Adam Smith on Schooling: A Classical Liberal Rereading

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Abstract

Adam Smith’s article “Of the Expence of the Institutions for the Education of Youth” in The Wealth of Nations provides a series of passages that have contributed to the seemingly unassailable interpretation that Smith argued for the government subsidization of education for youth. But a nuanced passage stands in tension and has largely been neglected in the scholarship. The current article pursues whether this nuanced passage better characterizes Smith’s policy inclinations on schooling. The article rereads Smith relative to the discourses, debates, and expectations that occurred on the topic of education in his time. Such late-eighteenth century contextualization reveals the weaknesses of the traditional inferences and suggests an alternative interpretation. Smith considers several policy measures, but it is wrong to conclude that he favors government subsidization. Attention to his complex rhetoric reveals that he censures those impassioned by warm sentiments to seek government provision, and he deprecates Montesquieu for advocating the same. Besides treating the policy measures Smith considered, this article addresses the claim that Smith favored compulsory schooling.

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I. Introduction.


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a necessary role for” government (Gordon and Boland, 1998, p. 2), government provision is an unmistakable element to Smith’s reform initiatives. It may well be called doctrine.

Yet the there are reasons to be ill-at-ease with doctrine. The history of education is one such reason. The 18th century began with observers favorably remarking on a form of education called “charity schools.” Such schools demonstrated “the greatest Instances of public Spirit the Age has produced.” They were “the Glory of the Age” and the way out of the nation’s “Degeneracy and Depravation” (Steele and Addison, as cited in Bygrave 2009, p. 71). The century ended with the moniker, “the age of Benevolence” (More 1828, vol. 1, p. 291). If there is merit to such accolades, it is perplexing to think that Smith would have chosen to abandon charity in favor of government.

Aspects of the scholarship, itself, are also unsettling. For instance, many adherents to doctrine betray a certain degree of discomfort with the key text on the matter. His article, “Of the Expence of the Institutions for the Education of Youth,” from Book V in The Wealth of Nations, is seen as “contradictory,” “awkward,” “vague,” “unspecific,” “muddled,” “odd,” “deficient,” “eclectic,” “ambiguous,” “wandering” and “unformulated.” It would also seem to lack the proper tenor, scope, practicality, and conviction of a meaningful reform initiative. Yet these disappointing qualities of the text have rarely been investigated further. Meanwhile there are occasionally searching and somewhat heterodox explanations of Smith’s position. Perhaps Smith

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3 e.g., Leathers and Raines (2003, p. 69); Berry (1997, p. 145); Weinstein (2013, p. 186); Stanfield (2005, p. 1); Macdonald (2019, p. 144); Leathers and Raines (2003, p. 69); West, (online); Weinstein (2013, p. 202); Small (1907); Blaug (1975, p. 572)

was conflicted or cautious,\textsuperscript{5} unsure of who should pay,\textsuperscript{6} recommending only marginal subsidization,\textsuperscript{7} or was in the end still leading his reader to alternative solutions.\textsuperscript{8} The scholarship thus leaves one to wonder whether the peculiarities of the text, if rendered more intelligible as a product of design or intention, would comport with or conflict with doctrine.

The current article therefore reopens the question of how attached to government provision Smith was. Given that much has been written about the topic already, it will apply a unique approach. It will read Smith’s text relative to the debates, discussions and expectations in his time which specifically apply to education. It will focus on the most enigmatic and unexplored parts of the text. And it will expect that the text may be marked by rhetorical practices necessary to engage with his immediate audience. The aim is to resolve more of the text, and to more clearly and confidently articulate the tenor, scope and purpose of Smith’s call for attention from government.

A natural entry point for the project is a passage which, by its placement, ought to attract more attention than it has. It is his summary of his articles on education. Smith places it in a section called, “Conclusion of the Chapter,” located at the end of his studies of potential roles for the state. It constitutes his final words on the matter of who should pay for the education:

This expence of the institutions for education and religious instruction is likewise, no doubt, beneficial to the whole society, and may therefore, without injustice, be defrayed by the general contribution of the whole society. This expence, however, might perhaps with equal propriety, and even with some advantage, be defrayed

\textsuperscript{5} e.g., Lynn (1976, p. 372); Barnard (1961, p. 46).
\textsuperscript{6} e.g., Kennedy (2005, p. 225); Browning (1983, p. 17); Peacock (1975, p. 561); Lucas (1972, p. 363).
\textsuperscript{7} e.g., Young (1997, p. 200); Otteson (2011, p. 166); Hanley (2016, p. 505).
\textsuperscript{8} e.g., Compané (1886, p. 510); Clark (1903, p. 230); D. Friedman (1997); M. Friedman (1776); West (1964b; 1990); Phillipson (2012, pp. 233-234).
altogether by those who receive the immediate benefit of such education and instruction, or by the voluntary contribution of those who think they have occasion for either the one or the other. (V.i.i.5)

What should be evident here is that the passage, at a minimum, equivocates about the best way forward. It likely also conveys some degree of belief in the superiority of alternatives to government. And it is not incredible to think that the passage may be more broadly incongruent with doctrine. The hedging, the double negative, and the use of terms such as “propriety,” “benefit,” “advantage,” and “justice”—all of these tease of greater complexity to his thinking. It would seem that any interpretation should go through this passage to gauge its utility as an interpretive tool.

The current article examines this passage and the article it represents to answer four questions. (1) Is there a third option introduced with the phrase, “or by voluntary contribution?” (2) By what criterion is Smith comparing these options? (3) With what level of confidence might Smith have rendered a judgment? (4) To what degree do these judgments apply to elementary education instead of university and religious education? It is believed that answering these questions provides the keys to characterizing Smith’s position more precisely.

2. Interpreting the Tension in the Article

The primary task of interpreting the article has long been to resolve its central tension. The tension between the following two sets of passages resembles the tension in the passage above. Advocacy for subsidization is seen in the following: “For a very small expence, the publick can facilitate, can encourage, and can even impose upon almost the whole body of
people, the necessity of acquiring those most essential part of education” (V.i.F.54). And, “The publick can facilitate this acquisition by establishing in every parish or district a little school, where children may be taught for a reward so moderate, that even a common labourer may afford it” (55). A package of reforms seems to include: endowed support of a school; small honors and encouragements; and impositions for employment to demonstrate education. Additionally, numerous scholars have asserted that Smith favored compulsory schooling.

In contrast, criticism of subsidization is seen in Smith’s assessment of “endowments.” Endowments are trust funds which pay teachers’ salaries and therein free teachers from relying on user fees. For Smith, a problem emerges since salaries provide too much security and thereby interfere with motivation. He writes of the salaried teacher, “His interest is, in this case, set as directly in opposition to his duty as it is possible to set it” (7). And he writes, “The diligence of publick teachers is more or less corrupted by the circumstances, which render them more or less independent of their success and reputation” (45). Government subsidization is implicated in so far as it provides salaries.

The interpreter is left to resolve a question of how Smith came to terms with endowments. A few common methods are seen in the literature. The first method is to assert that Smith saw private markets as inadequate to the task, and that he felt the potential benefits were too great to not intervene. While the article is amendable to diverse contemplations of benefits,

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9 All references to passages within the article in question will henceforth only be designated with its paragraph number, unless context requires additional clarification.
10 (e.g., Quinn 2013, p. 120); Sen (2013); Lawson and Silver (1973, p. 253); Spengler (1977, p. 33); Reisman (1998, p. 376); Kennedy (2008, p. 235); Rauhut, (2005, p. 30)
11 Most of the interpretive effort has gone toward elucidating those benefits. For example, Smith finds value in impartial judgement, self-respect, mutual respect (e.g., Weinstein, 2013; Skinner, 1995; Harpham 1983); self-restraint (e.g., Fay, 1930); overcoming alienation (e.g., Heilbroner 1973; Lamb, 1973; Pack, 2013; West, 1969); improving human capital and economics of country (e.g., C. Winch, 1998; Muller 1993); and ensuring efficient and
this “failing market” interpretation is problematic. It treats his criticism of endowments as “mere curiosum” (Rosenberg 1960, p. 568). In doing so, it skirts the question of how replacing an inadequate commercial solution with a repeatedly identified “corrupt” institution (17, 20, 30, 33, 45, 49) can possibly achieve its ends.

The second method is to state that he came to terms with the tension by ceding only partial control to government. In particular, he emulated the Scottish parish model which relied on both government and private funding. The interpretation would seem to improve on the first by noting that Smith specifically constrains subsidization even as he entertains it: “The master being paid partly, but not wholly paid by the publick” (55). But the mixed-mode explanation should also be unsettling. What would be an acceptable amount of government funding given that is has the capacity to corrupt? Almost total provision (C. Winch 1998, p. 371)? “The better part” (Muller 1993, p. 199)? Less private grants, corporate sponsorship, and revenues from advertising on the athletic score boards and from soda vending machines, etc. (Weinstein, 2013)? “Less than half” (Hanley 2016, p. 505)? A marginal amount (e.g., Young, 1997)? The infinite number of potential mixes assures that Smith could be placed anywhere on a political spectrum or within the history of thought. Perhaps Smith had no clear answer himself. Or perhaps Smith provides no clear answer because he did not favor this option. It should be noted that the “Conclusion of the Chapter” does not indicate an interest in mixed-modes.

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effective operation of government and democratic society (e.g., Freeman, 1969; Rothschild, 1992; Werhane, 1991; Haakonsen, 1989; Robertson, 1983; Schliesser, 2006).

The third method of resolving tension is to assert that Smith’s criticism of endowments only applies to colleges, universities, or religious institutions. In this approach, the tension goes away; it was never meant to enter into the discussion of education of youth. But on what textual grounds does this compartmentalization of criticism occur? The scholarship fails to provide any textual support for it. And the “Conclusion of the Chapter”—which is a summary of both of his articles on education (“of Youth” and “of all Ages”)—certainly does not do any such compartmentalizing.

The final method is to retain the tension. It has produced the intriguing but underdeveloped set of narratives mentioned previously. Namely, Smith should be placed in some psychic middle ground of internal conflict. These interpretations seem to hedge in a manner resembling that in the “Conclusion of the Chapter.” But it is not clear what practical implications can be derived. For example, Arthur Taylor concludes, “Smith offered [the private market] a modicum of encouragement.” And Craig Smith writes, “Basic education is to be compulsory and subsidized by the government. However…the stress is clearly upon competition between, and accountability of, providers to consumer. Without this local responsibility there is a real danger that the providers will become unaccountable and inefficient” (2012, p. 795).

The current article will now present the case that, first, another tension exists in the article which has received little scholarship; second, there is different way to resolve the now

14 Milgate and Stimson (2009, p. 114) apply remarkably artful parsing of the passage in order to make it seem that Smith clearly leveled his concerns only at religious institutions.
multiple tensions. In both cases, it is the history of education and its related discourses which provide the insights.

3. An Alternative Resolution of Tension: Leaving it to the “Public”

Smith writes that there may be advantages when a school is funded “by those who receive the immediate benefit of such education and instruction, or by the voluntary contribution of those who think they have occasion for either the one or the other” (emphasis added). Does the “or” simply reframe the first type of funding (from the parent/student), or does it introduce another type of funding? E.G. West believes Smith meant to introduce a role for charity, that a third party would “have occasion” for the lower ranks to have education (West, 1994). Is that possible and what are the broader implications? The historical record is rich on this matter and suggests answers.

In the 18th century, “voluntary contribution” was a common term with an institutional meaning. It was a source of funding for public or social projects, and it worked through three channels—local government, church, and private organizations. In the first case, voluntary contributions enhanced tax revenue and other government sources. Public-spirited citizens would petition local government for approval of a public project and permission to solicit funding. These project were frequently in aid of the poor.15 In the church, voluntary contributions complemented obligatory tithing. The “voluntary contributions” supported the church’s charitable endeavors (including schooling), while the obligatory part maintained the church.16 Finally, voluntary contributions were the primary funding source for private charitable

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15 Sinclair (1785, pp. 96, 135-136, 171, 176); MacFarlane (1782, p. 160); Ruggles (1793, vol 2, p. 223); Sullivan (1776); Hooker (1763, p. 163); Geography and History of England (1765, p. 200). Scots Mag 1758, v 20, p. 40-42.
16 (WN V.i.g.1); Lawson (1703, p. 177); Forbes (1705, p. 45); Besse (1726, p. 275); Rushworth (1701, v2, p. 123).
organizations. The most prominent of these was the Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge (SPCK), which invented the important recurring “subscription” of voluntary contributions and therein succeeded in establishing an extensive network of schools of literacy throughout Britain in the 18th century. “Voluntary contributions” was a prominent fixture in civic and social life and would have unambiguously conveyed the idea of charity.

There is some evidence that Smith succeeded in conveying an interest in charity. In 1785 Reverend Samuel Parr reasserted his faith in the charity model against speculation by ethicist John Brown regarding a potential role for government. Parr turned to an authority figure to defend his faith. That figure was Adam Smith, of whom he writes: “We have the satisfaction, you see, to know the principle on which our charity schools are founded, is not without an advocate in a person who stands in the first class of political writers, from his clear and extensive views, from his copious and exact information, from the soundness of his judgment, from the liberality of his spirit” (Parr 1828, p. 186).

The likelihood that charity is in Smith’s final thoughts has a ripple effect, which I will trace here on out. Namely, it renders many peculiarities intelligible. The first is the occasionally noted peculiarity of Smith assigning agency to “the public” when he writes, “The publick can facilitate this acquisition be establishing in every parish or district a little school” (55).17 Although this passage is treated as key evidence of his interest in government provision and control, it should be clear that three significant inferences are needed to make it so. “The publick” must mean “government,” “can” must mean “should,” and “facilitate” must mean “fund.” But the passage is also consistent with citizens helping the poor through charity schools.

17 The peculiarity is noted but not explained by Berry (1997), Cropsey (2001), Hyard (2007).
A casual survey of Smith’s corpus shows that Smith frequently, if not predominantly, uses the agent, “the public,” in Habermas’s sense of “a carrier of public opinion” or a “critical judge” (Habermas, 1989). In a 1745 sermon, Joseph Butler also did so on the topic of education. Butler advised “public provision” of education but was unambiguously preaching in support of charity schools (1896, p. 355). In contrast, in 1797 Frederic Eden would use the term to mean government provision of education (Eden 1797, V.1, p. 428). Without additional textual support, assenting to either interpretation would require a leap of faith.

Seeking textual support unravels the traditional interpretation further. The textual support for the traditional interpretation is that Smith immediately follows the above statement with the example of Scotland’s parish schools. “In Scotland the establishment of such parish schools has taught almost the whole common people to read, and a very great proportion of them to write and account” (55). A cursory knowledge of history will show that Scotland’s parish system derived from national legislation and was funded with local tax revenue. However, after identifying the Scottish system as an option, in the very next sentence Smith also mentions a solution he associates with England: charity schools. “In England the establishment of charity schools has had an effect of the same kind, though not so universally, because the establishment is not so universal” (55). What textually or historically permits us to discount charity? Smith does not make a strong case for one over the other. The rest of the paragraph reads differently than adjudication or persuasion. In a neutral tone it identifies flaws in both systems, and leaves both to stand in a sort of equipoise in their flaws. The Scottish system’s flaw is that the teachers are paid too much by salaries. (They are too public.) The English system’s flaw is that it is “not so
universal.”18 This passage appears nothing more than an accountant’s ledger of options. It lacks a compelling argument for one over the other.

It is important to substantiate this last point. “Not so universal” is not a compelling argument against charity. Charity—even if not universal—had a long history of successes and a positive outlook.19 Throughout the century, charity schooling formed an uninterrupted “movement” (Jones 1938, p. 27). In England by 1725, there were already 1419 charity schools educating over 22,000 students (Jones 1938, p. 72). In Scotland (though not as known for charity schools), there were such schools in nearly every lowland parish at the start of the eighteenth century (Smout 1969, p. 450-453). By the end of the century, the Scottish SPCK alone had 189 schools educating 13,000 students (Hill & Montag 2015, p. 78).

This charity movement would have been no secret. The headquarters of the SPCK were in London and Edinburgh, where they were very active in soliciting for its causes and where they became well-known institutions (Jones 1938, p. 206). In addition, leaders throughout Britain brought attention to charity schools with parades, sermons, and philanthropic tracts. And it became the project of the growing middle class (Lavington 1746, p 15-16; Goldsmith 1759, p. 91; Lawson & Silver 1973, p. 181).

Its successes were reiterated often. Early in the century it was recognized that charity schools were “happily set on foot, and wonderfully blessed with Success through all Parts of the Island” (Waterland 1723, p. 25). By the middle of the century, it was written of these schools that “the good tendency of the method before us is unquestionable” (Butler 1896 [1745], p. 357). And in the years in which Smith was writing, it was well recognized that England “abounded” in these charity schools (Hathway 1766, p. 111) which formed “one noble comprehensive plan of

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18 Additionally one, the other, or both also need to improve their curriculum.
national charity” (Porteus 1776, p. 19). There was a common impression that as long as wealth increased, voluntary efforts would increase and resolve whatever deficiencies the system experienced (e.g., *Edinburgh Magazine* 1849, p. 573). “Not so universal” could not have been read as a major flaw requiring one to abandon faith in charity.

It is doubtful that his readers would have had a similar faith in the potential of the Scottish parish system. Although there was certainly a degree of Scottish pride regarding education in general (Anderson 1995, p. 2; Allen 1993, p. 6), the realities of the parish system in particular did not warrant it. Scottish politician and social reformer, James Burgh, condemned the parish system as “inept” (Burgh 1766, p. 79). And the details seem to support that condemnation.

The 1696 statute which initiated the parish system was problematic. It did not specify the degree of funding, nor did it specify facility or curricular standards. It directed establishing a school *only* where a school did not already exist from charitable or other means. It had a wage *ceiling* specified in *nominal* terms. Finally, it exempted the burgh cities, including Edinburgh. The ensuing evolution of the system reflects these legislative deficiencies. The facilities were often minimal—sometimes being no more than “dirty huts” or access to a pre-existing building (Scotland 1969, p. 62-65). Inflation across the century made the unadjusted wage ceiling more and more onerous for hiring (Smout 1969, p. 458; Sinclair 1799, v. 21, p. 307; 454; Christison 1802, p. 18). The tax burden, being placed on landowners, was weakly enforced—especially among absentee landowners (Anderson 1995; Scotland, 1970). And where a parish school was established, its coffers were often inadequate, eventually forcing the school to become *dependent* upon the variable zeal and coordination by its *social* leaders to solicit voluntary contributions.20

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20 *General Assembly* (1833, v.7, p. 14); *North-British* (1849, p. 573); *Proposal for building* (1834, p. 11); Anderson (1993, p. 4, 25); Stephens (1998, p. 33); Withrington (1988, p. 167); Drylie (2016, p. 47-61). This history stands in
Only in Smith’s last years of life did parish schools begin to approximate the goal of one per parish. And even that was an empty victory. In both geographically large parishes and densely populated ones, a single school had little practical value to many or even most potential pupils (Smout 1696, p. 461; *General Assembly*, Vol 7., p. 14).

Such was the state of education in Britain as Smith wrote. It constitutes a fairly reliable common knowledge. It substantiates that if Smith’s objective was to persuade his audience to choose government over charity, the text lacks the persuasive comparative argument that would seem necessary to shift emphasis between the paradigms of an age. Either he made a poor effort or had a different intention.

It may be prudent to first seek intention. Smith, as a writer who is “systematic and rigorous as a matter of principle,” could be said to deserve some benefit of the doubt (Minowitz 1993, p. 6). What intention could make sense of his account, which is both overly simplistic and seemingly agnostic? I propose the possibility that his intention in this passage is simply to identify the solution set available to the public. There is no adjudication because he didn’t intend to offer it either directly or at this particular place in the article. Smith, then, chooses the ambiguous agent of “the public” because it is rhetorically efficient as a comprehensive agent. It embraces both options. Smith places responsibility on the public, and the public may act through the state toward a parish system or through social leaders toward a charity one.

This interpretation begins to make sense of more of the article. For example, it can explain the perplexing shift in tone that occurs when identifying what the public can do. Leading up to it, Smith writes in a tone characterized as “harrowing” (Muller 1993, p. 150), “disturbing” (Young 1997, p. 200), “devastating” (McNulty 1973, p. 360), “damning” (Himmelfarb 2012, p.

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contrast to West’s assertion that the parish system thrived in this period (1964b). I cannot find evidence to support West, nor does he substantiate his assertion.
14), “severe” (Dankert 1974, p. 165), and full of “unusual…outrage” (West, 1964a, p. 25). Smith writes: “[The labourer] 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” (50). There is a particular lack of restraint, balance, or qualification: The laborer’s “whole life” is spent doing “always the same” thing, offering “no occasion” for moral development, and leaving him “altogether” incapable of judgement and devoid of “any” generous sentiment (50, emphases added). And he ends: “Their labour is both so constant and so severe that it leaves them little leisure and less inclination to apply to, or even to think of any thing else” (53).

In contrast, the specification of action occurs with a jarringly practical constraint and a tempered tone: “But though the common people cannot, in any civilized society, be so well instructed as people of some rank and fortune, the most essential parts of education, however, to read, write, and account, can be acquired” (54). He then continues by stating what a public can do, instead of should or must. And he outlines the agenda with restraint: “If in those little schools the books…were a little more instructive…the literary education of this ranks of people would perhaps be as complete as it can be” (55).

The preceding paragraphs undoubtedly served to impel to action, but the cool tone of policy talk jolts the reader back to a different mindset. As the public now has the responsibility of choosing the correct way forward, Smith sets a certain tone for choosing. He signals that prudence is essential to such a responsibility. This is consistent with his views elsewhere. Smith recognizes that “the soft, the gentle, the amiable virtues, the virtues of candid condescension and indulgent humanity” are those which spur interest, but the “respectable” virtues of “self-government” and “command of the passions” are those best to adjudicate public policy (TMS I.i.V.1).
Much is consistent with an interpretation of a solution set. But is it credible that Smith’s recognition of such a dire social situation can be coupled with prudence and restraint? The answer may be surprising. Historically, we can see that anything else would have been unexpected. A call to action that is at once impassioned about the poor yet prudent about solutions is indicative of the times. The social reform movement, as documented in sermons and philanthropic tracts, follows this same pattern. George Lavington (1746), Richard Price (1766), Jonathan Shipley (1792, v1), Griffith Jones (1749), Jonas Hathway (1766), James Burgh (1747; 1754), Joseph Butler (1745; 1751), Bielby Porteus (1776), Thomas Spence (1775; 1793) and Thomas Sheridan (1756; 1757)—these men were major voices of social reform, many specifically concerned with the education of the poor.\textsuperscript{21} Their concerns were no less alarming than Smith’s. They sought to “promote the health, vigor, and immediate happiness,” to “preserve the bodies and souls of the poor” (Hathway 1766, p. 95; 133), to “rescue them from ignorance and wickedness” (Price 1766, p. 26), to “stop that loose and disorderly way of life and manners,” to save them from that “dissolute and vicious course of life” (Clarke 1741, p. 20; 15), to “make honest and industrial men, of those who would have been bred up in Thievery and Rags” (Hayter 1753, p. 7), and to provide them “a useful education” which would enable them “a comfortable Livelihood” (William 1713, p. 10). These reformers also very much kept in mind the larger public benefits, seeking to improve the “welfare of our country” (Hathway 1766, p. 95), to improve the “Trade of the Nation” (Methods 1719, p. 39), to render the poor “serviceable” (William 1713, p. 14), and make them “a Treasure and a Blessing” to the nation (Hayter 1753, p. 7).\textsuperscript{22}

\textsuperscript{21} Among all their publications, there are only two passing references to government provision. Spence (1782) and Burgh (1764) mention government or parish provision in their utopian fictions—though they are not doing so in the context of the poor (Drylie 2016, p. 90-97).

\textsuperscript{22} William Hendley’s lengthy response to Mandeville covers a lot of territory (1725).
To these writers, much was at stake for society. However, none went so far as to make a call for dramatic changes to the status quo. None turned to government subsidization. On the contrary, they made a point to resist government.\textsuperscript{23} They preferred not to have education “trammled by the addition of state imposition” (Burgh 1766, p. 79) or “constitute any part of an act of parliament” (Hathway 1766, p. 115). They preferred to be “content with protection, which implies a sort of tacit approbation, than to ask for assistance, which might involve us in unforeseen difficulties” (Parr 1828 [1785], p. 186). And they saw compulsory attendance as belonging to “absolutist” regimes, and instead favored only that “parents must be invited and allured by Motives of Interest and Advantage, and by Dint of Persuasion” to send their children to the already extant charity schools (Tucker 1746, p. 14). Smith, in writing as he did, adopted the familiar language and structure of sermons. While we might today expect such concerns to naturally lead toward a justification of government, in his times they did not. If he meant to justify government just on the grounds that the poor and society in general were suffering, it would have been shocking, uncharacteristic, and inadequate.

The most direct challenge to this line of thinking is Smith’s stronger appeal to government in the last four paragraphs of the article (58-61). Here he states that social benefit justifies government action (61). He compares ignorance and its “mental mutilations, deformity, and wretchedness” to leprosy (60). He states that the “safety of government” depends upon people being able to judge (61). And he summons government specifically: “This is the state into which the labouring poor…must necessarily fall, unless government takes some pains to prevent it” (50). Also, the “mental mutilations” and “gross ignorance and stupidity” deserve “the most serious attention of government” (60-61, emphasis added). The case appears to be made that,

\textsuperscript{23} Granted that they may have each had self-interested reasons to wish to stay with the charity model.
even if Smith at first leaves the options open, he concludes by embracing direct government action.

Some caution here is necessary. While these passage are frequently cited to substantiate his embrace of government, close attention to the text reveals a problem. Government is specified as an agent, but the action is not. In fact, he writes of the importance of “attention” twelve time in the waning paragraphs (sometimes summoning the public, sometimes government) but never specifying an action. These passages are nothing more specific than calls to attention. It is unclear what kind of attention he might prefer: facilitate, provide, encourage, impose, or other. Any one of these (not necessarily all) may be sufficient. Vigorously calling attention to government should not imply vigorous action (i.e., provision). The nature of the call does not imply the form. If anything it would only imply an interest in certain or reliable solutions, whatever those might be.

The point here is not just a logic argument. The phrase “attention of government” has a particular linguistic history which resists inferring provision from it. The phrase “attention of government” was frequently used in the decade when Smith wrote WN. Its popularity corresponded with the energetic constitutional efforts to define the role of the state. The examples of its use reveal that actions which belong to the modern state (taxation, provision, or regulation) by no means predominate. Institutional actions are also well represented. “Attention” could mean government should remove restrictive regulation (e.g., Talbot 1771, p. 186). It could mean government should provide encouragement of an activity (e.g., Griffith 1769, p. 549). And it could mean—as in the one other use of the phrase by Smith—government should grant freedom and ensure security for a free exchange of goods (V.ii.c.19).

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24 Reacting to one as if it is the other is a heuristic substitution—substituting the easily accessible intensity for the more difficult to discern actuality (Kahneman 2011, pp. 98-104).
The use of the phrase in the context of education is particularly insightful. A treatise on education from 1769 meant by it that government officials should be moral exemplars that could inspire children to learn (*The Monthly Review* 1769, p. 531). Education reformers Thomas Sheridan and Henry Ker both recognized the challenges that charity schools faced in an era that lacked mature corporation rights. Sheridan meant by the phrase that government ought to promote charitable schools and societies rather than inhibit them (1757, p. 29). And Ker went so far as to recommend by it that government should dismantle public endowments and redirect funds into the superior charity system (Ker 1819, p. 69). Each of these examples substantiate that educational leaders were exploring a wide variety of institutional solutions (not government provision) and using the same language as Smith. We should resist inferring Smith’s enthusiasm necessarily took him further afield.

Historical realities give further reason to be cautious about inferring an interest in government provision. First, general corporation rights did not exist yet. The most prominent “facilitating” action for government at the time was, therefore, the individual granting of “special corporation rights” (West 1990, p.88). It is well documented that the government’s facilitating role, or control of these rights was problematic. It led to stipulations and capriciousness which had regularly jeopardized the success of charity schools, including those from the SPCK. Against these practical historical realities, “facilitating” would have foremost implied getting out of the way, or even as Parr wrote, offering greater support, tolerance and “protection” to the current schools (1828 [1785], p. 185).

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25 Hayter (1756, p. 84); Priestley (1768, p. 95); Priestley (1828, p. 303); Ker (1819, p. 111); Scotland (1970, p. 110); James Hurst (1970); Jones (1964, p. 131).
Second, the environment set by political, academic and philosophical leaders was hostile to the poor having education at all, let alone one provided by government. The defining concern of the era, frequently traced to John Locke (1689-1692) and Bernard Mandeville (1723), was that education of the poor was dangerous to society. A wide array of important figures maintained a serious doubt: Joseph Priestley (1826, p. 1), Adam Ferguson (1767, p. 135), Arthur Young (1771, cited in Rimlinger 1976, p.336), James Anderson (1777, p. 7), Thomas Ruggles (1793, p. 10-11), John Millar (1812, v.4, p.159), John Howlett (1788), William Godwin (1793, v2, p. 22), Dugald Stewart (1855, V.8, p. 52), Davies Giddy (1807, p. 798). Hostility is further manifest in the pedagogical silence about the poor in some two hundred philosophical treaties exploring the topic of pedagogy from 1762 to 1800 (Bygrave 2009, p. 14; see also Chisick 1981, p. 41-43).

Although philanthropists regularly complained of these “intellectuals” (e.g. Hendley, 1725; Parr 1828, p. 117, 192; Ferrar 1796, p. 56; Colquhoun 1806, p. 11), the intellectuals’ hostility endured well into the 19th century. The objective for reformers, therefore, in Smith’s time was simply to convince a wider audience (specifically the higher ranks) of the merit of the poor having education (Sturt 1967, p. 4l; Green 2016, p. 204-236; Dean 1991). Any further objective would have been unintelligible until this essential objective was met.

Third, earlier efforts to aid the poor, the Poor Laws, had been seen as a failure and even a potential cause of the current moral state of the poor (e.g., Fielding 1751, p.18; 55; 71; Howlett, 1788; Malcom 1805, p. 154; Eden 1797, Vol. 1, p. 481). The Poor Laws had “given rise to an administration which, by every competent observer, was deemed ruinous and demoralizing”

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26 Regarding hostility, see also (Gay, 1998, p 190); Hampton (1968, p. 110); Viner (1991, p. 283).
27 Even William Playfair, as the editor of the 1802 edition of WN, argued from a Mandevillian perspective, and criticized Smith for finding merit in the poor getting an education. Despite his willingness to criticize Smith, there is no indication Playfair felt Smith also went so far as to advocate for government provision. I see this omission as rather telling.
(Mackey 1898, p. 39). It had set a bad precedent for other direct government initiatives in aid of the poor.

Smith’s efforts certainly challenge this resistance toward the poor being educated. And they open door to rationalizing government action. For a person of his circle or stature, his efforts are radical. But his writing never hones in unambiguously on a plan for government which would be based on provision or control. His text would have been read as a call to action only. It leaves the public a solution set of charity, private, and government arrangements to cautiously consider. The tension of the article is therein not resolved but formulated and presented to the public to resolve.

The solution-set hypothesis is not entirely alien to Smithian scholarship on the topic of education. It bears resemblance to a few anomalous interpretations in the literature that have not been developed. Knud Haakonssen provides one such interpretation. It is peculiar that given his authority within Smithian scholarship, his views on this issue have not had a greater impact. He asserts that Smith’s notion of governance encompasses “the great number of public offices which were certainly of a civic nature but which were not offices of the state.” The solution for education, thus, sits within “a wide variety of leadership roles in local communities” (2006, p. 20). Much earlier, historian William Boyd drew a similar conclusion, noting that Smith’s choice of the term, “the public,” “leaves open the possibility of other educational authorities” (1932, p. 324).

The solution set interpretation also resonates with characterizations of how Smith operates in general. Warren Samuels traces how Smith uses “interactive” and “open-ended” explorations of “sets” of solutions to be adjudicated “through the principles of approbation, disapprobation, the impartial spectator, and so on” (1977, pp. 196-204). Alan Peacock explains
that Smith places policy contemplations first and foremost in “the public” sphere (1975, p. 556). Both of these views suggest that direct persuasion on policy topics may not necessarily Smith’s purpose.

And yet, there is an interpretation of Smith’s methods which suggests that deference to the public may not be all there is to it. Charles Griswold explains that a distinguishing characteristic of Smith’s approach to ethics is its “protrepticism” (1999, pp. 49-52). Protrepticism recognizes the complexity of ethical life and accepts that, while a philosopher may aim to persuade, he cannot do so through proofs intended to create closure. Instead he must use a rhetoric which places the author and the reader on a level in a social community, in a dialogue, allowing the reader to be guided in part by the author and in part by implicit self-awareness. Thus, it might be argued, that even as Smith assigns responsibility to the public to make a choice, Smith may act to indirectly guide his reads to discover the merits of a particular choice. A similar covert set of intentions is attributed to the practice of esoteric writing, in which a writer may partially conceal his intended purpose. Whether it be for pedagogical, defensive, political or protective reasons, authors in Smith’s times tended to employ a complex rhetoric to ensure a particular message had to be earned by the reader (Melzer, 2014). The remainder of the article will seek to answer the following: While Smith appears to present solutions without prejudice to his readers, does he also provide implicit guidance for what the public should do? And if so, why would he employ such a rhetorical technique?


Smith uses the word “justice” in the context of schooling just once. Located in the conclusion paragraph, it strongly suggests that a subtext of justice exists in the article itself, and
that any recommendation he would make, overtly or covertly, ought to be expressed within such a framework.

In *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (TMS VII.ii.I.10) Smith identifies three senses of justice. The first two are commonly assumed to create a framework for understanding Smith’s views of government. The first is *commutative justice*, or “abstaining from what is another’s.” It is summoned in liberty talk, and is seen to underscore Smith’s liberty principle, or a strong preference for government abstention in markets and social life. However, it may be argued that Smith finds that taxation in support of schooling is tolerable if those who are taxed are remunerated in kind through benefits accruing to society. His tax maxims lend to cautiously entertaining such thinking (WN V.ii.b). The second form is *distributive justice*. It is “proper beneficence” or the “becoming use of what is our own” toward “those purposes either of charity or generosity” (TMS VII.ii.I.10). Although an evaluation of the individual operating within society, it may be argued that Smith endorses a government’s compulsion of assistance. A passage in TMS lends to cautiously accepting such a possibility (TMS II.ii.8).

Problematic for these two rationalizations is the language Smith uses in the “Conclusion of the Chapter.” Although he states that government action might indeed be “without injustice,” he continues that private and charity schools may possibly have “equal *propriety*, and even *some advantage*” (emphasis added). Smith seems to view the final adjudication through the lens of propriety, and believes the adjudication to be determinable through degrees.

*Commutative justice* is ill suited to such language. It is to be understood as “precise and accurate” (VII.iv.3.1). It has rules that are like those of grammar (III.6.11). It does not well entertain grays, shades, or degrees. For Smith, taxes violate liberties (Haakonssen 1989, p. 96). If
he accepts a role for government, it would be in spite of the violation. He would be doing so by appealing to some other evaluative sense of goodness.

Distributive justice also falls short. An individual may act with distributive justice of his or her own resources, but it is questionable whether distributive justice can occur by compelling it. In this matter, we should be careful in understanding Smith (e.g. Griswold 1999, p. 295; Brubaker 2006, p. 172; C. Smith, 2014; Schliesser, 2017). If Peter is compelled to surrender resources to be transferred to Paul, neither Peter nor his compeller is thereby doing distributive justice. Most likely, if Smith cautiously contemplates compulsion, his contemplation would require a different application of goodness.

The third sense of justice can shed light on his language choice. It is a justice which Daniel Klein terms estimative justice (2017) or which Craig Smith calls “Platonic” justice (2014, p. 258). Estimative justice is the proper estimation or appreciation of objects (TMS VII.ii.1.10). It is the measure to which we frequently turn to normatively or aesthetically judge of things in our daily lives. And Smith asserts that it is “more extensive than either of the former.”

Estimative justice seems quite suited to the passage. It is associated with assessments of propriety and virtue. In contrast to commutative justice, which follows the grammar-like rules, estimative justice operates through “loose, vague and indeterminate” evaluations of what is “sublime and elegant” (III.6.11), and it admits to “different degrees of accuracy” (TMS VII.iv.3.1-2). Moreover, it “comprehends in it” the other justices (III.6.11). By such language, Smith implies that estimative justice has the capacity to evaluate the other claims and outcomes of the other justices, setting them within a context of propriety.

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28 The difference in term can be attributed to the fact Smith does not name it, but describes it as an act of “esteeming.”
A new interpretation of Smith’s article thus follows: Smith has put the solution set to the problem (along with their rationalizations) in the position of being *the objects* under estimation. The initial appeal of this interpretation is that it renders the conclusion of the chapter more fully intelligible. First, that fact that justice is mentioned in the first sentence and propriety in the second creates a sense of incongruence at first look. But the twin sentences mirror the working of estimative justice. Namely, government subsidization may be *justifiable*, and yet not be the most *proper solution*. Second and related, Smith uses a double negative, “without injustice,” to describe the government solution. It is a peculiar turn of phrase. But Smith’s writing on estimative justice and propriety can account for it. For Smith, there is a sober middle ground for propriety in a way there isn’t for commutative justice. An act, judged in terms of propriety, might fall between the extremes of praiseworthiness and blameworthiness (II.ii.1.6).

Accordingly, government schooling may avoid injustice (blameworthiness) but not achieve a high (virtuous) degree of properness or estimative justice.

A new characterization of Smith follows naturally from the concept of estimative justice. In the sphere of propriety, rationalizations are precarious. They are subject to details and circumstances, and they require recurring scrutiny. Smith may thus esteem the idea of educational access *to some degree*, but may not be entirely at ease with the calculus or the compulsion of government provision, and thus not view it as a permanent or unassailable fixture of government. Such a characterization is incongruent with both the Scottish parish system of his time and the institutionalized public education system of today.

Can this explanation via estimative justice be substantiated? The article itself would have to clearly operate through estimative justice as well. A strong indication would be if he fills the void of any direct reference to justice in the article with some clearly identifiable evaluative
criteria. For such evidence, we need to look away from his much-studied reform initiatives located in the final section of the article and toward his lesser-studied analysis of alternatives located earlier in the article. The next section provides a deep look at the first three-quarters of the article.

5. The Case for Competition and Markets

The 1802 French translator of WN, Germain Garnier, offered praise for the article of education in his oft-reprinted preface.29 He felt that Smith “proved” subsidization to be problematic, and that he did so by “confirm[ing] theoretical opinions by incontestable examples” (Garnier 1843, p. xxx). In 1803, J.B. Say called it a “highly ingenious disquisition…replete as it is with the erudition and the soundest philosophy, at the same time that it abounds with valuable instruction” (1853, p. xlv). And Parr described it as having “clear and extensive views, from his copious and exact information” (Parr 1828, p. 186). The portrayal of the text as a rich, thorough, scientific, and conclusive is worth noting. Recent scholarship rarely views it as so competent, focused, and purposeful.30 This section will substantiate that Smith does arrive at a well-substantiated moral certainty of the superiority of private education, and that it is an assessment that cannot thereafter be downplayed or compartmentalized.

The article should be seen as containing four sections with clear demarcations. Each is of nearly equal length, providing a certain balance and tempo to the article. The first three sections preceding Smith’s question of what to do about the poor fall into the form of a scientific analysis.31 Identifying each section, its unique characteristics and its relationship to the rest is the

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29 In both the French and English editions.
30 Exceptions: Hutchison (1990, p. 87); Dankert (1974).
31 7934/10,724 works = 74%
key to understanding the magnitude of his project and the confidence of his observations. It starts with a hypothesis about human nature and an observation of contemporary schools (paragraphs 1-17). It continues with what should be seen as extended case study (18-34), and it is followed by a validation of his contemporary data by way of comparisons to examples in ancient society (38-47). Each of these sections matures his argument and yields greater policy insights. The scope and certainty of his efforts will be shown to overawe and mark the fourth section, which should be seen as a study of options in light of his scientific findings.

5.1. The Hypothesis, Scope, and Contemporary Evidence

Smith starts the article, “The institutions for the education of youth may, in the same manner, furnish revenue sufficient for defraying their own expence” (V.i.f.1, emphasis added). The phrase “in the same manner” is worth noting. It situates the discussion within a continuity of thought. His analogue is transportation infrastructure.32 There he concluded that the nascent solution of user fees and independent trustee management, though imperfect, can provide a better incentive scheme than taxes and government management could.33 Smith’s default position for education is, therefore, user fees and legal reform. The category of endowed schools comes in second rank, rendering direct government third: “Even where the reward of the master does not arise altogether from this natural revenue, it is still not necessary that it should be derived from that general revenue of society” (2).

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32 This sentence dates from the first edition, before the insertion of the section on joint-stock companies. If assuming it now refers to joint-stock companies, a similar continuity of thought prevails.

33 There is sometimes confusion about his specific prescription for roads in that he is also critical of the fee system he recommends (V.i.d.9). But historical context clarifies that the salient point of para. 9 is to recommend patience and a degree of government oversight to the novel private trust model that had come to the fore in the 1750s and 1760s. For a fine history of British turnpikes see Bogart (2005).
If government is available to subsidize education, it is natural then to have to inquire as to the merit of endowments which currently subsidize education. What lessons can be learned? To that end, he asks three questions of endowments: First, “Have those publick endowments contributed in general to promote the end of their institution?” The use of the phrase, “end of their institution,” recurs in paragraph 19, clarifying that Smith would like to know if endowed schools have met their intended goals. Here is the first vague indication that Smith will be evaluating the options along a criterion. Second, “Have they contributed to encourage the diligence, and to improve the abilities of the teachers?” Here are the criteria of effort and the quality of instruction, which would put him in lock-step with the discourse on education of the time, which showed a strong preoccupation with issues of quality (Drylie, 2016; Hans, 1951; Musgrave, 1968). Lastly, “Have they directed the course of education towards objects more useful, both to the individual and to the publick, than those to which it would naturally have gone of its own accord?” Here are two other related criteria: personal utility and social utility. Smith concludes: “It should not seem very difficult to give at least a probable answer.” The sentence should be seen as a simple structural demarcation announcing a study.

How large is the scope of his study? It is important to note it is exceptionally broad. Paragraph 2 provides a list of the endowment sources: “Some local or provincial revenue, from the rent of some landed estate, or from the interest of some sum of money allotted and put under the management of trustees for the particular purpose, sometimes by the sovereign himself, and sometimes by some private donor.” These align (in order) with Scottish parish schools, those run from seized Jacobite lands,34 and those established by the sovereign or by the legacies and wills of private donors. The list broadly embraces the common forms of endowed schools of Smith’s

34 See Jones (1939, p. 180) for the history.
time, and includes both government and private forms, elementary and university. The study truly is a study of method of funding (established endowments) regardless of original source of the funds. In contrast to an impression best represented by Albion Small, who misquotes Smith for his intended interpretation, the scope is not of private endowments so as to justify public endowments (1907).

The announcement of a study is followed by a hypothesis. In its universal form: “In every profession, the exertion of the greater part of those who exercise it, is always in proportion to the necessity they are under of making that exertion” (4, emphasis added). It is noteworthy that Smith is using language asserting a highly probable causal relationship between incentives and behavior. The particular version reads in the same light: “The endowments of schools and colleges have necessarily diminished more or less the necessity of application in the teachers” (4, emphasis added). The turn of phrase, “more or less” continues the language of causality, and will be used repeatedly in the article to more poignantly stress variables moving in sync (i.e., in correlation).

Paragraphs 6-17 constitute his observations of contemporary examples. I will briefly focus on aspects which bring to light the rigorous and probabilistic nature of his method. I opt to use the anachronistic language of modern statistics. The intention is not to imply the same level of sophistication from Smith, but rather to add a framework for the reader to more easily identify and enter into Smith’s employment of the conceptual probability which was well-established in his time amongst a wide array of philosopher-scientists.35

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35 See the fine histories of Shapiro (1983), Hacking (1984) and Franklin (2001) on the state of probability and the scientific method in the 17th and 18th centuries
Universities fall into two sets. The first contain those in which the independent variable is in the middle of its range, where the pay of the teacher is part salary and part fee. Smith finds that exertion is diminished but is not “entirely taken away.” “Some dependency” between the variables still exists. “Reputation is still of some importance” for the teacher, who then demonstrates “abilities and diligence” (6). The second set is where teachers only receive a salary. Smith finds here that a teacher’s interest is “set as directly in opposition to his duty as it is possible to set it.” The teacher will be “careless and slovenly” (7). Universities in their various forms, thus, match his predictions by the degree of their reliance on endowments.

Others schools fall into four categories. First are schools for Greek or Latin. Smith finds that teachers of such schools teach everything “which it is expected, they should teach.” Second are schools for fencing and dancing. These too are run by user fees and as a result “seldom fail” to generate the desired result (16). Third are fee-based (private) schools for reading, writing and accounting. These almost always achieve “the degree in which it is necessary to acquire them” (16). Fourth are riding schools. Because of the extraordinary expense, they must be endowed in order to make them affordable to the students. As a result of these endowments, they do not commonly show “good effects” (16). Each, without exception, provides evidence in support of his hypothesis. A compelling case for private solutions and against endowments is coming together.

His argument evolves in the process of his analysis as well. He must address why it is that since fully endowed universities are so bad, the system does not collapse on itself. How can

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36 He uses the term “publick school.” Here one must be cautious to note that “publick schools” do not mean publicly funded schools, but rather schools located outside of the traditional “domestic” setting (e.g., Williams 1779, p. 204; Shepherd 1782, p. 1).
such universities even attract students? The answer for Smith is that certain social institutions force attendance irrespective of quality. For example, it was common that particular jobs historically expected or required graduation from specific university programs, and that scholarships sent students to specific colleges “independent altogether of the merit of those particular colleges” (12). Both of these “institutions” reveal that it is insufficient to think user fees alone predict quality. Students must also have the freedom to choose where they attend school. They must have the same liberties they have in markets for other goods. Paragraph 10 fills in the gap in his theory, defining a new variable. “Whatever forces a certain number of students to any college or university, independent of the merit or reputation of the teachers, tends more or less to diminish the necessity of that merit or reputation” (emphasis added).

Entering into his article as a formal study brings to light that Smith is rigorous and disciplined in testing his hypothesis. He assesses six categories of data, and adds one more independent causal variable in response to a counterargument. But it is his treatment of alternative hypotheses which most reveals the complexity of his thinking. While it is easy to recognize how brutal his characterizations of teachers in endowed schools are, Smith is never absolute in dismissing claims that there are forces which can nonetheless produce quality amongst them. He chooses a parsimonious model to explain teacher behavior, but forsakes strength in doing so.

For example, to the optimistic hypothesis that man is naturally driven toward excellence (independent of incentives), he writes: “Alone and unsupported” natural drive has “seldom been sufficient” but to explain the behavior of “few men.” But it can “sometimes animate the exertion of a few men” (4). To the hypothesis that there are “men of sense,” he admits that they may be disposed to “take some pains to give tolerably good [lectures]” but that such incitements will be
“blunted” with time (14). To the hypothesis that social and administrative forces could encourage exertion from teachers, he is again dismissive but fair. Social force fails because members tend to be “very indulgent to one another,” and external administrators (whom he identifies as bishops, governors, and ministers of state) tend to act “ignorantly and capriciously.” Although sometimes such an institutional setting will create an Oxford where teachers forsake “even the pretense of teaching,” such results are only “likely” and “liable” and “apt” to occur to “the greater part” of teachers (8-9).

He also concedes that there are forces which negatively weigh on his prediction of quality in private schools. First, the “generosity of the greater part of young men” may lead them to tolerate negligent teachers. Thus user fees may not always elicit quality. Second, private fencing and dancing schools will actually teach said subjects (which he finds ironically refreshing) but there are no guarantees that “students will “always lean to fence or dance very well” (16).

Smith’s first section should be characterized as hypothesis testing. It succeeds in providing strong evidence in support of his hypothesis, and therein demonstrates that private schools will generally or usually be superior.

5.2 A Case Study: European Universities and the Error of Common Sentiments

Section two is announced with a short paragraph which appears at the logical place to write a conclusion, but which is anything but. The entire paragraph reads, “The parts of education which are commonly taught in universities, it may, perhaps, be said, are not very well taught. But had it not been for those institutions they would not have been commonly taught at all, and both the individual and the public would have suffered a good deal from the want of those important parts of education” (18, emphasis added). The sentiment here is that something
is better than nothing. It seems a natural, well-intended reaction to the growing impression that subsidization will likely lead to poor quality.

But the sentiment is not originating from Smith, himself. By the phrase, “it may, perhaps, be said,” Smith takes pains to place the sentiment outside of himself. I assert that Smith has introduced what I will call his *rhetorical interlocutor*. It is a persona of the “man of public spirit” turned “man of system,” that reformer who “in spite of all opposition” pursues the beauty of the idea (TMS VI.ii.2.16-17). It is a persona who will take the remainder of the journey with him on this topic. The appearance of an interlocutor sets up a scenario whereby the nature of the text changes in a manner perhaps resembling Vivienne Brown’s description of a “dialogic” structure. She proposes that Smith allows alternative voices to challenge him so as to enable him to mature his argument.37 The result is that the text does not employ a “constant, unchanging, authorial voice controlling the text, there is a range of different voices” (1994, p.30).38

The presence of a rhetorical interlocutor changes what we ought to expect to now happen. First, Smith must either capitulate, modify, or defend his position. Second, he may feel compelled to respond to the rhetorical interlocutor with a new register which he finds appropriate to it. We may thus expect rhetorical writing. Smith chooses to defend his position, and at the end of the defense employs irony in a direct response to his interlocutor. Observing this dialogue makes evident the tenor of Smith’s views.

Smith’s basic defense is lengthy but simple. He evaluates the history of universities to ascertain how well they fit his model. He asserts that the teachers were always under protection of the pope, were “exempted from the civil jurisdiction,” and were only accountable to their own

37 She is specifically examining TMS in her analysis.
38 Smith admires such a technique by Jonathan Swift: “The most common manner in which he throws ridicule on any subjects when he speaks in an other character is to make them express their admiration and esteem for those things he would expose (Belles Lettres, 1. 120).”
“ecclesiastical tribunal” (19-20). They were, in other words, not subject to the market forces. The end result was a corrupted curriculum of casuistry and ascetic morality, of “exploded systems and obsolete prejudices” (34). Such curricula were not “proper” for either of two categories of people: “gentlemen” or “men of the world” (35). They failed to serve “to improve the understanding, or to mend the heart” (32), or to achieve “the real business of the world” (35). It is a broad condemnation made all the more vivid in its colorful portrayal and through its association with his criticism of casuistry in TMS (VII.iv). It also remains a self-conscious probabilistic condemnation. He concludes that a useful curriculum occurs “with more or less diligence, according as the constitution of each particular university happens to render diligence more or less necessary to the teachers” (33, emphasis added).

The basic value of the lengthy account is that, as a case study, it enriches his portrayal of the poverty of endowed curricula. But it accomplished more. He saves the most poignant points for the end as a summary response to the sentiments of his interlocutor (34-37). He makes four ironic points. First, he states that the something being taught, the “unconnected shreds and parcels,” are indeed useless. But, worse, “even these they commonly teach very negligently and superficially” (33). With some glee he implies that endowed universities can’t even do bad right. Second, he writes, “In general, the richest and best endowed universities have been the slowest in adopting…improvements. Those improvements were more easily introduced into some of the poorer universities” (34). Endowments have had, then, the social outcome of inverting the traditional hierarchy of social order, of rich and poor—a particularly ironic assertion since provision for the poor was also feared on such grounds.39 Third, Smith writes that the corrupt state of British endowed universities was to blame for the common practice of sending children

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39Smith will employ a very similar demographic inversion in paragraph 47 with regard to women.
abroad for a worldly education in lieu of formal university education. Here again Smith picks up a familiar worry of the time (e.g., Sheridan 1756, p. 29-30; Dennie and Hall 1808, p. 172). Namely, students return home worldly “more unprincipled, more dissipated, and more incapable of any serious application” (36). In conclusion, then, the something-is-better-than-nothing mentality is not just errant, but damaging to the moral fabric and productive spirit of society.

Smith’s answer to his interlocutor is to pick up the common sentiments of the day—sentiments that derive from good intention and seem natural responses to a problem—and to reveal the irony of them. The common worries of British society are a direct result of endowments and the sentiments which find them necessary. A crisp, final, one-sentence paragraph puts an exclamation on his response: “Such have been the effects of some of the modern institutions for education.” It is a sarcastic understatement after such an expansive depiction of institutional and moral failure. Whatever probabilistic doubt he may have had about the superiority of private education, it is nowhere here to be found when engaging in a dialogue with those proffering dangerously simple sentiments in support of simply doing something.

5.3 Validation: The Examples of Ancient Civilization

Ancient histories and travel literature had long been used in interpreting the world. It was common practice since the scientific revolution in Britain for scientists to address and reveal the flaws of these histories (Shapiro, 1983; 2014). Smith certainly scrutinized both in his corpus. In paragraphs 38-47 (approximately another quarter of the article) he does so again. He announces the new vector with another demarcation device—a one-sentence paragraph: “Different plans and different institution for education seem to have taken place in other ages and nations.” He

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40 That Smith is cautious recipient of ancient accounts perhaps requires no support. But that he is also an aggressive skeptic of traveler interpretations can be seen in the following: (e.g., I.xi.b.41; IV.vii.b.7; V.i.d.17).
then examines histories of four examples of schooling in ancient society: (1) gymnastics and music; (2) reading, writing and; (3) philosophy and rhetoric; and (4) civil law. He seeks to determine if they comport to his hypothesis or require him to modify it.

The historical accounts of gymnastics and music make the greatest challenge to his hypothesis. They were taught in Greece “under the direction of the publick magistrate” and they are claimed to have achieved their social ends. The implication: Government direction and provision could actually be effective. Smith, however, finds many flaws with the causal associations.

Of gymnastics and music, the account of music is his primary concern. The intended purpose of the state’s actions toward musical education was to “humanize the mind, to soften the temper, and to dispose it for performing all the social and moral duties both of publick and private life” (39). Smith is unconvinced. He identifies four flaws. First, music education may not have been the underlying mechanism of those social ends, since the Romans achieved temperance without musical education (para. 40). The observed relationship may be spurious (i.e., an example of omitted variable bias). Second, music is a poor choice as a theorized causal driver: It is nearly universal and was common even among “barbarous nations.” Didactically, it is even so among “the negroes of Africa,” “the antient Celtes,” and “the antient Scandinavians.”

Third, the role of the legislator is historically inaccurate. Greek musical education predated legislation and was a result of custom not legislation. Finally, teachers of music were not “paid, or even appointed by the state,” and the state “advanced [almost] nothing for this purpose.”

Thus, even if there was a causal relationship between music and temperance, it was user-fees instead of government endowments that brought about the success.

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41 Another ironic inversion of ranks.
42 As for gymnastics, it is more simply debunked by this fourth point alone.
As for reading, writing, and arithmetic, the historical account is not contentious. The rich received these skills with private tutors. The poor did so at “schools of such masters as made a trade of teaching for hire” (42). Endowments played no role in this sphere.

As for philosophy and rhetoric, “No teacher appears to have had any salary from the publick, or to have had any other emoluments, but what arose from the honoraries or fees of his scholars.” Moreover, “the teachers had no jurisdiction over their pupils, nor any other authority besides that natural authority, which superior virtue and abilities never fail to procure from young people” (43). Again endowments had no part in success.

The successes of the ancients fail to reveal a role for endowments. In an interesting development, Smith also makes abundantly clear that they fail to reveal a direct role for government. He writes, “The masters…do not seem to have been paid, or even appointed by the state” (41). Also, “It does not appear that the state ever assumed any inspection or direction” (42). And “The state…seems never to have encouraged them further” (43). Finally, his summary assessment: “The state seems to have been at no pains to form those great abilities” (45, emphases added). Smith is didactic on this point. Smith therefore not only sustains his hypothesis in this section but now more clearly reveals it has implications for limiting the role for government.

5.4 Potential Roles for Government

A closer reading of the section on the ancients reveals two important messages leading up to his contemplation of reforms. First, there are potential roles for government, but they lie outside of provision. Second, the tendency to choose provision derives from faulty methods of
justification and prejudices of learning. An elucidation of each will provide an explanation point to his study, and make clear the strength of his opposition to provision.

Throughout his analysis of ancient examples, Smith attributes success to different forces than provision. He describes a virtuous cycle of a competitive environment in which demand and supply naturally stimulate each other toward an ever-improving market. He writes: “The demand for philosophy and rhetoric” was initially small and teachers roamed the land for students. But through “unrestrained competition” it was possible that schools’ “reputation,” “tone and character,” and appearance of utility stimulated additional demand. The increased demand thereafter spurred further “emulation” among suppliers, which evoked further levels of “superior virtue and abilities,” consummating in “natural authority” (in lieu of coercive) and an “empire” of the mind. All this approached “perfection.” His account of this cycle is inspired and glowing. It substantiates that, in his view, a weak market is not a stable equilibrium that we must worry about. Institutions conducive to competition may suffice to trigger the cycle toward a more beneficial equilibrium.

He is consistent on this point. On the topic of joint-stock companies, he writes of the “extraordinary demand” which “competition occasions.” He explains that an “increase of demand, besides, though in the beginning it may sometimes raise the price of goods, never fails to lower it in the long run. It encourages production, and thereby increases the competition of the producers, who, in order to undersell one another, have recourse to new divisions of labour and new improvements of art, which might never have otherwise been thought of.” He concludes, “The great business of political œconomy” is to promote such competition not replace it (V.i.e.26).

43 West (online) states that Smith finds encouraging demand to be “efficiently workable.”
On the topic of education for *adults*, he continues the argument, and more clearly reveals that if one felt compelled to enhance this virtuous cycle further, one should choose stimulating demand, not supply. Here he pits one option against the other: “The state might render [science and philosophy] almost universal among all people of middling or more than middling rank and fortune; *not by giving salaries* to teachers in order to make them negligent and idle, *but by instituting some sort of probation*” (emphasis added). Similarly, the state “would have *no occasion* to give itself any trouble about *providing* them with proper teachers. They would soon *find* better teachers for themselves than any whom the state could *provide* for them” (V.i.g.14, emphasis added). Here he cites Hume to make the same point, “Leave the profession to itself, and trust its encouragement to the individuals who reap the benefit of it.” The resulting dynamic: “The commodity is always sure to be at all times nearly proportioned to the demand” (V.i.g.3).

The message is no different in his article on the education of youth. Smith’s account of ancients reveals a set of actions which have been successful, but which are almost all stimulants to demand. If it is inexpedient to wait for the virtuous cycle to solve the problems of education, *eschew* stimulating supply, and choose stimulating demand.

For reading, writing and arithmetic, Smith attributes success to the law of Solon. The law of Solon states that children “were acquitted from maintaining those parents in their old age who had neglected to instruct them in some profitable trade or business” (V.i.f.42). For Smith, this law was sufficient to allow the government to “abandon altogether” the issue of education to the parents. It stimulated demand for education and therein resolved the problem of motivation.

For military exercises: “The state required that every free citizen should fit himself for defending it in war.” While one sees here a more direct imposition to become educated, it is a
stimulation of demand, and one that retained freedom of choice: The state “left him to learn…of such masters as he could find” (41).

Finally, for the instruction of civil law, Smith attributes success to the institution of the courts—an institution not directly related to education. To explain, in neither Greece nor Rome were there formal schools for civil law. Those interested in it had to “frequent the company of such of their relations and friends, as were supposed to understand it” (44). That which elicited demand was the reputation of the courts. And on this point, a comparative analysis is enlightening. In Rome, the high reputation of the court spurred a thriving interest in scientific inquiry among the youth. In Greece, by contrast, the “mobbish and disorderly” courts repelled youth, and the study of civil law withered. Each behavior of the courts is traceable to the institutional designs of the courts. The example of civil law suggests that, even remote institutions, such as a constitution, may have an impact on demand.

It is only in Smith’s account of philosophy and rhetoric that he identifies an act of government which increased supply. Government provided a place. Since the provision of a school building is outside of Smith’s model and unrelated to teacher diligence, it would appear that here might be a precedent to justify government building schools. And, indeed, several scholars believe that the physical building is that which Smith is most willing to consider (e.g., West 1964b, p. 466; C. Smith 2012, p. 795; Weinstein, 2013). I see no reason to doubt it. But we ought to note that Smith treats this example differently than the rest, and his treatment is important for characterizing his willingness. He writes, “The state, however, seems never to have encouraged them further than by assigning to some of them a particular place to teach in, which was sometimes done by a private donor too” (43, emphasis added). Smith characterizes the act as minimal, unsystematic, and not exclusive to government. Nor do his examples suggest
otherwise. The Academy, the Lyceum, and the Portico are not mentioned as romantic examples of the glories of the past, but mentioned matter-of-factly as if aware that they were nothing more than preexisting mixed-use public facilities.\textsuperscript{44} In short, if Smith is willing to entertain such provision, he shows he would do so with prudence.

5.5. \textit{The Error of “Men of Ingenuity”}

The section on the ancients also provides assertions about the merit of his methodology versus that of the ancients. A few passing comments about historians provide some of the most damning evidence against believing Smith could endorse government provision.

Smith disputes the historians’ interpretations as discussed above, but goes further. He also takes a moment to explain how they have erred: “The respect, of those antient sages for the institutions of their ancestors, had probably disposed them to find much political wisdom in what was, perhaps merely an ancient custom.” He continues, the “prejudice is perhaps to overrate” the role of the state. The authorities, that is, have been subject to their biases. Smith “cannot be induced” to follow them (40). Those biases are to have romanticized the ancient successes as a product of design. In Smith’s world view, it is a harsh condemnation.

A reference to Montesquieu goes further. Although it has escaped attention in any publication I can find, it is a very important passage, rendering clear where Smith stands methodologically and how certain he is of his predictions. He writes:

\begin{quote}
Notwithstanding, therefore, the very respectable authority of Plato, Aristotle, and Polybius, and notwithstanding very ingenious reasons by which Mr. Montesquieu endeavors to support that authority, it seems probable that the musical education of the Greeks had no great effect in
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{44} In addition, Epicurus’s garden is private.
mending their morals, since, without any such education, those of the Romans were upon the whole superior. (V.i.f.40)

Montesquieu is the odd name in the list. He finds himself on the list of ancient historians because in his 1748 *Spirit of the Laws* he reiterated the ancients’ historical account of musical education in Greece and concluded that it was evidence of the “extensive genius” of prior statesmen (Montesquieu 2001, p. 53). He used the example to propose public education to nurture a republican spirit. Although the mention of Montesquieu is fleeting in the passage above, it places Smith in a very important debate that has largely been lost to history.

Montesquieu is rightly *not* an important figure in the historiography of public education. But because of that, his *transient* effects have been under-investigated. It turns out that a very prominent debate took place in Britain starting in 1765, and Montesquieu was the inspiration for it. Smith and others saw so, and reacted to his influence.

The debate involved, on one side, the best-selling English moralist and King’s chaplain, John Brown, and on the other side, the leading educational thinker, scientist, and emergent political writer, Joseph Priestley. In the 1765 work, *Thoughts on Civil Liberty, on Licentiousness and Faction*, Brown paraphrased Montesquieu and reached the same conclusion that public education was necessary. Brown’s objective was not republicanism but religious middle-class virtue (1765). Priestly (1765; 1768) responded swiftly and aggressively with a three-pronged critique that seems to have won or mirrored the sentiment of the age.

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45 An exception, Fletcher (1943).
46 Ironically, Brown makes the same point that Smith would: Greek musical tradition was a product of custom not legislation (p. 63). Brown’s historical rationale for public education is more extensive and not dependent upon the Greek music example.
47 For commentary on or direct emulation of Priestley’s views see Parr (1784, p. 184); Williams (1789b, p. 42-44); Godwin (1793, pp. 208-213); Yorke (1794, p. 13); Eden (1797, V. 1, p. 422-428); Sinclair (1799, v. 21, p. 317); Stewart (1855, p. 52-54); Urban (1765, p. 184).
While most commentators were swept up in the particular British version of the debate, Montesquieu’s position was also known and directly addressed. In 1756 British education thinker Thomas Sheridan writes in appreciation of Montesquieu’s curricular objective but withholds any comment on the public provision and control aspect (Sheridan 1756, p. 35; 1747, p. 29). In 1775, the well-known constitutional thinker and education reformer, David Williams, responds to the public provision aspect. He shows antipathy to the idea, and he denounces the Greek story as well as the overall methodology of relying on testimonies (1775, pp. 19, 23-24, 37, 86). Although he does not mention Montesquieu, the source of his ire is made evident when he takes up the argument again in 1789. At that point he specifically names Montesquieu and accuses him of being “contradictory,” “vague” (1789b, p. 49), and superficial in thought on the matter (pp. 129-130).

Smith ignores the Brown-Priestley debate and goes straight to the source. In this simplest of several possible readings of Smith’s passage, Smith merely points out that the historians’ interpretation of the historical facts is wrong, and that Montesquieu (by seeking to use their authority) has employed a methodology too easily subject to error. But there is likely an additional artistry involved—a shrouded, even harsher critique of Montesquieu which Smith may have found unsuitable for someone he otherwise took inspiration from.

The artistry comes from his use of the term “ingenious” in relationship to Montesquieu. Throughout his corpus, Smith uses “ingenuity” and “ingenious” in two distinct ways—one positively, the other negatively. He associates positive ingenuity exclusively with tradesmen (and the objects of their craft) who invent and contribute ideas to the growing productivity of a nation. And in all cases, those tradesmen are anonymous agents—the nameless figures who

48 Ingenuity: I.i.6; I.v.4; I.vi.3, 6; I.x.b.18; I.x.c.16, 60; I.xi.b.25; IV.V.a.39; IV.viii.48; V.i.f.51. Ingenious: I.x.b.9, 13; I.xii.o.11; V.ii.i.6. The only exception -- “jewels, baubles, ingenious trinkets” (II.iii.38).
move the nation into wealth. In contrast, he uses the term ironically to show that ingenuity has unforeseen negative consequences. In all such examples of this sort, the ingenious person is identified, directly or indirectly. These people are the ones in society of traditional voice and authority.

Those on whom he employs this device: the Physiocrats in general (V.ii.c.7; IV.ix.2; II.iii.1. footnote); Mr. de Quesney, as a specific Physiocrat (IV.ix.27); French minister of finance, Mr. Colbert (IV.ii.38); Charles Smith, the author of the mercantilist author of The Corn Trade (IV.v.a.4); Mr. Messance, author of French demographical statistics (I.viii.49); the specific movement of dissenting preachers (V.i.g.1); and mercantilists (IV.viii.39). In each case, Smith’s praise is clearly ironic for he goes on to heartily disprove each of their points. When ingenuity is found among the purveyors of traditional learnedness and power, it ends differently than among tradesman—it ends in “men-of-system” outcomes rather than productivity. I suggest that an attribution of men-of-ingenuity ought to be seen as parallel to his famous attribution of men-of-system. Smith, then, has not just found fault with Montesquieu, but has impugned him for the prejudice of his education and class.

Others would eventually come to similar conclusions about Montesquieu on this topic—though more overtly. David Williams eventually labeled the plan as “unscientific” (1789b, p. 48). He also delighted in the irony that, if Montesquieu’s plans already existed, there would never have been a Montesquieu. In the same vein, the influential French commentator, Antoine Destutt de Tracy, impugned Montesquieu for superficial thinking on the subject: “The strength of first impressions must have been very great in his mind” (Destutt 1811, emphasis added).

It is perhaps more than a footnote to mention that Williams also perceived what I claim Smith was doing—taking a position against Montesquieu in the debate of his time. In 1789,
having both Montesquieu and Smith’s writings available to him, he makes a comparison. Williams provides numerous reasons that it is a bad idea for Montesquieu to cede education to government, and he concludes that the reader should turn to Smith, instead, “who has treated the subject with ability and candor” (pp. 45-46).

Smith, then, would appear to have exploded the notion of subsidization in the first section of the article, admonished the natural human sentiments that might favor it in the second part, and now shown the errors of a once revered methodology that has been used to support it. The first three quarters of the article quite comprehensively render it incredible for Smith to adopt subsidization as an important aspect of his reforms.

6. The Overawing Conclusion and How to Interpret His Reform Initiatives

Smith rests a strengthened case in paragraph 45, the longest paragraph in the article. He accomplishes much here, but in general, the passage is about perspective. It is here he claims the historians were biased. It is also here that he explains that contemporary viewers are unable to get a perfect picture of the potential of private schools because such schools have been harmed by the existence of subsidized schools. Subsidized schools attract interest away from the now comparatively more expensive private schools, which forces them to compete on price by pushing salaries to a bare minimum, and attracting only the “lowest order of men of letters” who then can hardly inspire students. Endowments have “not only corrupted the diligence of publick teachers, but have rendered it almost impossible to have any good private ones” (para. 45). Some particularly metaphorical language, though, reaffirms the virtue of the pure form of private schools:

In the attention which the antient philosophers excited, in the empire which they acquired over the opinions and principles of their auditors, in
the faculty which they possessed of giving a certain tone and character to the conduct and conversation of those auditors; they appear to have been much superior to any modern teachers. (para. 45, emphases added)

This reference to auditing is, surprisingly, the only one in either WN or TMS, and its use here benefits from the dual semantic salience of the word in his time—in its older Latin form of “listener” or “audience,” and in its newly technical accounting form in Britain as an “investigator” or “adjudicator.” In private education, the student is both listener and judge of performance, passive and active. It is this active one which generally insists on quality and usefulness and which Smith appreciates throughout his analysis. The teacher in this model may have an “empire” but it is one granted to him by the audience. Here we have a portrayal of the market at work, where the consumer disciplines the provider and grants him authority on terms agreeable to the consumer. Smith crafts here, then, directly and metaphorically, an argument guiding his audience to have faith in his theory rather than their eyes, to trust the private market to solve the problem.

He also conveys this message through a profound change in his register. Namely, he drops the more specific language of education in paragraph 45, and replaces it with the language of markets. He now writes of “competition,” “trade,” “sale,” “goods,” “price,” “profit,” “demand,” and “bankruptcy.” Nowhere else is such language in the article. The shift places education back into its elemental form, as a market. Smith, therein, insinuates education to be unexceptional, to be guided by the same forces which recommend markets be unmolested. And he celebrates the role of demand in terms which are unequivocal: “The demand for such instruction produced, what it always produces, the talent for giving it; and the emulation which

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Soll (2014) provides a noteworthy history of auditing.
an unrestrained competition never fails to excite, appears to have brought that talent to a very high degree of perfection” (45, emphases added). Smith’s celebration of commerce is not something applicable only to higher education, but applicable to all forms of liberal education. Smith embraced all forms in his scoping of the problem at the beginning, and now places his findings into the even more broadly scoped market for all goods.

He follows this conclusion with two paragraphs playing off of the warm-spirited sentiments introduced by his interlocutor. He again turns to irony. Each of three ironic points stand in parallel to his first set. The first is a variant of his response to the something-is-better-than-nothing sentiment. He feigns a concession, “Were there no publick institutions for education, no system, no science would be taught for which there was not some demand” (46).

Taking a moment to untangle the negatives, the reader is rewarded with the underhanded sentiment: Endowments ensure we have universities which supply things we don’t want. The second is the ironic conflict between the aspirations of one’s educational choices and the end results: “Were there no publick institutions for education, a gentleman…could not come into the world completely ignorant of every thing which is the common subject of conversation among gentlemen and men of the world” (46). Finally, he inverts the traditional hierarchy, so to say, between men and women as he had between rich and poor universities: “There are no publick institutions for the education of women, and there is accordingly nothing useless, absurd, or fantastical in the common course of their education” (47). Women, through a different treatment in society, have been spared. This trilogy of ironies is how he ends his study.

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50 There are three other uses of “never fails” in this manner: II.ii.65; IV.i.9; V.i.e.26. He more frequently uses “always” to certify observed dynamics or dependent relationships within a market. A few examples are: I.i.7. I.iii.1, 4; I.v.3, 7.

51 This interpretation stands in contrast to a frequently occurring one in which I find no merit—that this passage amounts to Smith denying women access to public education (e.g., Bodkin, 1976; Darwall, 1999; Kuiper 2006, p. 55; Buchan 2006, p. 113-114).
What then to do for the poor? Paragraph 48 introduces the final section. It is a set of interrogative responses to the entirety of what has thus far been written and prompts a new sort of analysis. “Ought the publick, therefore, to give no attention, *it may be asked*, to the education of the people? Or if it ought to give any, what are the different parts of education which it ought to attend to in the different order of the people? And in what manner ought it to attend to them?” (emphasis added). The three question are: Act? Which curriculum? And how so?

Here again are sentiments, set outside himself and attributed to the interlocutor—sentiments of public spirit, incredulity, and inherent faith that something is better than nothing. A few points about the nature of the questions alter how the rest of the article might be read. First, the public-spiritedness does not appear to be borne out of any *statist* attitude. The questions are about what a *public* should do. It should be no surprise, then, that Smith’s reforms are assigned to an ambiguous agent as well. Second, the first question implies that Smith’s writing thus far conveys that *absolutely nothing* should be done to help the poor. I have emphasized throughout that Smith’s article is powerful, definitive, and broadly encompassing of all forms of endowments. Here the interlocutor confirms that his audience would have perceived it as such. With a reference point of no action, then, it should be no surprise that any sort of deviation from zero might be marginal or reserved.

And so it is. Upon closer inspection, his reform initiatives should be characterized by their marginal or meager qualities. He writes of a solution where “little schools” might be a “little more instructive,” offer only “the elementary parts” of subjects and only the “introduction” to sciences (55).52 The poor “cannot, in any civilized society, be so well instructed as people of

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52 Many sermons also, while pleading for charity, also set small goals, with the ultimate intention to “dismiss to such employments, as are fitted for ‘em, assoon as they are capable of making their labour of any use” (Clarke 1741, p. 17).
some rank and fortune” (54). The teacher should be paid “not wholly [by endowment] because if he was wholly, or even principally paid by it, he would soon learn to neglect his business” (55). If money is necessary to give incentives, it would be “small premiums” along with “little badges of distinction.”

Smith’s treatment of curriculum shows similar constraint. He finds himself in a precarious position on this matter. In his account thus far, utility either corresponds to whatever individuals desire—in which case, he should defer to the individual; or it corresponds to some social will—in which case he would need the “clearest evidence” of utility (V.i.e.36). Needing “clearest evidence” constrains him. Therefore, he recommends only changes for which he can make a case of their near universal benefit. He recommends eliminating Latin which is “scarce of any use” (i.e., near universally useless). And he recommends adding geometry and mechanics because “there is scarce a common trade which does not afford some opportunities of applying [them]” (para. 55, emphasis added).

Regarding reading and writing, he would need to say more. As previously discussed, during the Mandevillian era, there was broad hostility from the traditional elite toward the poor having an education—specifically literacy. In addition, there was wariness about top-down control of the curriculum. Priestley had made the defining case, writing that to cede curriculum to government would create “one kind of man”—a “brute creation” at odds with a society that valued the exchange of ideas (1768, p. 85). To grant authority to a central body would be “like fixing the dress of a child and forbidding its cloaths ever to be made wider and larger” (1768, p. 80). Thus, a top-down prescription of literacy would face considerable scrutiny. I suggest Smith’s approach to prescribing literacy stems directly from this historical context. He identifies numerous benefits and discusses them with a certain passion. But we should not be distracted
and therein fail to note that he nonetheless only prescribes a marginal change in the end. He recommends only to make the books “a little more instructive” which may allow the education of this rank to be “as complete as it can be.”

Probation or examination are also examples of his restraint. While they are shocking violations of liberty, they are less so than other options. Smith compared them to those other options in his 1774 letter to William Cullen in which he specifically argues for examination in lieu of certification of attendance. He concludes, “When a man had learnt his lesson very well, it surely can be of little importance where or from whom he has learn it” (Correspondences, p. 174). They differ from certification of attendance by allowing choice of school.

His recommendations of examination and probation also differ from compulsory attendance. Numerous scholars have cited an earlier paragraph as evidence that Smith advocated compulsory attendance of schools (e.g., Rasmussen, 2008, p. 107; Robbins, 1965 p. 92; Hill 2007, p. 347). But context is critical for understanding that paragraph and why there is no follow-through to his reform initiatives. He writes, “Force and restraint may, no doubt, be in some degree requisite in order to oblige children, or very young boys, to attend to those parts of education which it is thought necessary for them to acquire” (15). But the statement occurs only in the spirit of arguing that older students are not kids, and should therefore be able to judge for themselves the utility of attending a class. The passing quote is merely a rhetorical counterpoint aimed to affirm freedom of choice. It ought not be construed as the overture of a radical treatise for organizing society. A better interpretation is that Smith is commenting on a personal, not jural matter, in which parents and the schools to which parents have elected to send their children may compel their children to show up and be respectful—as when a teacher tells his class that attendance is required, or that attendance will be a component of grading.
To summarize, with each element of reform, he restrains the action to small, modest acts. The pattern is undeniable, and thus highly suggestive of intentional and reasoned caution, as respectable passions tempering the amiable. His 19th-century biographer, John Rae, wrote that “No man could be less chargeable with indifference to honest and practicable schemes of philanthropy.” But Rae also noted that *practicality* dictated Smith’s response to specific philanthropic projects (Rae 1895, p. 407). It might be asserted that, much like Smith’s view that the stage of history required a standing army where none was needed in the past, it was now necessary to take action on education where none was previously needed. Smith’s article in conducive to such thoughts (e.g., 51). But his suggested actions are marginal and practical, restrained by his knowledge that more will end in wastefulness and dangers to the growing nation.

7. Interpreting His Final Words

Given the interpretation proffered so far, the enigma of the text is why Smith does not elevate private school and charity more confidently in his conclusion to the chapter.

One potential answer is that his rich treatment of probability in the first section requires him to admit that the variation he excluded from his model constrains him now. He realizes that some endowed schools may succeed. There are, indeed, some men of sense and of ambition who care about their reputation and the results of their efforts. There are also some administrators who may escape the worst of tendencies toward capriciousness and malignancy. Smith’s model only reveals the likelihood of good and bad outcomes, and thus when pushed for a summary
view, he resists overstating his case. J.S. Mill tries to salvage endowments for himself in this manner (1859, p. 25-30).53

Perhaps more compelling answers lie in the practice of esoteric writing. Two variants of an esoteric message seem worthwhile entertaining. First, the distinct quality of the scientific community in Britain was its caution and prudence, where truths would emerge over time with the help of “many Heads and many Hands” (Glanvill, cited by Purver 2009, p. 96).54 Smith may, then, be shrouding his confidence a bit, showing the modesty of a gentleman scholar necessary for someone engaging in pioneering work—and it was indeed pioneering.55 Such understatement might be understood as defending against the perception of excessive confidence and imprudent scientific claims. Here would be an application of Melzer’s “defensive esotericism” (2014, p. 127-160).

Second, the dialogic nature of the article shows he is aware of strong sentiments to do something. And he is sympathetic to doing something. But his findings, which are highly critical of actions thus far, could thwart the ethical conversations needed for further efforts. He may have realized that he uncovered what Melzer calls “dangerous truths” (2014, p. 161-204)—in this case, that the natural sentiment for direct action is dubious and that there is not an expedient solution to the social ills plaguing Britain. Therefore, to encourage further discussion of how to act—to promote discovery rather than sow a sense of futility—he employs an artistry that partially conceals his findings. He already did so in the article when he rebutted his interlocutor, but employed irony, which is a partial shrouding of a message for more attentive readers to enjoy. He also did so when he chastised Montesquieu, but shrouded the rebuke with grace. Smith

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53 And Andrew Skinner describes Smith’s uncertainty as such (1995, p. 90-91).
54 see also Shapiro (1983, Ch. 1)
has chosen a lighter touch. Perhaps it is Melzer’s “pedagogical esotericism” at work; perhaps it is Griswold’s protrepticism. The conclusion appears to places the decision of what to do into the public realm. He may want the public to steer clear of direct subsidization, but he cannot summarily make that statement, or else he is telling and not teaching.

Another question my analysis has not yet clearly answered is why Smith esteems charity over endowments since it would seem charity—in being a means of subsidization—runs into the same problem of endowments (V.i.i.5). There is a plausible historical explanation for Smith’s distinction. It was a common view in his time that charities were not like endowments (e.g., Hathway 1766, p.133). Charity was esteemed in a way endowments were not. The commentary is rich on the matter.

To explain, endowments had been a long-running topic of criticism by Smith’s time, and had become particularly focal in public discourse since the 1757 article by Turgot in the *Encyclopédie*. (e.g., Sheridan 1757, p. 10; Goldsmith 1759, p. 87). Endowments relied on legacies and wills, and often extended across many generations. Many problems were associated with endowments. First, donors often constrained the use of the funds for particular purposes. Over time these constraints precluded the ability to adjust to changing needs. Second, laws constrained the flexibility of their use, to the same unfortunately end. Third, graft became common; corrupt management often arose whenever it became “impossible to secure the like zeal and public spirit” of the original donor (Mackay 1898, p. 30). Fourth, endowments had an image problem, seeming to run off of “ostentatious” kinds of beneficence (Bygrave 2010, p. 86). Lastly, and most important for our current discussion, their funding had a static quality; the endowments paid teachers independently of how schools performed. In John Stuart Mill’s 1833
historical assessment of endowments, he stressed that the negative view of endowments was “common to all the philosophers of [Turgot’s] time” (1859 p. 25, 30; 1873, p. 56).

Charities were different (Salmon 1908, p. 10). They were not based on trusts from prior generations, but relied on recurring donations from the living. The perception of them differed accordingly. Historian, Thomas Mackey writes, “In the argument of Turgot there is of course no condemnation of voluntary charity, so long as it is kept in control of the living generation…The spontaneous act of the living is, he seems to argue, the best guarantee we can have for a wise exercise of the spirit of benevolence” (1898, p. 31, emphasis added). Comments by contemporaries of Smith make the same juxtaposition, and they use the same metaphorical language that “the living” employ their discretion and judge according to quality. Priestley, for example, wrote, “In most cases it would certainly be much better to provide…places of education [that] are supported by the voluntary contributions of the living” instead by way of endowments (1826, p. 303-304). Voluntary contributions, therein, appeared to be an analogue to user-fees. Contributors audited quality, modifying their contributions (sometimes meticulously) based on their approval or disapproval (Jones 1938, p. 52). This juxtaposition and its metaphorical language of the “living” and “dead” sources was quite pervasive and would continue throughout the following century (e.g. Hobhouse, 1880).

Smith does not apply the juxtaposition of the living and the dead. He does, however, juxtapose “voluntary contributions” to “general contributions” in the conclusion to a similar effect. And, in the following article on religious education, he does make a clear distinction between endowments and charities and imposes that distinction back onto the arena of education of youth. He writes:

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56 Mill argues to not give up on endowments—there may still be administrative fixes for them.
57 See also Parr 1828, vol 2, p.183, 187; Ker 1819, p. 110).
The teachers of the doctrine which contains this instruction, *in the same manner as other teachers*, may either depend altogether for the subsistence upon the voluntary contributions of their hearers; or they may derive it from some other fund to which the law of their country may entitle them; such as a landed estate, a tythe or land tax, an established salary or stipend. *Their exertion, their zeal and industry, are likely to be much greater in the former than in the latter.* (V.i.g.1, emphasis added)

Smith, like his contemporaries, does distinguish charity from endowments—one working toward positive ends, the other not.

To conclude, the traditional interpretation of Smith as an advocate of public education has long relied on a series of inferences. But these inferences are insensitive to the history of education and its discourses. When read in context, the article still appears radical, but only because it commits to the idea of educational access for the poor. The article never specifically urges government provision. It instead—without deviation through the first three-quarters of the article—builds a compelling and simple reason to be suspicious of endowed provision. Teachers, as all producers of a good, must be subject to the disciplining forces of the market. Therein is how quality and useful education will fill the nation. This simple conclusion applies to all forms of liberal education, from elementary to university.

My interpretation is a critique of the current dominant doctrine, but it does not question Smith’s legacy as an important reformer and advocate of the poor. Smith extends the sphere of societal agency, and he summons reticent or hostile governments to participate *in some capacity*. However, he provides insights into the human spirit which ultimately point us to solutions *outside* of the sphere of government provision. Smith is at ease with this conclusion. The central
tension in the article is not one within Smith, but rather between Smith’s science and those social sentiments and sophisticated rationalizations toward taking more direct actions.

My interpretation is at odds with most scholarship on the topic since the Progressive era. And it strongly rejects portrayals of him as an advocate with no reservation. In these unreserved portrayals, Smith sought universality and prescribed compulsory attendance. He proposed a “most extensive and expansive” plan (Muller 2002, p. 79), “a scheme requiring a greater measure of government involvement than anything that had ever existed before” (Himmelfarb 1984, p. 59), and “nothing less than public education” (Hill and Montag 2015, p. 75). And as a result Smith would have accepted “practically all the tasks that modern welfare liberals…would put under government purview” (Fleischacker 2004, p. 234).

My interpretation contrasts with scholarship but realigns Smith with a characterization more commonly espoused by earlier commentators. They were particularly attracted to his vigorous criticism of endowments (e.g., Williams, 1789b, pp. 45-48; Garnier 1843, p. xxx; Mill, 1859 pp. 25-30; Mill 1873, p. 56; Lowe 1868, pp. 4-7). To them, there was no way to diminish the importance of his criticism, and there was no way to compartmentalize it away from a discussion of elementary education. Such initial responses are intelligible by my analysis, and perhaps truer to Smith’s intended reactions.

My interpretation helps to restore a lost line of thinking. At least one initial reader saw Smith as operating within a framework of charity (e.g., Parr 1828 [1785]). In 1903, another continued to see it as self-evident that early economists such as Josiah Tucker and Adam Smith

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chose “charity schools” as the form they approved of (Clark 1903, p. 230). But there has since been a “polarization around the dichotomy of purely voluntary market choices and collective-coercive group decisions.” This polarization has suppressed “realistic thought on the possibility of other kinds of social institutions” when reading Book V in The Wealth of Nations (Campbell 1967, p. 354). Prior to the codification of the Western resolution on government schooling, which many families today try to escape, or counteract, a rich exploration of solutions occurred. Smith’s article represents an extensive and disciplined exploration. But it never calls for government provision, nor compulsory schooling. It barely seems to tolerate government provision except for rather scanty roles. The article instead serves as a testimony of his appreciation of voluntary affairs, conditioned only rather minimally by government institutions.

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