sentiment, and consequently of forming any just judgment concerning many even of the ordinary duties of private life. Of the great and extensive interests of his country, [. . .] His dexterity at his own particular trade seems, in this manner, to be acquired at the expence of his intellectual, social, and martial virtues. But in every improved and civilized society this is the state into which the labouring poor, that is, the great body of the people, must necessarily fall, unless government takes some pains to prevent it. [(Smith 1981, WN V.i.f.50); see also (Smith 1982b, LJ(B) §329) and (Bravo de Lallana 2023)]

The loss of courage denounced in the “alienation passage” was in fact a general concern in the Scottish Enlightenment. With the introduction of luxury, as had occurred in Ancient Rome, people would become “effeminate” (Berry 2013, p. 158), rendered incapable of self-sacrifice by their lack of self-command. Speaking of the last Jacobite revolt, Smith explained: “200 years ago such an attempt would have roused the spirit of the nation. Our ancestors were brave and warlike, their minds were not enervated by cultivating arts and commerce, and they were already with spirit and vigor to resist the most formidable foe” (Smith 1982b, LJ(B) §332). Yet the decline of the martial virtues was not as serious as the decline of self-command that it revealed. Self-command was, in Smith’s system, the meta-virtue that made possible the exercise of the remaining virtues (Montes Lira 2017, p. 114, namely prudence, justice and beneficence), and, subsidiarily, of the sense of duty (Smith 1982c, TMS VI.iii.1). But it was only in harsh times that self-command could truly prosper (Smith 1982c, TMS III.iii.36), so that “perhaps, the delicate sensibility required in civilized nations sometimes destroys the masculine firmness of the character” (Smith 1982c, TMS V.ii.13).

To this was added the danger inherent in rural exodus and the subsequent concentration of workers in urban areas. Whereas in the countryside individuals possessed a known identity, “as soon as he comes into a great city, he is sunk in obscurity and darkness”. No one knew him, no one observed him, no impartial spectator (real or, ultimately, imagined) supervised his conduct, so that the worker either gave himself over “to every sort of low profligacy and vice”, leading to his ruin, or, in an attempt to be noticed or to regain mental equilibrium, joined some religious sect, whose morals “have frequently been rather disagreeably rigorous and unsocial”, thereby rendering their members incapable of cultivating the social affections (Smith 1981, WN V.i.g.12; see also Campbell and Skinner 1981, corresponding footnote). Such conditions fostered sectarianism together with enthusiasm and superstition: the former associated with fanaticism, delusions of self-importance, and even the rejection of morality; the latter with irrational fears and unfounded prejudices (cf. Hume 1987, EMPL, *Of Superstition and Enthusiasm* §2–3, since Smith himself provides no explicit definition of these terms).

Therefore, in *The Wealth of Nations*, the very work in which he envisioned a better society, Adam Smith warned that an individual who spent his life manufacturing nothing but the head of a pin in a vast urban factory would become intellectually stunted and socially uncultivated, incapable even of virtues as fundamental to society as justice itself. For justice, understood as the duty to recognise the equality of others (cf. [Fleischacker 2006](#)) and therefore to refrain from harming them, was “the main pillar that upholds the whole edifice. If it is removed, the great, the immense fabric of human society [. . .] must in a moment crumble into atoms” ([Smith 1982c](#), TMS II.ii.III.4; see also [Fleischacker 2021](#), p. 223).

With the aim of providing the working class with the tools to confront alienation, Adam Smith devised a system of compulsory, semi-public education ([Smith 1981](#), WN V.i.f.55; [Skinner 1996](#), pp. 193 and 199). Through this programme, Smith sought to preserve their intellectual capacities and prevent moral decline. Assuming that the common people would send their children to work as soon as possible, his plan made school attendance compulsory. Under state supervision, all children would learn to read, write, and count ([Smith 1981](#), WN V.i.f.54). His ambitions were broader, however, for he sought to enable the working class to understand more clearly where their own interests lay and how these related to the interests of society as a whole, thereby educating them in the principles of the system of natural liberty and in its promise of a fairer society: how it was designed in accordance with human nature, how it aimed to extend happiness and justice throughout society, and how workers themselves formed an integral part of such a system.

Indeed, in earlier stages of society, “(e)very man too is in some measure a statesman, and can form a tolerable judgment concerning the interest of the society” ([Smith 1981](#), WN V.i.f.51). The alienation brought about by the triumph of the division of labour jeopardised this capacity, unless education intervened to preserve it. The risk was great, for ignorance was linked to unsociability, faction, and disorder. Smith developed this argument when he observed that “instructed and intelligent people are always more decent and orderly [. . .] They are more disposed to examine, and more capable of seeing through, the interested complaints of faction and sedition, and they are, upon that account, less apt to be misled into any wanton or unnecessary opposition to the measures of government” ([Smith 1981](#), WN Vi.i.f.54). This reflection, which concluded Smith’s discussion of the instruction of the young among the working classes, led Winch to argue that, in the Smithian system, “(e)ducation assists them in understanding the way in which their interests are connected with the rest of society; and it could also improve their grasp of those natural rights and obligations to which everybody was entitled and everybody could therefore be required to respect” ([Winch 2005](#), p. 120, which can also be read in connection with [Smith 1981](#), WN I.xi.p.9; see also [Elton Bulnes 2006](#), p. 239).

Furthermore, Adam Smith addressed the problem of urban sectarianism, enthusiasm, and superstition through a tripartite solution, which may be reconstructed as follows.

First, it was in this context that he proposed the introduction of religious liberty, in the belief that a market-based system of faiths and doctrines would lead to general moderation. Were religious institutions and groups to be atomised into hundreds, or even thousands, of sects, then “(t)he teachers of each sect, seeing themselves surrounded on all sides with more adversaries than friends, would be obliged to learn that candour and moderation which is so seldom to be found among the teachers of those great sects” ([Smith 1981](#), WN V.i.g.8). In his view, a complete separation between the state and any particular religion (cf. [Rasmussen 2018](#), p. 219), within which religions, doctrines, and churches would compete freely, constituted the most effective means of countering sectarianism, enthusiasm and superstition. In order to attract and retain adherents, religious groups would tend to moderate their demands, relax their strictness, and adopt a more accommodating stance

towards the public at large. According to Smith, this freedom would ultimately result in the triumph of “that pure and rational religion, free from every mixture of absurdity, imposture, or fanaticism, such as wise men have in all ages of the world wished to see established” (Smith 1981, WN V.i.g.8).

Secondly, with the aim of calming tempers and promoting good humour, Adam Smith further proposed expanding the programme of public entertainments (painting, poetry, music, dancing and theatrical performances), for they “would easily dissipate [...] that melancholy and gloomy humour which is almost always the nurse of popular superstition and enthusiasm” (Smith 1981, WN V.i.g.15).

Finally, he argued that the state should promote science and philosophy among the middle and upper classes: “The [*last*] of those remedies is the study of science and philosophy, which the state might render almost universal among all people of middling or more than middling rank and fortune; [...] Science is the great antidote to the poison of enthusiasm and superstition; and where all the superior ranks of people were secured from it, the inferior ranks could not be much exposed to it” (Smith 1981, WN V.i.g.14). This proposal was consistent with his earlier reflections on the education of the working classes, where he maintained that “(t)he more they are instructed, the less liable they are to the delusions of enthusiasm and superstition, which, among ignorant nations, frequently occasion the most dreadful disorders” (Smith 1981, WN Vi.i.f.54).

Therefore, Adam Smith’s response to the limitations of the system of natural liberty lay primarily in education, regardless of social class. Education was “a necessary pre-condition for perfect liberty” (Weinstein 2013, p. 206), a requirement for the system to function properly, to achieve its aims, and thus to remain legitimate. This solution included instruction in religious beliefs. As Weinstein observed, “(r)eligion is necessary for civil society; it provides a sense of community and meaning for individuals who feel lost or alienated. It also provides a further incentive to people to abide by the moral rules of conduct established through repeated sympathy” (Weinstein 2013, p. 214). Indeed, this educational programme rested upon the diffusion, and ultimately the triumph, of a pure and rational religion: pure insofar as it was moral, rational insofar as it was grounded in science and philosophy. Such a religion was necessary if individuals were to remain sociable, and civil, and just.

3. Education in the Pure and Rational Religion

3.1. Pure Religion and the Reinforcement of the Sense of Duty

According to Adam Smith, not every form of religious education was desirable, for not every religion was pure and rational. The medieval university, for instance, had fundamentally erred in subordinating philosophy to theology, that is, to the “doctrine of spirits, of which so little can be known” (Smith 1981, WN Vi.i.f.28).

In his use of the term “pure and rational religion”, Adam Smith may have had several influences in mind. Quite obviously, he would have been thinking in terms of the contemporary notion of natural religion, understood as consisting of two basic beliefs: belief in a Supreme Being who created or designed the world (God), and belief in the immortality of the soul (López Sastre 2010, p. 162). But Smith’s horizon of influences would most certainly have included his greatly admired Voltaire (1694–1778). A deist himself, Voltaire referred to “pure religion” as belief in a wise and general Providence that had benevolently created the world and now regarded it as a passive spectator (Rosenthal 1955, p. 153). The French philosopher further argued against “absurd” dogmas and ceremonies, defending the idea of a just God, who rewards and therefore values virtue alone (Rosenthal 1955, p. 159; Voltaire 2006, *Philosophical Dictionary*, “Theist”). This latter idea also appears in David Hume (1711–1776), when he bitterly observed that “the vulgar [...] are utterly

incapable of so pure a religion as represents the Deity to be pleased with nothing but virtue in human behaviour" (Hume 2007, DNR XII.15; see also Hanley 2015, p. 40).

Now, even if, in Adam Smith's moral theory, the general rules upon which the sense of duty emerged were nothing more than a generalisation of our experience as impartial spectators (Smith 1982c, TMS III.iv.8, a point worth bearing in mind given Smith's place within the sentimentalist and empiricist tradition), they were nevertheless "justly regarded as the laws of the Deity" (Smith 1982c, title of TMS III.v). In Smith's view, this experience as impartial spectators was later internalised through our natural love of praiseworthiness, as opposed to a mere love of praise (Smith 1982c, TMS III.ii.7 and TMS VII.ii.IV.8), for, as Smith himself beautifully observed, "What so great happiness as to be beloved, and to know that we deserve to be beloved?" (Smith 1982c, TMS III.i.7). Faith in God, however, and with it the belief in a final judgement (Smith 1982c, TMS III.v.3), further strengthened the sense of duty and respect for the general rules (Smith 1982c, TMS III.v.13; we even see it in Heydt 2017, pp. 90–91). This applied particularly to the rules of justice, for these alone possessed genuine precision (Smith 1982c, TMS III.vi.9).

As a matter of fact, since religion, and hence the idea of God contemplating our behaviour and presiding over conscience, provided "the greatest authority to the rules of duty" (Smith 1982c, TMS III.vi.12), what was believed to constitute God's will was of the utmost importance for society. Adam Smith's position on this matter was unequivocal: the test of any religious belief was, ultimately, a moral one. In this vein, when lamenting the "(f)alse notions of religion", Smith's deepest concern was the consolidation of distorted notions of duty, as represented in Voltaire's *Mahomet, or Fanaticism* (1741), in which the protagonist believed it his duty to kill a friend (ultimately revealed to be his father). On the contrary, divine commandments were exclusively grounded in a morality of mutual respect and tolerance. God did not command adoration, rituals, or unnecessary mortifications. What God commanded was that one should act, always and everywhere, in accordance with the social virtues. A pure religion had to be moral, it had to reinforce justice and benevolence, for only therein did its natural principles reside:

And wherever the natural principles of religion are not corrupted by the factious and party zeal of some worthless cabal; wherever the first duty which it requires, is to fulfil all the obligations of morality; wherever men are not taught to regard frivolous observances, as more immediate duties of religion, than acts of justice and beneficence; and to imagine, that by sacrifices, and ceremonies, and vain supplications, they can bargain with the Deity for fraud, and perfidy, and violence, the world undoubtedly judges right in this respect, and justly places a double confidence in the rectitude of the religious man's behaviour. (Smith 1982c, TMS III.v.13)

In the context of a largely alienated population plunged into urban anonymity, as anticipated in *The Wealth of Nations* (and later portrayed in literary testimonies such as those of Charles Dickens), reliance upon the sense of duty would necessarily increase. Properly understood, for Adam Smith the sense of duty (or, if preferred, respect for the general rules) constituted a "second best": a rational substitute for a sensibility not always as refined as it ought to be (Smith 1982c, TMS III.v.1), or at times immersed in the "misrepresentations of self-love" (Smith 1982c, TMS III.iv.12). The weakening of moral sensibility and the growing egocentrism that accompanied commercial society and the division of labour thus rendered the sense of duty increasingly pre-eminent.

Fortunately, the sense of duty could be inculcated through "discipline, education, and example" (Smith 1982c, TMS III.v.1). Virtue was a matter of good character; duty, by contrast, depended upon clear rules and strong self-command, lending itself more readily to instruction. A just individual could act either from natural sociability or from reverence

for a God who valued justice alone. Herein lay the importance of education in a pure religion: in the effort to counteract the progressive erosion of sociability and self-command brought about by the increasing isolation of the urban worker, religious reverence (with the moral intensity it conveyed; cf. Hanley 2015, p. 43) endowed the sense of duty, and thereby the rules of justice, with their greatest moral force and authority.

3.2. Rational Religion as Scientific and Philosophical Wisdom

That the rules of justice demanded a “sacred regard” was strongly emphasised by Adam Smith (Smith 1982c, TMS VI.ii.intro.2), who did not hesitate to describe the social virtues as “divine” (Smith 1982c, TMS III.iii.4). Rooted in human equality, justice required humility, for it required understanding that we were “but one of the multitude, in no respect better than any other in it” (Smith 1982c, TMS III.iii.4). Justice required the difficult yet indispensable lesson of impartiality, namely learning “the real littleness of ourselves, and of whatever relates to ourselves” against (once more) “the natural misrepresentations of self-love” (Smith 1982c, TMS III.iii.4). One of the clearest means of fostering such impartiality, such consciousness of our real littleness, was education in the understanding that society under the system of natural liberty, and indeed the world itself, formed an ordered whole directed towards the happiness and perfection of humankind.

No other was Adam Smith’s cosmological outlook. In his *Essays on Philosophical Subjects* (1795), posthumously published by his friends Joseph Black and James Hutton, the Scottish philosopher claimed that monotheism was a consequence of science and philosophy, that is to say, of the discovery of an underlying order behind the apparent chaos of appearances (cf. Smith 1982a, HA II.12). The idea of a Supreme Being, he argued, the notion of an Architect of all things, of an impartial and benevolent God, was the product of scientific reflection. In adopting this line of reasoning, Smith embraced the argument from design (Lázaro Cantero 2002, pp. 338–9), an *a posteriori*, empirical argument inferring the existence of a divine mind from contemplation of the universe as a vast and perfect mechanism (López Lloret 2019, p. 89). We consequently read in *The History of Ancient Physics*:

As soon as the Universe was regarded as a complete machine, as a coherent system, governed by general laws, and directed to general ends, viz. its own preservation and prosperity, and that of all the species that are in it; the resemblance which it evidently bore to those machines which are produced by human art, necessarily impressed those sages with a belief, that in the original formation of the world there must have been employed an art resembling the human art, but as much superior to it, as the world is superior to the machines which that art produces. The unity of the system, which, according to this ancient philosophy, is most perfect, suggested the idea of the unity of that principle, by whose art it was formed; and thus, as ignorance begot superstition, science gave birth to the first theism that arose among those nations, who were not enlightened by divine Revelation. (Smith 1982a, HAP §9)

Any interpretation of Adam Smith as a radical sceptic (cf. Raphael and Skinner 1982, p. 19; Griswold 1999, pp. 163–73; Cremaschi 2018, p. 6) is undermined once the severity with which he addressed polytheistic systems is seriously considered. By describing them as “pusillanimous”, and asserting that they were immersed in “mental confusion” and, more importantly still, in “ignorance” (Smith 1982a, HAP §9), Smith clearly distanced himself from Pyrrhonism. Scientific enquiry, by contrast, led to theism, meaning what would today be called deism (Manuel and Pailin 2024): a rational religion. The vision of Nature as an ordered system, in which the ordinary course of things reflected an underlying harmony (a chain of causes and effects directed towards an end) led to the belief in a Maker who had

inscribed such order into Nature itself. The world was therefore conceived as an immense machine directed towards the welfare and progress of humankind, in accordance with the ultimate purpose impressed upon Nature by its Maker. “The happiness of mankind, as well as of all other rational creatures, seems to have been the original purpose intended by the Author of nature, when he brought them into existence. No other end seems worthy of that supreme wisdom and divine benignity which we necessarily ascribe to him”, Smith remarked (Smith 1982c, TMS III.v.7; see also Smith 1982a, ES §60).

Against superstitious fears and prejudices, Adam Smith maintained that God was to be found in the ordinary course of things, not in the rare or astonishing (Smith 1982a, HA III.2). The recourse to the metaphor of the “invisible hand” (originally the “invisible hand of Jupiter”, as seen in Smith 1982a, HA III.2, later reformulated in Smith 1982c, TMS IV.i.10, and, most famously, in Smith 1981, WN IV.ii.9) partook, in this very vein, of the religious language of the time and of a conception of divine Providence (Harrison 2011, p. 47). This was so because the wisdom of the philosopher had to mirror the wisdom of Nature itself, the wisdom of God, such being the spirit underlying the system of natural liberty.

Science and philosophy therefore led to rational religion, beyond miracles and the like. Yet enthusiasm, rather than superstition, was the principal danger to be counteracted with the rise and consolidation of the commercial era. Whereas superstition involved irrational fears and prejudices, enthusiasm threatened the very existence of society through the egocentrism it fostered. Enthusiasts were radically unsociable: they regarded themselves as uniquely chosen by God and therefore as standing beyond the ordinary rules of morality, including those of justice. A society composed of enthusiasts was a society of fanatics and sectarians, not of citizens: a society ultimately doomed to disintegration. Instruction in science and philosophy, including the rational religion to which they led, amounted to an education in human equality. The world was understood to be ordered for the common good, and within such a design no individual enjoyed privileged status. The Supreme Being was a God for all, not for a particular individual, or group, or sect. “What institution of government could tend so much to promote the happiness of mankind as the general prevalence of wisdom and virtue?”, Smith remarked (Smith 1982c, TMS IV.ii.1). Rational religion thus amounted to a generalised form of wisdom, the surest foundation for the preservation and progress of society.

4. Conclusions

Adam Smith’s defence of education, science, and religion formed part of a unified response to the moral and social tensions generated by the consolidation of commercial society, with its increasing division of labour and urban concentration. Commercial society entailed the risk of a desolate human landscape, and the best remedy for preventing such a condition, or at least mitigating its consequences, was to be found in the classroom. The system of natural liberty, if it was to fulfil its promises of happiness and virtue, depended upon the cultivation of sociability and justice. Since a pure and rational faith reinforced the sense of duty and encouraged impartiality, Smith regarded religious education as socially indispensable, as one of the most effective means of counteracting the risks generated by commercial society. Most likely, it was in recognition of this indispensable social function that Smith refused any involvement in Hume’s *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion* (1779). Despite Hume being his closest friend, Smith declared himself “resolved, for many reasons, to have no concern in the publication of those dialogues” (Smith 1987, Corr. Letter 172).

According to the framework set out in *The Wealth of Nations*, the state was to employ several mechanisms aimed at securing the triumph of pure and rational religion. In urban centres, let us recall, the worker would predictably turn to religious sects in an attempt to escape anonymity and isolation. The state therefore had to ensure the existence of religious

liberty, together with sufficient religious plurality and competition, so that the resulting religious environment would favour the emergence of a pure and rational religion whose divine law reinforced justice, not faction. Furthermore, within the programme of public education directed at the working classes, which included instruction in the principles of the system of natural liberty, some degree of education in the principles of rational religion was likewise implied, thereby encouraging impartiality and humility. This becomes even more evident in the case of the education of the middle and upper classes, who were to receive instruction in science and philosophy. In both cases, examinations were to be undertaken, confining the state to a general supervisory role.

Education in pure and rational religion further implied that the perspective of individuals should be enriched by the more abstract and contemplative perspective of the philosopher (cf. [Forman-Barzilai 2010](#), p. 17, criticising [Griswold 1999](#): “I resist his reconciliation here [. . .] I argue that the vivid tension between ordinary moral experience and reflective transcendence remains productively unresolved in Smith’s thought [. . .]”). Yet this did not mean that the impartial spectator was to be identified with God. Even if the idea of God proved instrumental in reinforcing their authority and binding force, the general rules remained originally human in character, and the impartial spectator remained, however idealised, fundamentally human. Pure and rational religion thus remained secondary to morality itself, reinforcing and consolidating moral obligations rather than originating them, with evident consequences for the content of the general rules (cf. [Bravo de Lallana Forthcoming](#)).

This connects to one of the most intriguing tensions in Smith’s thought: how belief in a benevolently ordered universe could coexist with so acute an awareness of the internal dangers of the system of natural liberty, itself ultimately grounded in a teleological conception of Nature. Just as the impartial spectator never ceased to be a human being, the triumph of pure and rational religion had to remain in equilibrium with human limitations, whether epistemological or practical. Smith’s confidence in the harmony of Nature never translated into political quietism or passive optimism. In this respect, Smith’s criticism of Marcus Aurelius remains particularly revealing. With remarkable literary sensitivity, Smith recognised that “(t)he 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”. Nevertheless, he continued, “(t)he most sublime speculation of the contemplative philosopher can scarce compensate the neglect of the smallest active duty” ([Smith 1982c](#), *TMS* VI.ii.III.5–6), however sublime such contemplation might be.

Funding: This article draws on the author’s doctoral thesis, which was awarded the Royal Spanish Academy of Doctors (RADE) Prize for the Best Doctoral Thesis in the Humanities (2025, *ex aequo*). The research leading to these results was supported by the Universidad de Navarra (Ayudas de la Asociación de Amigos para estudios de doctorado) and Banco Santander.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

Corr.	<i>The Correspondence of Adam Smith</i>
DNR	<i>Dialogues concerning Natural Religion</i>
ES	<i>Of the External Senses</i>
EMPL	<i>Essays, Moral, Political, and Literary</i>
HA	<i>The History of Astronomy</i>
HAP	<i>The History of the Ancient Physics</i>
LJ(A)	<i>Lectures on jurisprudence (Report of 1762–3)</i>
LJ(B)	<i>Lectures on jurisprudence (Report dated 1766)</i>
LRBL	<i>Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres</i>
Stewart	<i>Account of the life and Writings of Adam Smith</i>
TMS	<i>The Theory of Moral Sentiments</i>
WN	<i>An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations</i>

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