

# Adam Smith's Non-foundationalism

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**Abstract** This article is part of a symposium (in *Society*) on a target article by Amitai Etzioni. Using that article as a point of departure, I take the opportunity to elaborate a reading of Adam Smith's moral philosophy that sees it as quite non-foundationalist. Whereas foundationalism's metaphor is a block or pillar, as non-foundationalism's metaphor I suggest a spiral. I claim that non-foundationalism and Smithian liberalism dovetail.

**Keywords** Adam Smith · *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* · Foundationalism · Relativism

**JEL Classification** A13 · B12

Charles Griswold (1999, 165) describes Adam Smith's moral philosophy as "self-consciously non-foundationalist," Samuel Fleischacker (2004) writes approvingly of it not being foundationalist (see 23–26), and Emma Rothschild (2004, 152) notes that Smith is little concerned with "foundational or metaethical questions." Indeed, a number of aspects of Adam Smith's moral philosophy exhibit a tendency toward non-foundationalism. I offer a brief on such tendency. In what follows the citations that do not specify a source refer to *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, and 262.1 means page 262, paragraph 1 of the edition listed in the references.

Non-foundationalism is associated with philosophical pragmatism (William James, John Dewey, Richard Rorty), which is associated with postmodernism, which is associated

with political leftism. Yet I feel that non-foundationalism dovetails with Adam Smith liberalism, centered on the principle of "allowing every man to pursue his own interest his own way, upon the liberal plan of equality, liberty and justice" (Smith 1976b, 664.3). The words "to pursue his own interest his own way" (which also appear in the "natural liberty" paragraph 687.51) highlight the particularism, moment by moment, of sentiment, interpretation, understanding, personal meaning, that ought to humble the selfhoods of happiness experts, health officials, busybodies, and meddlers, who often presume to know based on some quackish formulations. The words "the liberal plan of equality, liberty and justice" signify not so much a philosophical foundation as a political potentiality. In apprehending the most important things, Smith saw, in the context of a stable polity, a presumption of liberty as one of the central options on the table. Smith's non-foundationalism apprehends the options, sizes them up, and develops a non-foundationalist case for any inclination for one over another. Shall we lean North, South, East, or West? Smith may be understood as expressing liberal sensibilities and mounting of a non-foundationalist case in their favor.

A brief on Smith's non-foundationalism is pertinent to Amitai's article "Happiness Is the Wrong Metric." Its main idea is susceptible to criticism of a non-foundationalist flavor.

In the article we learn that, while many researchers maintain that "pleasure" or "satisfaction" is what motivates people, Amitai sees that "people are motivated in part by their quest to live up to their moral commitments." Such motivation, he holds, "cannot be reconstituted as another source of satisfaction." The insight that "both pleasure and moral commitments significantly influence human behavior" heralds a new understanding of human preferences, and brave new opportunities for "changing cultures and social and political structures, which shape preferences." Amitai concludes by calling for "a social movement...to withdraw the legitimacy of an old

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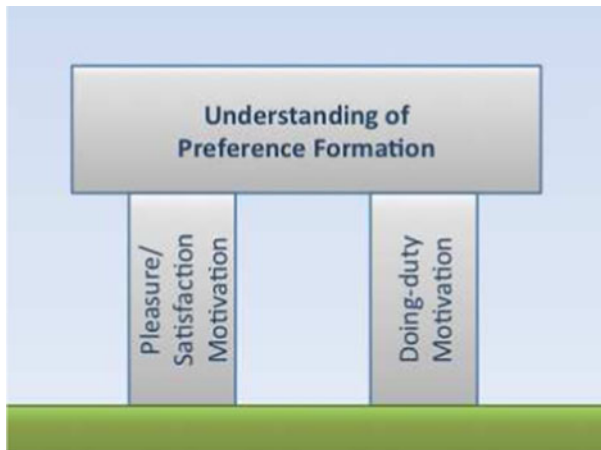
regime and invest the freed legitimation in the formation of a new one.” To make such a call inspired by his dual-motivation insight, Amitai must think that the distinction is solid and deep.

But the distinction is not solid and deep. Sure, in the moment, we might use such a distinction. In explaining his point, Amitai gives an example:

To illustrate this point very briefly, if one states that ‘I would LIKE to go to a movie but OUGHT to visit a friend in the hospital’ and reads this as not different from ‘I would like to go to a movie or a dinner,’ one has lost half of what social science needs to study.

It’s not that I disagree (though I doubt that many would regard the two statements as not different). The problem is that Amitai is thinking in terms of two pillars—a pillar of “pleasure”/“satisfaction” and a pillar of doing-duty.<sup>1</sup> Upon these two pillars, researchers, regulators, experts, nudgers, and uplifters shall develop an accurate understanding of preference formation and promulgate a new and improved polity.

“Pillar” serves as a nice metaphor for foundationalism. Indeed, the term *foundationalism* suggests a foundation of a building, a solid, uniform, unchanging, immovable block, much like a pillar, upon which a description or understanding stands.



To the non-foundationalist, however, such an image of understanding is suspect, particularly in moral philosophy. If an image serves as non-foundationalism’s metaphor, it is a spiral.

<sup>1</sup> The expression “doing-duty” seems apt for the motivation highlighted by Amitai. He describes it as “the sense one has after doing something considered to be a moral duty,” and “attempting to live up to moral commitments.” He proceeds to give as appellation for such motivation “affirmation.” It seems to me that doing one’s duty, avoiding disappointment, is what Amitai describes; it would be yet another step (though, admittedly, a small, natural step) to reflecting on one’s duty and doing-duty to experience affirmation (see Klein 2012, 270–271). So I refrain from using Amitai’s appellation (“affirmation”) and instead use “doing-duty.”

Unlike a block-like structure or movement along a straight line, a spiral shows interdependence or movement from a top to a bottom and then back to a top; thus each top depends on a bottom, and that bottom on a preceding top. A spiral depicts distinct loops (which a simple circle or cycle does not), such that the top at one loop may be somewhat different than the top at the next, and similarly for the bottoms. Within each loop, we have, as it were, a distinct subscript on “top” and “bottom.”



The spiral works differently than the one in *The Wizard of Oz*. Dorothy landed in Oz, learned of the yellow-brick road, and decided to be on it, to pursue a journey on it. She started at a central fixed point. Man’s spiral, however, has no start and no end, and living it is not a matter of decision.

Dorothy’s journey wound outward, but man’s journey is to find a cohesive center of consciousness, to make his doings coherent. His spiral winds inward. As he passes from moment  $i$  to moment  $i+1$  he winds deeper into the spiral.

Yet, as he winds further along, arriving at moment  $i+1$ , he finds the road widening and opening up new scenes of strange and wondrous objects:

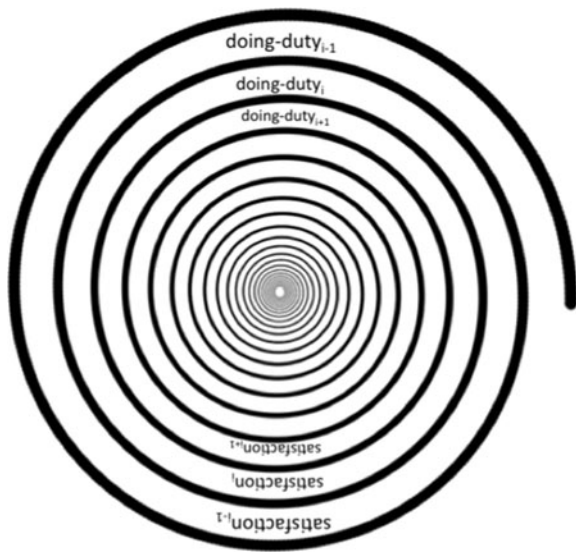
Cattle in the marketplace  
Scatterlings and orphanages  
He looks around, around  
He sees angels in the architecture  
Spinning in infinity  
He says Amen! and Hallelujah!<sup>2</sup>

In 1757, Edmund Burke (1990, 67) wrote: “Infinity has a tendency to fill the mind with that sort of delightful horror, which is the most genuine effect, and truest test of the sublime.”

Amitai’s two motivations, satisfaction and doing-duty, recur as we circumnavigate the spiral’s loops (or layers or

<sup>2</sup> Paul Simon, “You Can Call Me Al,” 1986.

levels). Let us associate “going to the movie” with satisfaction<sub>i</sub>:



Think of a spiral winding upward from the page. We see that satisfaction<sub>i</sub> relates, on either side, to doing-duty:

... doing-duty<sub>i-1</sub> — satisfaction<sub>i</sub> — doing-duty<sub>i</sub> ...

On the one side, in doing-duty<sub>i-1</sub>, we have duties such as that of not disappointing one’s expectations of seeing the movie, of rewarding oneself after a hard week, of staying conversant with modern culture, of stimulating one’s mind, of *resisting* other iniquitous activities, and of who knows what else. Also, in considering any manner of occupying oneself, there is the abiding duty of minding the cost, what would be forgone. On the other side, in doing-duty<sub>i</sub>, we have the continuance of things at the preceding loop, but man reviews and revises, though usually only in small ways. Perhaps the movie sparks new perspectives and sentiments, which affect some of his abiding duties. Also, it might lead to new transitory duties: “I must post about it on Facebook.”

Likewise, if we associate “I ought to visit my friend in the hospital,” with doing-duty<sub>i</sub>, we can easily think that it relates to satisfaction on either side. The word *ought* derives from *owe*. One might then look for the source of the obligation, such as the convalescent friend’s sympathy, kindness, and companionship, and one’s memories thereof. And, looking forward, there is the expectation of the friend’s gratitude for the visit, and, most importantly, the satisfaction that comes with doing one’s duty, the pleasure in the approval of the man within the breast. Or, the avoidance of his disapproval: “it is this inmate who, in the evening, calls us to an account for all those omissions and violations, and his reproaches often make us blush inwardly both for our folly and inattention to

our own happiness, and for our still greater indifference and inattention, perhaps, to that of other people” (262.1).

Amitai recognizes that one can identify a satisfaction associated with doing-duty, but he shoos us off of doing so: “it seems best to separate the quests for self-satisfaction from efforts to adhere to one’s value.” He says that “Understanding what makes some societies more self-oriented and pleasure seeking and others more dedicated to affirmation [or doing-duty] is a major subject for ... public discourse *and policy*. Collapsing the two kinds of pursuits into one means losing the conceptual tools this kind of analysis requires” (my italics). Thus, Amitai suggests that we must either collapse the two kinds or pursuits into one or keep them separate. But the spiral approach affords a subtle approach in which the two kinds of pursuits are neither collapsed into one nor kept separate. Contrary to his insistence that duty-doing “cannot be reconstituted as another source of satisfaction,” instances of duty-doing may indeed be usefully construed that way. In my view, students of comparative culture or ethnology ought to be prepared to enter into the individual’s spiral, to pass from satisfaction to duty and back again. In comparing one society with another, the difference in the importance that people place on doing-duty might be less illuminating than differences in *what it is* their duties demand.

Some people have understood Smith to be saying that what is right for an individual simply conforms to that individual’s sentiment: Each individual has his own set of moral faculties; those faculties produce sentiments regarding human conduct; and those moral sentiments determine what is right for that individual. Smith’s theory, they say, finds no basis for moral judgment; it collapses into “relativism.” They add that Smith says that the individual is not alone, that the individual gets his moral sensibilities from the community or society, but then “relativism” simply reemerges at the level of the community or society.<sup>3</sup>

But Smith develops an outlook that lends itself to considering humankind as a single whole. Within the spiral of the whole, we explore what *our* moral faculties are: We do not know what they are. Our interpretations of them emerge from the school of life.<sup>4</sup> What does our schooling tell us? What is it

<sup>3</sup> Numerous 18th and 19th century commentaries on TMS are contained in Reeder (1997), and several make “relativism”-related criticisms, including Thomas Reid (81–82, 87), Thomas Brown (152–156), James Mackintosh (164–166), Theodore Jouffroy (177, 180, 190, 198, 200), and James Anson Farrer (219–230). Cropsey (2001) holds that “Adam Smith’s explicit doctrine is that each man will act virtuously when he wins the approbation of his conscience, of ‘the man within the breast’” (21), which is wrong, I think. Similarly, see Prior (1949, 91), who seizes upon a passage in Smith (at 117.7, “Nature...what he himself approves of in other men”) that does, alas, lend itself to the interpretation that Prior gives it. Melzer (2001) criticizes Smith’s antifoundationalism, saying that Smith’s theory “tries to use the principle of manners to explain morals” (153).

<sup>4</sup> Smith writes of life in society as “the great school of self-command” at TMS 145.22 and 146.25.

that we *have been schooled to*—or, *should*—do?<sup>5</sup> Smith presupposes that each of us is engaged in a journey, a diachronic self-conversation about what “my” moral faculties are and what they tell me: Plato and Aristotle countenanced infanticide: Is it right of me to criticize them for that (as Smith does at 210.15)? Smith’s outlook bypasses talk of “relativism” versus “absolutism,” and is non-foundationalist.

Suppose Jill is the daughter of Anne. Smith proposes that in any case of Jill’s judgment (or approval or moral sentiment) regarding the doings of Ted the judgment is connected to a sympathy with a spectator, such as Anne, who also observes and morally reacts to Ted’s doings. That is, in all instances of judging Ted, moral approval is connected to, perhaps determined in or confirmed in, a sympathy or fellow-feeling in the matter of judging Ted. The organon of Adam Smith is that approval always relates to a sympathy. In the example, the organon points to a Jill-Anne sympathy, not a Jill-Ted sympathy (though that too plays a role). Smith shows us that, in speaking of the moral sentiments of Jill, we may sustain the organon everywhere and always, by resorting to the man within Jill’s breast as the being with whom Jill finds sympathy.<sup>6</sup>

As for one’s judging of one’s own conduct, Smith writes:

When I endeavour to examine my own conduct, when I endeavour to pass sentence upon it, and either to approve or condemn it, it is evident that, in all such cases, I divide myself, as it were, into two persons; and that I, the examiner and judge, represent a different character from that other I, the person whose conduct is examined into and judged of. (113.6)

And the procedure repeats: Smith proceeds to divide the judge. After all, judging is a form of conduct, and the procedure may be applied again, producing a judge of the judge, and again, iteratively, spiral style. If we are spiral savvy, we understand that there is no lexical ordering of judge and judgee, and that, in any particular parable or homily, wherever we pick up the story, judge and judgee tacitly relate to one another, that the doors in either direction are open to us, that there is no absolute starting point.<sup>7</sup>

We create a judge of our actions by “endeavouring to view them with the eyes of other people, or as other people are likely to view them” (110.2). But it is not “other people” in undifferentiated, proximate mass. As we go, there are certain

<sup>5</sup> On the idea that the word *should* evolved from (or with), and may be understood as, (*would*) *have been schooled to*, and likewise for *ought* and *owed*, see Klein 2014.

<sup>6</sup> Smith affirms the organon at 17.3, n\* on 46; 110.2 (“some secret reference”), 163-65.4-5, 193.12 (final sentence), 306.21 (final sentence), 325.14 (last three sentences). He also does so in the *Correspondence*, p. 49.

<sup>7</sup> For discussion on lexical ordering, see Griswold (1999, 82) and Forman-Barzilai (2010, 172, 174).

other people, certain individuals, who evoke wonder and admiration, and inspire emulation<sup>8</sup>; influenced by such exemplars, the man within in the breast develops. Jim’s man within the breast is Jim’s own; it evolves in Jim’s individuated process of experience and discrimination; it is product and warden of Jim’s judgment. That judgment can make itself independent of any particular pressure toward conformity, though not of all such pressures—from the organon, that would be nonsensical.

The man within the breast cultivates principles or “general rules.” Smith contrasted the cultivation process, as he saw it, with a view he rejected, namely, deduction from “ultimate foundations”:

When these general rules, indeed, have been formed, when they are universally acknowledged and established, by the concurring sentiments of mankind, we frequently appeal to them as to the standards of judgment... They are upon these occasions commonly cited as the ultimate foundations of what is just and unjust in human conduct; and this circumstance seems to have misled several very eminent authors, to draw up their systems in such a manner, as if they had supposed that the original judgments of mankind with regard to right and wrong, were formed like the decisions of a court of judicatory, by considering first the general rule, and then, secondly, whether the particular action under consideration fell properly within its comprehension. (160.11)

Smith sought to straighten the rod by bending it the other way, namely, toward “induction” from sentiments experienced:

[The general rules of morality] are ultimately founded upon experience of what, in particular instances, our moral faculties, our natural sense of merit and propriety, approve, or disapprove of. We do not originally approve or condemn particular actions; because, upon examination, they appear to be agreeable or inconsistent with a certain general rule. The general rule, on the contrary, is formed, by finding from experience, that all actions of a certain kind, or circumstanced in a certain manner, are approved or disapproved of. (159.8)

The general maxims of morality are formed, like all other general maxims, from experience and induction. We observe in a great variety of particular cases what pleases or displeases our moral faculties, what these

<sup>8</sup> On the wonder, surprise, and admiration evoked by those who impress us by the “uncommon and unexpected acuteness and comprehensiveness” of their sentiments, and the emulation of such exemplars, see 20.3, 75.3, 114.3, 192.11, 323.10, and 336.24.



approve or disapprove of, and, by induction from this experience, we establish those general rules. (319.6)

We just quoted Smith saying that the general rules are “ultimately founded” on our moral data in particular instances, but of course he would agree that each moral datum, each moral sentiment, of the instant, is influenced by the moral rules we had cultivated up to then. In the two passages just drawn from (159-160.8-11, 319-320.5-7), Smith emphasizes the “induction” direction of cultivation, but I hold that Smith does not mean to place “induction” over “deduction,” but rather to show that our moral reasoning evolves in a back-and-forth manner, or spiral style. The editors of TMS say that Smith’s “own habits of reasoning include both deduction and induction, as one would expect” (Raphael and Macfie 1976, 22). As for the notion that, in the moment, Jim’s entire history of moral data is the foundation of his moral rules, that manner of speaking fails because, contrary to the “foundation” metaphor, there is no such clear “entire history,” no time zero, and any history is not only Jim-specific, but diffuse and mysterious, even to Jim. Indeed, it is misleading of me to speak of Jim’s moral “data.”

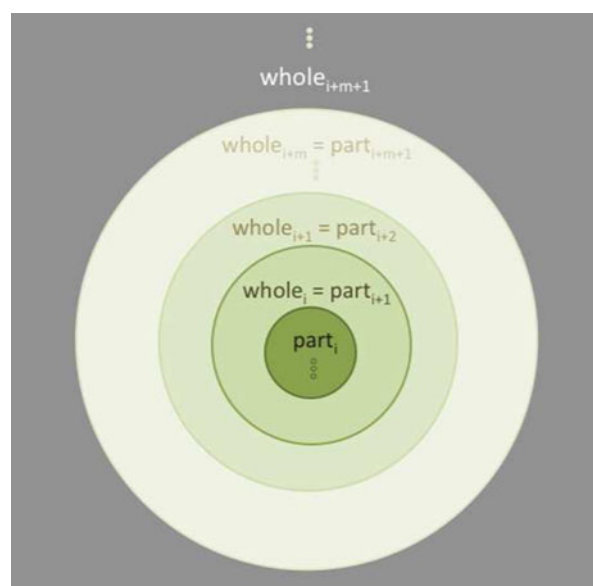
Smith introduces the word “induction” only near the end of TMS, in addressing whether reason is “the principle of approbation,” that is, the process or faculty that generates moral judgment. He notes that “induction is always regarded as one of the operations of reason,” and he affirms that “virtue may very properly be said to consist in a conformity to reason, and so far this faculty may be considered as the source and principle of approbation and disapprobation” (320.6). But, Smith continues, the “first perceptions, as well as all other experiments upon which any general rules are founded, cannot be the object of reason, but of immediate sense and feeling,” and, “reason cannot render any particular object either agreeable or disagreeable to the mind for its own sake” (320.7). Smith rejects the notion that reason alone is the generator of moral judgment.

I think Smith tended toward the view that reason, on either of two significations of the term, could hardly be regarded as foundational. First, as a flat computer-like logical processor of information, reason presents limits to which virtue must conform, but the limits are weak; such reason leaves virtue vastly underdetermined. Second, as a wider, richer, imaginative, creative faculty, performing what C. S. Pierce termed abductive reasoning, to arrive at new insights, connections, formulations, or interpretations, reason is far too vague, open-ended, unruly to be thought of as foundational. Rather, it is a spiral, of which each loop features a set of “particular instances” of moral experience and a set of sensibilities of general rules, each set with its own subscript corresponding to the loop. One side of the spiral shows moral experience affecting rules (when challenged, “we generally cast about for other arguments”, 89.8), the other side shows rules affecting moral experience.

The set of rules corresponds to the man within the breast, or conscience; either way, it too bears a subscript, even if it changes little from loop to loop. In explaining why a man of humanity in Europe would not visit upon China a great earthquake to prevent the loss of his pinky, Smith says: “It is reason, principle, conscience, the inhabitant of the breast, the man within, the great judge and arbiter of our conduct” (137.4).

By speaking of Jim’s conscience as Jim’s “man within the breast,” Smith leads us into a spiral, for the figure naturally invites iteration, that is, to ask after *that* man’s conscience, that is, Jim’s conscience’s conscience. And to iterate yet again: Jim’s conscience’s conscience’s conscience.

Jim’s conscience calls Jim to mind his larger, more enduring interests, which include benevolent interests (as TMS’s first sentence says) and the love of those we live with. Conscience causes Jim’s mindfulness to take up conduct and habits that effectively extend Jim’s care further into the future and farther in social consequences. Iterating part-whole, Jim graduates from whole to whole, each with a different subscript:



Division, Burke wrote in 1757, “must be infinite as well as addition; because the idea of a perfect unity can no more be arrived at, than that of a complete whole to which nothing may be added” (Burke 1990, 66).

From the Paleolithic success of solidarity in the family and band, perhaps, and the genes so selected, humankind evolved the creed and conviction of the holiness of the whole, effervescent tribal manifestations of which are described by Emile Durkheim in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. It wasn’t until the 15th century that the noun *whole* was written with the *w*-. The words *holy* and *whole* came from common Nordic, Germanic, and Old English “hel-” and “hal-” roots,

and both relate etymologically to *heal* and *health*.<sup>9</sup> Griswold (1999, 135) speaks of the impartial spectator as “the personification of the public.”

Jim’s conscience realizes that the larger, more enduring interests of Jim that Jim tends to neglect generally move with the good of larger wholes, so it drifts toward counseling Jim toward just such considerations. Long ago, that idea, serving the larger whole, caught on as lovely, agreeable, becoming. Smith counsels us to regard the pursuit of wisdom and virtue as the best game in town, better than games of fame, wealth, or political power; he mounts the case partly by arguing that the alternatives are actually pretty lame. We don’t have anything better to do.

But even if Jim is such a votary, that by no means ensures that Smith would think that Jim’s conscience is doing a good job. The drift of the conscience, the man within the breast, is toward virtue, but the drift may be quite defective and erroneous, and it might be weak. Asking, now, after the man-within-Jim’s-breast’s conscience, we say, again, that *that* conscience drifts toward virtue, toward larger beneficialness, and towards the correction and overcoming of preceding-order defects and errors. It looks “to interrogate and sometimes to subvert the *very measure* by which he [Jim] has become accustomed to judging himself and the world” (Forman-Barzilai 2010, 177). But it again is weak and still somewhat defective. The higher-order consciences might lack traction in getting Jim to behave more virtuously, but we can say that they readily exist, if only in our imagination, or as allegory.

If virtue and serving the whole are mutually constitutive, then in pursuing virtue you admire exemplars who serve the whole; you spurn those who hurt or neglect the whole by favoring only a part or party. You spurn the partial. Those who care beyond any particular part or party, and serve the whole, are impartial.

In TMS, Smith introduces impartial spectators as actual people who happen to be present, to be spectating, and to have “no particular connexion” to any of the parties, and hence to be partial to none of the parties (135.3). But Smith takes the idea further, into allegory, and arrives at the impartial spectator that beholds the largest ethically relevant whole—say, humankind, including future generations<sup>10</sup>—and is “well informed,”<sup>11</sup> a super-human, super-knowledgeable being who, in such respects, is like a universally benevolent deity of a monotheistic religion.

I am uncertain about whether Smith’s repeated affirmations of divine providence are entirely frank and sincere, but I

incline towards the view that his thinking toward God was rather like Hume’s, which I’d call agnostic (his attitude toward religion was friendlier than Hume’s). I speak of the super impartial spectator as allegory, but I realize that for some it is more than allegory, and quite conceivably for Smith. What is offered here is, I think, compatible with theism.

It is useful to give a short name to the super impartial spectator. Although Smith referred to that allegorical being with masculine pronouns, I use the name Joy, and feminine pronouns.

The man within Jim’s breast is not Joy. Those two beings are distinct. But they are related. The man within the breast is a “representative” of Joy (215.11). As representative, he is, again, defective and weak. Still, his effect is to move Jim toward virtue, toward Joy’s approval, if only a little.

Now iterating, the man within the man within Jim’s breast is yet closer to Joy. On such construction, the iteration would lead to Joy. We might think of it as analogous to a sequence that converges to Joy in the limit:

Jim’s conscience’s conscience’s conscience’s...conscience = Joy.

As written there (“= Joy”), the ellipsis represents infinite iteration. In finite terms we say that, for any given arbitrarily small epsilon, there is a finite conscience-iteration length *N* such that for every (finite) “Jim’s ... conscience” sequence greater than *N* the difference between it and Joy is less than epsilon.

Our construction displays universalism in three ways. Suppose that Amitai Etzioni and I, Dan Klein, are discussing Jim’s conduct. We express and partly articulate the rules or standards by which we approve or disapprove of Jim’s conduct. The first universalism is that the rules and standards go not only for Jim but for anyone; yes, there are quite particularistic things about Jim and his situation that bear on the matter, but those things correspond to complications in the rules; they are not a basis for invoking Jim-rules as opposed to some other set of rules. Maybe we approve of Jim stealing the bread, but, if so, it is because at that particular node on that particular branch of the universal tree, as it were, we approve of “human” stealing the bread. Second, as Amitai and I both adhere to the principle of having virtue or praiseworthiness correspond to advancing Joy’s pleasure in beholding the whole, which means advancing universal benevolence, since Joy is benevolent,<sup>12</sup> we both, in reckoning the consequences

<sup>9</sup> See entries in the Oxford English Dictionary, but the Online Etymological Dictionary suffices (<http://www.etymonline.com/>). The common roots of *holy* and *whole* remain clear in Swedish today: One would translate “the holiness of the whole” as *heligheten av det hela* or *helhetens helighet*.

<sup>10</sup> Going beyond humankind certainly makes sense; Smith speaks of “all rational and sensible beings” (237.6).

<sup>11</sup> Smith speaks of an impartial spectator being well informed at 130.32 and 294.94.

<sup>12</sup> I think that a subtle way in which Joy differs from any human being is that, outside of her interests deriving from the pleasures she finds in our good living, she has no other interests, or, if she does, they would have to pertain to matters off on another planet, as it were, with no connection to our good living. The following quotation about the Deity would, it seems to me, go also for Joy: “Benevolence may, perhaps, be the sole principle of action in the Deity, and there are several, not improbable, arguments which tend to persuade us that it is so” (305.18). But man, even when he is as virtuous as Adam Smith, “must often act from many other motives.”

of Jim's conduct, regard the consequences for everyone among humankind, including people far off and far away. Universal benevolence is universal in its beholding, it considers "the total effect" (Coase 1960, 44). Third, even if Amitai and I differ sharply in our judgments about Jim's conduct, we have faith that Amitai's conscience's...conscience and Dan's conscience's...conscience converge toward a common standpoint or sensibility. Knud Haakonssen indicates this sense of universality in the following passage:

[T]he approval of the actual spectators, has a strong tendency to become a search for another and higher judgement and approval... This search for a third standpoint of absolute impartiality may never, or very rarely, be completely successful, but the really important point, and the point which Smith tried to make..., is that it is the *search* itself which makes social life possible; it is the *search* for a common standpoint that is common, not necessarily the standpoint. (Haakonssen 1981, 58)

Each, Amitai and Dan, has, in the moment, his own standpoint, but both need a notion of a common standpoint to search for something that adjudicates over both standpoints, a search that leads to the next loop in a spiral. The notion of a common standpoint goes, not just for Amitai and Dan, but for all human judges. Joy's standpoint would represent a sort of universal standard for adjudicating human standpoints.

Here I have outlined a central framework in Smith's ethical perspective. That framework involves the organon, spirals (or sequences with an ellipsis at each end), Joy, the idea of convergence to Joy, and the understanding that to choose the more virtuous option is to advance universal benevolence, or "to cooperate with the Deity" (166.7). The framework is a way of organizing our thinking about virtue, the social good, and so on, and understanding the framework makes us mindful that we develop mutually constitutive beliefs about what serves the whole and what is virtuous (or just, in the largest sense). Like accounting identities, the framework is an organizing of beliefs.

One may object: But the framework is empty, it begs the question of what sorts of behavior are virtuous. Where I said, "think of the spiral winding upward," one may object: How do we know what is upward? Where I posited Jim as a votary of wisdom and virtue, one may object: How do we know whether Jim is such a votary?

Such questions have no good foundationalist answers. Each of us, including those who think they have good foundational answers, develops sensibilities and carries on. Whether one recognizes it or not, one relies heavily on his or her exemplars. Our exemplars, such as Smith, may help mediate our disagreements. True, the bare framework does not inform us on virtue. But Smith gave us an illustration-rich exploration of moral experience (TMS) and a quite

comprehensive investigation of public policy (WN), some 1300 pages of "particular instances" of his judging in important worldly matters, plus other essays, letters, and lecture notes. There is plenty of meat on the bones. We recur to Smith and other exemplars, to traditions of thought, in discussing important worldly matters.

The construct of Joy does not provide a foundation. Joy is universal in her beholding, but we don't see what she sees, and we do see as she sees. We do not have foundational access to Joy. Many theists say, similarly, that we do not have foundational access to God (even those who believe that scripture is the word of God might feel that there is no foundational way to adjudicate interpretations of scripture, nor interpretations of "scripture is the word of God"). The framework is a way of thinking, and the case for embracing it is non-foundational. We may discuss whether it is better than the alternatives.

To illustrate our non-foundationalist reading of Smith, let me treat four topics in TMS, each very briefly.

- I. Smith suggests that in estimating Jim's conduct we compare it to two standards, perfection and propriety. Perfection is only a vague idea, not foundational; it is something "no human conduct ever did, or ever can come up to" (26.9; see also 247–248). Propriety is a sort of average performance within our community or reference group (25.7, 26.9). This "ordinary degree itself seems neither blamable nor praise-worthy" (80.6), but it separates praiseworthiness and blameworthiness (26.9, 80.6). And Smith proceeds to distinguish one level of propriety from another. The admiration we feel for great actions, he says, arises from our perception of "the great, the noble, the exalted propriety of such actions" (192.11; see also 240.9). The individual, at the start, is accustomed to his community's propriety, and then apprehends an "exalted propriety." The individual may enter a new more exalted community, even if only abstract or "within the breast." Elsewhere, Smith considers two kinds of self-restraint, one from a "vulgar prudence" and another from "the sense of propriety," and says the former constitute "a propriety and virtue of a much inferior order" to the latter (263.5). Smith implies a sort of ladder of proprieties (see 247–248). One can think of a spiral, each loop of which showing a "propriety" and a "moral experience and reflection," each with a subscript.
- II. It is similar with prudence. When we speak of Jim in a simple context, such as shopping at the supermarket or skating on the floor of roller-rink, we will naturally attribute contextual considerations to be objects of his immediate prudence, but we can also ponder Jim's more enduring moral and spiritual context, in which the doing of what had previously been aspirational duties has been routinized and become an object of his self-interest. Thus, Smith speaks of a "superior prudence," which is a

prudence “combined with many greater and more splendid virtues, with valour, with extensive and strong benevolence, with a sacred regard to the rules of justice, and all these supported by a proper degree of self-command” (216.15). From the spiral spirit, we may reason that Jim’s virtuousness is chiefly the matter of what it is that Jim makes his self-interest.

- III. Smith treats (in TMS Part IV) the relationship between moral approval and utility.<sup>13</sup> He suggests that moral approval and utility, when properly understood and reckoned, do coincide (188.3). He insists, however, that, in the moment, moral judgments spring from a sense of overall propriety,<sup>14</sup> not impressions concerning utility. The move points to a diachronic spiral process involving moral approval, overall propriety, and impressions concerning utility, each with a subscript corresponding to the loop of the spiral. It is here that Smith proceeds to speak of an “exalted propriety” (192.11).
- IV. Early in TMS, Smith develops a fascinating yin-yang of “two different sets of virtues,” the amiable and the respectable (23.1). Later we find that “The person best fitted by nature for acquiring the former of those two sets of virtues, is likewise best fitted for acquiring the latter. . . . The man of the most exquisite humanity, is naturally the most capable of acquiring the highest degree of self-command” (152.36). Smith suggests a diachronic personal development in which the amiable faculties of one loop feed into the respectable faculties of the next, and vice versa. Moral improvement is a yin-yang of amiable and respectable, a vital, humbling affair that makes one kindly toward others who manifestly have not yet gotten very far (248.25).

There are other topics in TMS that lend themselves to a non-foundationalist spiral approach (for example, the third sense of justice at 270.10, such that each loop would feature “object” and “estimation,” or that each estimation then becomes an object of estimation). Likewise, I think of knowledge as a spiral of information, interpretation, and judgment

<sup>13</sup> Incidentally, there is a curious feature of Part IV of TMS. Smith represents Hume as holding that “our whole approbation of virtue” comes from “the appearance of utility” (188.3, see also 179.2, 188.5, 327.17, as well as the title of Part IV, and of its chapters). Hume, however, in *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, distinguishes between utility and agreeableness—utility meaning useful to some further aim, agreeableness meaning immediately pleasurable (like in eating chocolate ice cream)—and Hume plainly, schematically holds that *both* utility and agreeableness go into moral approval, not just utility. (I should note that at 188.3 there is one sentence in which Smith indicates that agreeableness, too, is part of Hume’s theory.)

<sup>14</sup> I write *overall* propriety because, it seems to me, Smith uses *propriety* both with respect to an aspect of one’s conduct and with respect all aspects considered more holistically. The latter, described by Smith at 202.5, is what I mean by overall propriety, and it seems to be the sense Smith means in Part IV.

(Klein 2012, 145–147). We might also consider sentiment and reason (see Matson 2016; cf Forman-Barzilai 2010, 179).

The spiral approach does not dissolve or dispense with the distinctions used within a loop. In the loop, in a given context, the distinctions can certainly be useful, as in the context given by Amitai, of a man deciding between going to a movie (satisfaction) and visiting a friend in the hospital (duty-doing). Our discourse is contextual, both in that we refer to things in their context and in that our own discourse is situational or contextual. Sometimes an instance of behavior will be usefully treated as satisfaction, sometimes as duty-doing. Indeed, I think the various virtues, as Smith describes them, may be understood as different sets of lenses, such that the very same behavior can variously be treated in terms of prudence, temperance, courage, generosity, benevolence, and so on (Klein 2015).

Some might feel that non-foundationalism subverts ethics by turning it into murky spiral soup. But, it seems to me, embracing non-foundationalism highlights the specialness and the importance of those merely grammar-like rules of conduct, rules that Smith describes as “precise and accurate” (175.10–11, 327.1; see also 340.34). Those rules provide nothing like a foundation for the ethics of what you ought to do with your stuff; they merely sanction you against using it to mess with another’s stuff. A political ethic that puts a premium on extending such principle to public policy, such that the sanction against messing goes also, at least presumptively, for the jural superior, making what Smith called the liberal plan, is an option on the table, and the case for it is non-foundational.

Competence in non-foundational thinking will help one formulate and assess the options. In particular, it will help one tangle with the purported blocks and pillars that so often accompany contrary options. Justifications for governmentalizing social affairs often involve a pretense of knowledge (Hayek 1989), a pretense dressed in a foundationalist, unduly demarcationist distinguishing of concepts. Smith (1976b, 687.51) said that those who assume a duty to superintend the affairs of private society expose themselves to “innumerable delusions.” Such delusions are often propped up by quackish foundations.

Again, this article is merely a brief. I have asserted a non-foundational interpretation of Smith’s moral philosophy without providing lengthy substantiation or consideration of a contrary view. Such matters are worthy of further discussion.

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