ADAM SMITH'S ANTI-CARTESIAN EPISTEMOLOGY AND THE INVISIBLE-HAND

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1. Introduction: Adam Smith’s irony
My claim is that Adam Smith’s mention of the invisible hand was neither a reference to a still non-existing theory of self-regulating markets nor just a ‘mildly ironic joke’; it is true that he contributed two key ideas in social thought, namely the unintended-results principle and the doctrine of spontaneous emergence of order, but neither may be identified with an elusive ‘invisible-hand principle’. The phrase had been adopted in the twentieth century as a label for both doctrines, and this would not be too bad. What is confusing, yet, is that the distinction between two distinct principles has been blurred and that the – in itself innocuous – linguistic innovation has been read retrospectively in Smith’s work.

2. Adam Smith’s post-scepticism
Smith was Hume’s lifelong fellow-traveller and a proponent of the latter’s common-sense doctrine albeit in an improved version, making room for common sense’s self-correction. On balance, he may be assumed to have endorsed Hume’s ‘true scepticism’ as contrasted with Phyrronianism, that is, dogmatic scepticism, keeping scepticism on duty in the capacity of dialectical counterweight to dogmatism (Hume 1758 xii.3).
Smith was not a neo-Stoic. He was instead a critic of Stoicism. His claim is that a philosophy which ‘detects’ some sort of world-order responds to a need of our imagination, but such philosophy is a slippery one, and we cannot consistently follow the view it suggests without endless paradox.
Smith, far from being a crypto-Atheist, was a sceptical Theist. He overtly declared that religious sentiments, when they are able to inspire love for one’s neighbour instead of fanatic hatred of heretics, are a respectable attempt to answer the question of the origin of evil, a question for which no answer justified by theoretical arguments is available (Cremaschi 2017).
In every field, epistemology, theology, ethics, politics, and political economy, Smith consistently defended some kind of sceptical something; that is, without being a sceptic, he was a sceptical Newtonian, a sceptical virtue theorist, a sceptical Whig, and a sceptical political economist.
The defence he provides for his own third way consists in proving that ‘systems’ – from the Cartesian theory of vortices to the Mercantile system – always result from oversimplification, excessive love of analogy, confusion of invisible, that is, imaginary entities with some hidden really existent mechanism. This goes with a constant reminder that Phyrronianism is self-defeating in so far as it ends up either with no conclusion at all or with the same ones as dogmatic systems.
His intellectual strategy is a dialectical one, aimed to unmask false claims embedded in ‘systems’ imposing themselves to human imagination by apparent ‘grandness’ of their principles, while what lays behind is just the ‘meanness’ of the philosopher’s vanity, the arrogance of the clergy, ‘love of domineering’ and greed displayed by the ‘masters of mankind’ and by ‘merchants and master-manufacturers’.
Knowledge is nothing but classification of phenomena by similarity and contiguity plus construction of invisible chains or imaginary machines filling in the gaps felt by our imagination in the classification we are able to carry about. There are more plausible and less plausible kinds of doctrines, and our imagination feels compelled to conform with the most plausible ones, since they
are simpler, more consistent, beautiful, and leave less gaps in the phenomena. This overall strategy makes special room for ‘Wit’. The reason is that this strategy aims at a partly negative and partly constructive task, getting rid of ‘systems’ and restoring common sense while avoiding to ‘freeze’ the latter into one more dogma.

The kind of ‘third way’ he was trying to mark out was a more sophisticated version of an intellectual program current in eighteenth-century Scotland, the ‘Newtonian philosophy’. In epistemology, the final outcome is the same as the one the rationalists wanted to attain, that is, an account of natural philosophy according to which it is true that there is growth of knowledge, theories become simpler and more comprehensive, previously incomprehensible phenomena are accounted for, and accurate predictions become available for still non-observed phenomena, but also one whose curious point is that the hidden mechanism of the human mind allowing for a quasi-realistic outcome are precisely those cherished by the sceptics, namely custom, association of ideas, imagination, and self-deception. This yields the ironic conclusion, in ‘The Principles which lead and direct philosophical enquiries’, that even Newton’s theory may be accounted for in terms of psychological mechanisms and its ability to impose itself on our imagination depends on reasons different from truth, and yet the power of imagination is so strong that – Smith admits –

even we, while we have been endeavouring to represent all philosophical systems as mere inventions of the imagination, to connect together the otherwise disjointed and discordant phenomena of nature, have insensibly been drawn in, to make use of language expressing the connecting principles of this one, as if they were the real chains which Nature makes use of to bind together her several operations. Can we wonder then, that it […] should now be considered, not as an attempt to connect in the imagination the phenomena of the Heavens, but as the greatest discovery that ever was made by man, the discovery of an immense chain of the most important and sublime truths, all closely connected together, by one capital fact (Smith 1795, Astronomy IV.76 my emphasis).

Note that he contrasts here invention and the imaginary on the one hand with the real, fact, experience, truth on the other, qualifying the latter as important, capital, immense, sublime, while adding that self-deception (that is, being insensibly been drawn in) works in favour of the arguably real, not of the imaginary. All this is something less than a sceptical conclusion.

3. Adam Smith’s anti-Cartesian economics

The Wealth of Nations is one more exemplar of the new genre of treatises on commerce inaugurated by Cantillon in 1755 where two traditions met, the pamphleteers’ piecemeal economic theorizing and the natural-law theorizing on property, price, and exchange. Smith’s choice to develop the lectures on policy into a self-contained book depended on various reasons: (a) a political agenda, namely the ongoing Scottish discussion on wealth and civic virtue; (b) the already existing example provided by Cantillon’s and Turgot’s treatises of commerce; (c) his own peculiar epistemology. It was thanks to the latter that he was in a position to rephrase the Physiocrats’ system – the closest to truth, in his view – into a more abstract and plausible theory, whose strength – he believed – was avoiding assumptions contradicting common sense, such as identification of wealth with raw produce. The result was a theory where a conjectural-historical account of phenomena coexists with the construction of invisible chains providing connections between apparently disconnected phenomena.

Systèmes, or systems, in eighteenth-century philosophical jargon, were too ambitious theories such as the Cartesian theory of vortices whose vice was recourse to conjectures or bending facts to fit them to theories, instead of saving the phenomena by introduction of just those principles that may connect phenomena with each other. Smith’s criticism of the “prevailing mercantile system” in his discussion of systems of political economy in Book IV may be understood as the main rhetorical goal of the work, and this critique provides a good case study in Wit.

In the beginning – he argues – there are ‘popular notions’ on money, such as may be suggested by custom. These “naturally” arise from its twofold function of instrument of commerce and of measure of value. Not unlike primitives, who believed that fire burns, water refreshes, springs are
inhabited by nymphs and trees by dryads, also the ‘polished nations’, as a result of a turn taken by their imagination, tend to believe that money is wealth, that there is some inherent quality in gold and silver. This is why the Spaniards considered worth conquering only those lands that abounded in precious metals. The Tartars, instead, cherish strange notions about cattle. A French ambassador says that the tartars used frequently to ask him, if there was plenty of sheep and oxen in the kingdom of France […] Among the Tartars, as among all other nations of shepherds, who are generally ignorant of the use of money, cattle are the instruments of commerce and the measures of value. Wealth, therefore, according to them, consisted in cattle, as according to the Spaniards in consisted in gold and silver (Smith 1776 IV.i.2).

Note, here, an opposition of apparently grand things such as gold and silver and mean ones such as sheep and oxen. Smith’s concluding comment is: ‘Of the two, the tartar notion, perhaps, was the nearest to the truth’ (Smith 1776 IV.i.2). He goes on, then, illustrating how from such popular notions the prohibition to export gold and silver was inspired, but also how, as commerce developed, merchants found such prohibition inconvenient while provided against it ‘partly solid and partly sophistical’ (Smith 1776 IV.i.9) arguments. The solid one was that to export money may be sometimes useful to a country; the sophistical one was that the government should act in order to grant a ‘favourable balance of trade’, that is, to secure that more metals were imported than those exported. The attention of government was turned away ‘from one fruitless care’, guarding against the exportation of gold and silver, ‘to another care, much more intricate, much more embarrassing, and just equally fruitless’, namely, watching ‘over the balance of trade’ (Smith 1776 IV.i.10; my emphasis). The mentioned arguments were addressed by those who were supposed to understand trade, to those who were conscious to themselves that they knew nothing about the matter. That foreign trade enriched the country, experience demonstrated to the nobles and country gentlemen, as well as to the merchants: but how, or in what manner, none of them well knew. The merchants knew perfectly in what manner it enriched themselves. It was their business to know it. But to know in what manner it enriched the country, was no part of their business (Smith 1776 IV.i.10).

Note, again, that enriching the country is a grand object, juxtaposed to the merchants’ effort to enrich themselves, which is mean object, and that knowing nothing is contrasted with knowing perfectly, apparently as the mean contrasted with the grand, but then the tables are turned, and perfectly turns out to apply to what is mean, while what is apparently grand is left in the company of nothing. If one takes a closer look at such arguments, it is clear enough that they amount to nothing, since the merchant never asked themselves how to enrich the country and they just needed to ‘to say something about the beneficial effects of foreign trade, and the manner in which those effects were obstructed by the laws as they then stood’ (Smith 1776 IV.i.10). Smith adds that complaints of scarcity of money are often raised but

Money, like wine, must always be scarce with those who have neither wherewithal to buy it, nor credit to borrow it. Those who have either, will seldom be in want either of the money, or of the wine which they have occasion for (Smith 1776 IV.i.16; my emphasis).

Here it is money, supposedly a grand object, to be contrasted with wine, a rather mean one. The point is that gold and silver are commodities among others, the only difference being easier transportation and more stable value. Every time there is a real need of such commodities, they are provided by market mechanisms. Besides, money is a commodity less indispensible than many others, since it can be supplanted by barter, buying and selling upon credit and well-regulated paper money, and thus it ‘would be too ridiculous to go about seriously to prove that wealth does not consist in money, or in gold and silver; but in what money purchases, and is valuable only for purchasing’ (Smith 1776 IV.i.17; my emphasis). The proof is that money runs after commodities but the latter not always run after money, and it is no objection that consumable commodities are soon destroyed whereas ‘gold and silver could be accumulated for ages together, to the incredible
augmentation of the real wealth of the country’ (Smith 1776 IV.i.19; my emphasis), since we do not reckon that trade disadvantageous which consists in the exchange of the hardware of England for the wines of France. In fact, hardware is a very durable commodity, and might too be accumulated for ages together, to the incredible augmentation of the pots and pans of the country (Ibid.; my emphasis).

Note that real wealth is opposed, here, to pots and pans. This opposition serves once more the goal to show how ‘absurd’ is any doctrine that would contend that more pots and pans would be of any use without a corresponding increase in virtualls to cook.

Smith concludes that ‘fatal experience’ has sufficiently exposed ‘the folly of a system’ that inspired ruinous conduct such as that of the various companies of East Indies and the ‘savage injustice’ of the Europeans in administering the American colonies (Smith 1776 IV.i.33). His alternative is the ‘simple and obvious’ system of natural liberty, described as something that establishes itself without any artificial intervention from above. All we need is a tolerable degree of liberty, justice, equality. In a word, in economics no less than ethics and natural philosophy, rationalistic systems miscarry and their sceptical antagonists hardly do any better. But Smith, the author of ‘The Principles’, may have known too well that also such a tentative and imperfect kind of order might have been mistaken by his alleged followers for the fixed Order of Nature.

7. Invisible hands, economic and theological
The invisible hand mentioned in The Wealth of Nations became popular toward the middle of the twentieth century⁴. The phrase became popular in the social sciences at large as a signpost for theories based on unintended effects, spontaneous order, or evolution⁵. This would not have been too bad, if Paul Samuelson had not used it as nickname for ‘self-regulating market’, understood as a mechanism behind the phenomena (Kennedy 2009, 250-1), what amounts to virtually the opposite of Smith’s original idea. And yet, Smith had been popular among economists for almost two centuries with hardly any mention of the phrase. As a result of recently won popularity among economists, also Adam Smith scholars started paying attention to it, discovering in The Theory of Moral Sentiments the poor man’s son passage to be compared with the domestic-investment passage from the Wealth of Nations, and later on with the invisible-hand-of- Jupiter passage in The Principles⁶.

All this culminated in the last fireworks lighted by the ‘New View’ proponents who squeezed out of the phrase something against which Smith had been fighting for his whole life, namely a deductive social theory⁷. The View consists of four claims: first, Smith endorsed several of the traditional proofs of God’s existence, first of all the Argument from Design (Hill 2001, 6); second, he claimed that order existing in the world is a morally good order implemented by Providence (Ibid.); third, he believed evil in the world to be only apparent; fourthly, the ‘invisible hand’ was literally the hand of God – the Christian God, not Jupiter (Denis 2005,16; Oslington 2011b, 71 and 67). They announced an intention to mend misreading introduced by the twentieth-century ‘secularizing turn’, while rescuing allegedly theological readings of early commentators (Hill 2001, 1-4).

To all this it may be answered that he truth is that the first readers never suspected a theological dimension in The Wealth of Nations. It is true that the Christian Political Economists elaborated on Smithian ideas, among them spontaneous order, while adding a theological dimension. Thomas Chalmers wrote that the

greatest economic good is rendered to the community […] by the spontaneous play and busy competition of many thousand wills, each bent on the persecution of his own selfishness […] which bespeack the skill of a master-hand, in the adjustment of its laws (Chalmers 1833, 238-9; emphasis added).

and Richard Whately that

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man is, in the same act, doing one thing by choice […] and another, undesignedly, under the care of the Providence (Whately 1832, 94).

And yet, far from ‘early commentators’, they were original thinkers working out their own views without even bothering to cite Smith’s relevant passages. In fact, Chalmers mentioned a master-hand, not an invisible hand, and Whately repeated a familiar doctrine about Providence without any mention of hands, visible or invisible. Shortly after – without waiting the twentieth-century ‘secularizing turn’ – the two Mills started swearing on Smith’s unbelief, and the German historical school proclaiming instead Smith’s ‘Deism’ – a term that in the eighteenth-century did not refer to belief in God but was instead an allegation of Atheism in drag – and by German Historcists was used instead as an allegation of the sin of ‘metaphysical dogmatism’ (Rothschild 2002, 118; Cremaschi 2018).

4. The invisible hand as irony and as metaphor
A few sensible voices have been heard in recent years trying to mend the rips. Emma Rothschild argued that ‘Smith did not especially esteem the invisible hand’ and the phrase ‘is best interpreted as a mildly ironic joke’ (Rothschild 2002, 116). It is worth noting her awareness of kinship subsisting between the invisible hand and ‘invisible beings’ or ‘invisible chains’ in Smith’s theory of religion and epistemology (Rothschild 2002, 120-1). Another sensible remark is that there is one sense in which Smith may have not been ironic about the invisible hand, if it is taken as a catch-phrase for the idea of spontaneous order in general (Rothschild 2002, 135; cf. Vogel 2017, 99-104), and also reasonable is the conclusion is that the phrase indicates ‘a system which soothes the imagination, and which might or might not correspond to relations in society’ (Rothschild 2002, 137). This is fair enough, and yet I have a few objections to raise. The first is that Rothschild (2002, 129-31) introduces an unnecessary argument for Smith’s irreligion, and this is vitiated by deficient acquaintance with the religious context; for example, she does not even suspect that derision of Catholic religious practices was not a proof of irreligion, but rather a matter of course for any pious Protestant. The second is that her effort to prove the human, not divine, character of the invisible hand is also unnecessary, precisely because the ambiguity on the character of the hand at stake may have been left on purpose in order to produce the desired rhetorical effect pursued. The third is that she does not draw all the consequences she could draw from the references she makes to other invisible entities.

Gavin Kennedy adds to Rothschild’s considerations that the phrase has no univocal theological connotation, being a widespread way of saying referring to both divine and human hands, and that it is ‘a metaphor, complying with the rules of grammar’, namely, ‘an allusion betwixt one object and another’ which is felicitous if ‘it gives the due strength of expression to the object described and at the same time does this in a more striking and interesting manner’ (Kennedy 2011, 56; cf. Samuels 2011, 142-63). He lists a number of texts where the phrase shows up with reference to human hands (Kennedy 2009, 242-3). Besides, he insists that, were we to take the phrase as an emblem for the unintended-results principle in general, the principle is believed by Smith to yield as many pernicious effects as beneficial ones (Kennedy 2009, 255-9). And he concludes that Smith had no ‘theory’ of the invisible hand, that he had recourse to it treating it as a well-known eighteenth-century literary metaphor, and he gave it ‘no role in his theory of competitive markets in Books I and II of the Wealth of Nations’ (Kennedy 2009, 240).

To add at least a dissenting but sensible voice to the discussion, Peter Harrison published a rejoinder to Rothschild. He starts with a reconstruction of the story of the idea of God’s hand in Christian theology from the first centuries to eighteenth-century Scotland (Harrison 2011a, 32-9). The reconstruction is fine, and it may be usefully combined with Samuels’s own reconstruction (Samuels 2011, 20-29), since both provide evidence of widespread use in a variety of context as well as of some continuity between use in religious and in secular contexts. Yet, a number of further conclusions he draws may be turned upside down. The argument is that at least several passages
from *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* allow ascription of theological commitments to Smith. He writes that

Smith’s lining up of perceived regularities in the moral and physical realms, and his apparent attribution of these to providence, provided a clear warrant for reading him as endorsing a general natural theology and of using the invisible hand as another way of speaking about divine providence (Harrison 2011a, 47).

At least he keeps his distance from the ‘New View’ on one specific point when he writes that ‘one reading of Smith would see his invocation of the invisible hand as […] denying recourse to special providence while retaining some role for general providence’ (Harrison 2011a, 44). Let me add that ‘special providence’ means God's exceptional interventions – which may on occasions imply a change in the workings of the laws of nature, that is, miracles. To be fair, Harrison concludes that Oslington’s God-and-the Market doctrine is, more than the final interpretation of Smith’s writings, just a plausible one, and lists among admissible candidates also the alternative ‘conventionalist’ reading proposed by Knud Haakonnsen according to which ‘the invisible hand, like the law of gravitation, was an artifact of the human imagination’ (Harrison 2011a, 48). But the main proof he advances in support of the realist reading is apparently that ‘few commentators regard Smith’s references to Newtonian physics as ironic or rhetorical’ (*Ibid.*), and from this he draws the inference that Smith was at least ‘conscious of being psychologically committed to the validity of both natural science and natural theology’ (*Ibid.*). It is, to say the least, a rather weak proof. One may object that majority rule is a criterion accepted in democratic politics, not in intellectual history, and thus Harrison, who has done such a wonderful work in the first part of the paper with seventeenth- and eighteenth-century sources, could have made the effort to be less nonchalant with twentieth-century commentators, however ‘few’ they may have been. There are indeed a few of them who argued that Smith’s interpretation of Newtonian physics was that of an anti-Cartesian who, while fully persuaded of Newton’s superiority vis-à-vis Descartes, concluded nonetheless that the Newtonian system might *not* be read in realist terms, and that this conclusion was made unavoidable by the tension he felt between the acknowledgment of the Newtonian system’s superiority and the admission of a permanently hypothetical character of any theory. This was the reason why – as mentioned – he manifested his feeling that there was, in the *The Principles*, ‘more refinement than solidity’, a statement that hardly sounds as a positive assessment of the validity of the Newtonian system. Half a century ago, Serge Moscovici suggested that we cannot be sure that Adam Smith had clearly grasped that difficulty, but he has surely felt it, while realizing that it was not possible to talk about Newton's system in the same way in which he was talking about other systems. The heaven of the past and of theory is faced with the earth of present and of the real which is grasped by science. Starting with a social and psychological account of philosophy, Smith is insensibly drawn to talk of it as if it was but imagination, and finally he cannot avoid finding in the imaginary a bit of reality. His reflection has not dwelt on these conundrums and his 'philosophy of science' has been nothing more than a sketch, echoing his contemporaries' troubles (Moscovici 1956, 10).

He adds that there are two sides in the Newtonian theory, namely that of a system which the mind may view as its own creation and that of a tool useful for everyday life and, while the instrumental dimension of other systems has gone lost to the point that we tend to think that it never existed, Newton’s system is still basic for us. He adds that we ‘cannot be sure that Adam Smith clearly spelled out such a conundrum, but surely he did perceive it’ (*Ibid.*), and thus in ‘The Principles’ we find an idea somehow echoing Blaise Pascal, namely that ‘the system, albeit not true at retail price, may be true wholesale’, (Moscovici 1956, 18-9). Taking advantage of thus universally ignored suggestion, the following objections may be raised.

First, Harrison’s reconstruction of theological uses is based on abundant textual evidence, and proves that the phrase had wide currency in eighteenth-century literature with reference precisely to God’s hand. And yet, the weakness of his second part depends on rather naïve use of textual
evidence, as if any uttering would always embody just one kind of speech-act, namely assertion. But after John Austin, Paul Grice, and Quentin Skinner, it is a matter of course that this is blatantly false, that we utter or quote a phrase in order to play on ambiguity, or to subvert its meaning through word pun, or to exert irony, sarcasm or ridicule by juxtaposing incompatible elements or exploiting equivocal senses, for ex. the sense of invisible as supernatural and that of out of sight or hidden by a screen.

Secondly, the hand of Jupiter is dismissed by Harrison without argument, writing that it ‘seems to be simply a metaphor, not drawing upon any developed conception of the invisible hand and unrelated to his other two references’. Yet, there is some literature arguing the opposite and it should have been discussed no less than Oslington’s (unwarranted) claim that Smith, by the word Jupiter, meant the Christian God. Vivenza (2008) pointed at a plausible source for Smith’s passage on the hand of Jupiter while contributing in making it clear that Smith was not endorsing any kind of hand-of-Jupiter explanation. John Lindgren had earlier illustrated the context where the passage fits, namely a critique of philosophical monotheism, which Smith declares to be logically inconsistent and both intellectually less respectable and morally more repugnant than polytheism itself (Lindgren 1973, 136-41; cf. Pack 1995: 302-3). The further consideration may be added that the principles of the human mind do account for polytheism while they neither account for philosophical monotheism nor for the Cartesian theory of vortices. Both doctrines result from a disease of the imagination, namely an excessive desire to simplify, while polytheism arises instead from naïve anthropomorphism soothing wonder caused by unexpected events by feigning behind them invisible beings acting not in order to support ‘the ordinary course of things, which went on of its own accord, but to stop, to thwart, and to disturb it’ (Smith 1795, Astronomy III.2; cf. Cremaschi 2018). Jupiter’s hand is mentioned not as the hand of the Christian God but as that of a heathen divinity, one more of those ‘invisible entities’ (Smith 1795, Astronomy III.2) feigned by ‘that vulgar superstition which ascribes all the irregular events of nature to the favour or displeasure of intelligent, though invisible beings, to gods, daemons, witches, genii, fairies’ (Smith 1795 Astronomy III.2; my emphasis). Note that Smith is practising precisely irony (Jupiter, allegedly something grand, juxtaposed with something mean, obvious facts from everyday life).

Thirdly, there are also cases where the phrase had been used without any religious meaning. Besides those listed by Rothschild and Kennedy, I discuss one more in the following section.

To sum up, in the New-View literature continuity between Jupiter’s hand and the two invisible hand in the main works has been, first, assumed without textual evidence and, then, used as a proof of identity of both with Christian God’s hand. Harrison implies that this is a non sequitur in a surprisingly reticent way and, with reference to special providence, omits mentioning that the mistake he is rejecting is precisely Oslington’s.

5. Beyond irony and metaphor
In this section I sketch a viable reading of the phrase ‘invisible hand’. Rothschild (2002, 119) suggested that we should decompose the history of the invisible hands into its constituent ideas. This requires to consider, first, semantics, that is, the map of correspondences and oppositions in one author’s dictionary, secondly, rhetoric and pragmatic, that is, speech acts and communicative intentions. Let me examine, first, three terms implied by the phrase, and then various kinds of speech act.

Semantic interpretation: invisible, hand, motion
(i) invisible. An examination of uses of the adjective ‘invisible’ has been carried out by Rothschild (2002, 120). I would like to add that the phrase ‘invisible hand’ shows up, besides other non-religious contexts, in a letter to Newton of 18 March 1712/1713 by his disciple Roger Cotes while formulating an objection concerning gravitation; he argues that attraction of one planet by another caused by a non observable principle such as vis attractiva would look to any observer as
the effect of an ‘invisible hand’ (that is, *invisible to a given observer in a given location*) pushing a globe laid on a table towards another. He writes:

Suppose two globes A & B placed at a distance from each other upon a table, & that whilst A remains at rest B is moved towards it by an Invisible Hand. A by-stander who observes this motion but not the cause of it, will say that B does certainly tend to the centre of A, & thereupon he may call the force of the invisible Hand the centripetal force of B, or the attraction of A since ye effect appears the same as if it did truly proceed from a proper & real attraction of A (Newton 1975, 149)\textsuperscript{12}.

In other words, Cotes points at an example of a *non-observed* cause of an *observed* motion. His hand is not the hand of a God imparting motion to celestial bodies; it is just a human hand pushing a globe placed upon a table while hidden to an observer who is looking from a given point. Cotes’s point is that there is a possibility to account for one and the same phenomenon in two alternative ways. Thus, use of the phrase is important for us, first, as evidence of use of the adjective ‘invisible’ in the down-to-earth sense of ‘hidden’ and, secondly, as evidence of use of this phrase in the scientific context while discussing precisely an issue that would have been of interest to Smith the historian of science, namely the equivalence of action at a distance with transmission of motion by direct contact. The above example may be compared with a passage from ‘The Principles’ declaring that the

motion of a small piece or iron along a plain table is in itself no extraordinary object, yet the person who first saw it begin, without any visible impulse, in consequence of the motion of a loadstone some little distance from it, could not behold it without the most extreme Surprise; and when that momentary emotion was over, he would still wonder how it came to be enjoined to an event so little suspected it to have any connection (Smith 1795, Astronomy III.2).

Smith adds that, in this case, we feel a want of connection between two objects, and finding an explanation may sooth our imagination.

(ii) Hands
Ernst Lluch (1998) argued that for Smith the legacy of Jansenism is important and that Mandeville’s idea of private vices *turned into* public virtues comes from Jansenist Pierre Nicole (1771). Mandeville had taken the idea who claimed the existence of a distinction between two realms of virtue, the former being sham virtue but good enough to keep order in the earthly city, the other being the true one, useless for this world but necessary for the other. The former kind of virtue is the result of ‘deft manipulation by a skilful politician’ playing with human passions like a puppeteer with marionettes. Human passions are directed into the right channels not by action of an invisible hand understood as a *vis a tergo* pushing human beings in a direction that they have not chosen, but by the hand of an architect who has projected the channels. In Lluch’s interpretation, Smith, when using the phrase ‘invisible hand’, was paraphrasing precisely this idea (Lluch 1998, 163). Rothschild adds a comparison of the invisible-hand passages with the chessboard passage, where the ‘man of system’

seems to *imagine* that he can arrange the different members of a great society with as much ease as the hand arranges the different pieces upon a chess-board. He does not consider that the piece upon the chess-board has no other *principle of motion of its own*, altogether different from that which the legislature might chose to *impress upon it* (Smith 1759 VI.II.ii.17; cf. Rothschild 2002, 129-30).

Note that the hand, here, is not just *invisible* but is also *imaginary*. The politician’s hand is in itself made of flesh and bones, but qua external cause impressing motion on the members of society it is just dreamt of. Note also that the metaphor here is primarily an anthropomorphic one – the government-subjects relationship is analogous to the player-pawns one. But, below the waterline, there is another physico-political metaphor; the hand of the Imperial Reformer is *visible* and that it
is vainly interfering with the ‘principle of motion’ with which every individual is endowed. But this is not the delusory ‘independence and idiosyncrasy of individuals’ (Rothschild 2002, 125) as Rothschild believes, indeed without textual evidence; it is precisely the same principle Smith on other occasions indicates by the phrase ‘invisible hand’, and he is mocking here the Imperial Reformer, not his subjects. Note also that here the theme on which Smith’s rhetoric elaborates is not provided by hands, either visible or invisible, but by what hands are supposed to impart to bodies, namely, motion. The focus of the simile is analogy subsisting between literal motion in physical systems and metaphorical motion in human society. Thus, besides uses of the term ‘hand’, it is as well to examine uses of the term ‘motion’.

(iii) Motion

Motion was the key-idea of post-Renaissance science. The controversy between Newtonians and Cartesians turned around transmission of motion by action at a distance. The main topic in Smith’s Principles, in the Astronomy section, is precisely the capacity to reduce motions in the universe to a unitary system by providing imaginary missing links. The three invisible-hand passages do, in different degrees, evoke the idea of motion. In the first, Jupiter’s hand is not yet invoked by primitives to make so that ‘heavy bodies descend, and lighter substances fly upwards’. In The Theory of Moral Sentiments, deception ‘roused and keeps in continual motion the industry of mankind’. In The Wealth of Nations, what is left of the physical metaphor is the idea that ‘every individual is led to promote an end’ (Smith 1795, Astronomy IV.II.9; 1759 IV.1.11; 1776 IV.II.9).

Talk of hands – I have suggested – is not so much about hands as about motion. Smith’s intention is not to prove the existence of a providential order – in fact, either we cannot help seeing it or, on the contrary, we may conclude that this way of seeing is just deception – but instead to reduce different motions to a system while avoiding to bend facts to fit theories. The pre-analytic vision this analogy suggests is that interest – following a familiar Renaissance commonplace – is the spring which sets individuals in motion. The various elements of which the body of society is composed are endowed with their own original motion and forces giving origin to motions, not unlike attractive forces in the universe, also bring about cohesion in society.

Pragmatic interpretation

Speech acts do not show up just in everyday life. Science itself has grown through controversies and the latter are made of speech acts which use, among other things, metaphor, analogy and other tropes. Thus, to Rothschild’s and Kennedy’s useful suggestions, the consideration should be added that irony is never just irony and metaphor never is just metaphor. Let me add that Smith was a wary Scot, and his choice of terminology was seldom casual, even more so in the invisible-hand passages Rothschild (2002, 137).

This implies that individual terms should be arranged in a network of meanings and, besides, we should be aware that some of them are over-determined by philosophical assumptions spelled out elsewhere – think of mention of invisible hand in the main works and discussion of ‘invisible beings’ and ‘invisible chains’ in “The Principles”. This does not detract, on the contrary it adds support to Rothschild’s claim that the author’s communicative intention was in both works ironical. Indeed the ironic effect is produced by contrasting the rich man’s or the merchant’s mean motives with grand unintended consequences of their action. Whether the hand is God’s or anybody else’s, and whether it is invisible by its very nature or instead non-observable because of the merchant’s short-sightedness goes beyond the point. Smith, in fact, did not hesitate to mention the Divinity when it was appropriate to do so, but, first, he did not mention her in this context and, secondly, on the only occasion when he identified the invisible hand with the hand of a god, the latter was a heathen god, not the Presbyterian God.
And yet, avoiding explicit mention of God while using an expression widely current in Presbyterian preaching may have been intentional, in so far as the contrast between the merchant’s meanness and God’s grandness is apt to produce scorn, and the target of such scorn is not the man in the street but the merchant, no less than Jupiter’s grandness contrasted with the meanness of everyday-life phenomena is apt to produce sarcasm, whose target is not the savage but the philosophical monotheist. The communicative intention may rather easily identified, namely, in the former case, poking fun at both the rich and powerful by associating their conduct with something grand in order to remind us of how mad a conduct inspired by mean motives may look once it is described with a grand name, in the latter poking fun at the dogmatic by associating their grand inferences to the mean but more warranted accounts of the primitive. It is clearly not a literal statement of a fact but a rhetorical figure, metaphor, employed to enact irony or sarcasm while evoking – by metonymy encapsulated within metaphor – human folly. But it is more than rhetorical embellishment, and indeed use of the rhetorical figure is made plausible by the author’s peculiar epistemology.

In another respect, the phrase may be in one sense just emblematic for a ubiquitous phenomenon, or better two distinct albeit interrelated ones, namely, the unintended-results principle and the evolutionary emergence of order. When thus understood, the whole of Smith’s social theory could be said to turn around the ‘invisible hand’. But, first, such order is much less than general equilibrium; it is order emerging without design in those cases when some kind of (more or less efficient, more or less beneficial, more or less equitable) order does emerge. And yet, he implied that both principles are at work in quite a number of cases; but just on two occasions did he resort to this rhetorical figure. It is as well to think that, by so doing, he wanted to stress some particularity in the workings of both principles (Rothschild 2002, 135-6; Smith 2009).

To sum up, the first invisible hand is clearly not the Christian God’s hand but that of a pagan deity; the second and third neither are divine nor human, and here the distinction is irrelevant. And besides, had Smith meant God’s hand, he would have just said so; I mentioned that he had been hardly reticent about the Architect of the Universe, the Deity, or the Father of the world. Thus, we may safely assume that in these passages the focus was deviation of motion by intervention of an external cause. Whether it is invisible on principle or quite visible but hidden was not the issue under discussion. There may have been a rhetorical overtone in the choice of a term widely used by Presbyterian preachers, but this may have been an intentional rhetorical side-effect, not the main point.

One may ask: where are the invisible hands when the actions of individuals have malign outcomes for society? Kennedy has counted in the Wealth of Nations a number of instances of ‘malign consequences of self-interested actions’ (Kennedy 2009, 255). Besides, that kind of order which does emerge, whenever it does so, is far less than a Panglossian order, being useful more for the survival of the species than for the happiness of individuals. And besides, it is a morally defective order and, on balance, more an additional source of unhappiness than of well-being. Harrison himself – contradicting Oslington once more – admits that there are many reasons ‘to consider that the invisible hand can work in reverse […] the system is a negative theodicy, a denial of theodicy, a theory that says that we can ignore theodicy’ (Harrison 2011b, 102-103; cf. Cremaschi 2010).

6. Conclusions: post-scepticism, irony, and the art of not understanding jokes
At the beginning of the nineteenth century, at the time of discussion of the Corn Laws and the Poor Laws, The Wealth of Nations started being quoted in the British Parliament by proponents of opposite views and, from this very moment, those claims he had reported in order to refute them by reductio ad absurdum started being read as propositions he endorsed. Smith as a Stoic, as a natural theologian, as a general-equilibrium theorist are later results of such astonishing hermeneutics first displayed in the British Parliament.

I have mentioned that the phrase has become a catchword for two distinct theories, namely the unintended results and spontaneous order. Both are seminal ideas without which the social sciences would have hardly yielded anything in the last two centuries (Vogel 2017, 99-104). Yet, they are
not tantamount to general equilibrium theory, another respectable idea less in touch with the world of facts. The circumstance that a phrase, used just twice or three times by Smith, was adopted as a name of a whole family of theories is curious, albeit in itself innocent on so far as language does work through either metonymy or metaphor. But the circumstance has been misleading for at least two reasons: first, it has been muddling up the distinction between two different principles; in this way, the suggestion has been smuggled in that unintended results constantly yield order – which is true in 50% cases, while in the other 50% they yield catastrophe; secondly, it has provoked a short-circuit in intellectual history giving birth to the inquiry into a non-existing invisible-hand Smithian doctrine.

Smith’s ironical destiny was that his own irony was seldom understood. Irony was an essential step in his own path of inquiry, precisely because his strength – like that of an illustrious predecessor – rested precisely on his awareness of how little we know. But his irony was too subtle to be understood, and appeals to his name as well as ‘interpretations’ of his thought have often been exercises in a widespread skill, the art of not understanding jokes.

References
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2 Forbes 1976; Cremaschi 1989, 85-87; for the opposite view see Griswold 1999, 164.
3 See Cremaschi 1989, 85-87; 2000, 73-77; Pack 1996, 185-189
6 For an overview of conclusions on which there is a consensus in the literature see Samuels 2011, 30-35.
7 Oslington 2011a provides an almost exhaustive anthology of what has been produced by the New View proponents.
10 Harrison 2011a, 45.
13 For a similar point see Pack 1996.