

## 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 deprecates Montesquieu's reasoning for government provision, and he censures warm sentiments when they urge the same conclusion. Besides treating the issue of policy, this article addresses the claim that Smith favored compulsory schooling.

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## I. Introduction.

Adam Smith is said to have advocated government subsidization of education for youth. A broad survey shows that nearly every commentator since the Progressive Era has hewed to this interpretation.<sup>2</sup> Emma Rothschild writes, “He is strongly in favour...of public support for the education of the ‘common people’” (2005, pg. 209). Andrew Skinner: “Education must necessarily fall into the state” (1988, p 10). Ellen Frankel Paul: “Education should be provided for those who can’t afford it” (1979, p. 34). T.L. Jarman: “His strong advocacy of freedom of trade did not prevent him from suggesting the need for public provision” (1951, p. 210). And Dennis Rasmussen: “The most important of these [public] services is compulsory and state-supported education aimed expressly at the poor” (2008, p. 107). The interpretations vary in color but largely arrive at the same conclusion. Whether Smith made a “most powerful plea for” (Robbins 1965, p. 38), “advocated for” (Freeman 1969, p. 180), “demanded” (Skinner 1996, p. 192), “urged for” (Wilson 1989, p. 60), “insisted upon” (Fleischacker 2004, p.235), “suggested” (Morrow 1923, p. 73), “recognized a place for” (Dankert 1974, p. 165) or “clearly acknowledged a necessary role for” government (Gordon and Boland, 1998, p. 2), *government provision* is an

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<sup>2</sup> Luzzatti, 1876 in Lai (2000), Milnes (1882), Bonar (1893), Sadler (1897), Holman (1898), Small (1907), Butts (1910), Graves (1913), Cubberly (1920), Morrow (1923), Fay (1930), Jarman (1951), Pollard (1957), Mulhern (1959), Barnard (1961), West (1964a); Robbins (1965), Silver (1965), Brubacker (1966), Miller (1966), Freeman (1969), Lamb (1973), Lawson and Silver (1973), Hollander (1973), Dankert (1974), Rimlinger (1976), Spiegel (1976), Spengler (1977), D. Winch (1978), Ginzberg (1979), Arrow (1979), Paul (1979), Campbell & Ross (1981), Davis (1981), Robertson (1983), Eze (1983), Ross (1984), Harpham (1984), Ralphael (1985), Rabushka (1985), Lissner (1986), Novak (1986), Brown (1988), Skinner (1988), Naismith (1988), Wilson (1989), Palley (1991), Baum (1992), Rothschild (1992), Hollander (1993), Muller (1993), Bassiry & Jones (1993), Skinner (1995), Fitzgibbons (1995, 1997), Anderson (1995), D. Winch (1996), Drosos (1996), Skinner (1996), Phelps (1997), Donald (1997), Berry (1997), Stabile (1997), C. Winch (1998), Alvey (1998; 2001), Rashid (1998), Gordon & Boland (1998), Walsch (1998), Ortman (1999), Tribe (1999), Fiori & Pesciarelli (1999), Leathers & Raines (1999; 2003), Ginzberg (2002), Lund (2002), Chandra (2004), Fleischacker (2004), Kayaalp (2004), Kennedy (2005; 2008), Rauhut (2005), Evensky (2005), Stone (2005), C. Smith (2006), Buchan (2006), Holler (2006), Hill (2007), Fallis (2007), Hanley (2009), Pederson (2009), Sen (2009; 2013), Perelman (2010), Klump & Woersdoerfer (2010), Bogotch (2011), S. Freeman (2011), Göçmen (2012), Quinn (2013), Weinstein (2013), Pack (2013), Labio (2013), ver Eecke (2013), Buschman (2013), Solomon (2013), Hall (2014), Alexander, Salmon and Alexander (2014), Fagbamiye (2015), Hill & Montag (2015), Thomas (2017), Lee (2017), Wolcott (2018), Norman (2018), MacDonald (2019).

unmistakable element to Smith's reform initiatives. Today, government provision (in full or in part) belongs to Smithian doctrine.

Yet there are reasons to be ill-at-ease with the doctrine. For one, the 18<sup>th</sup> century began with observers favorably remarking on a different solution for education: "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 a vast network of these schools and with the moniker, "the age of Benevolence" (More 1828, vol. 1, p. 291). It is, thus, curious that Smith would have chosen to abandon the solution of charity in favor of government. The scholarship has given almost no effort to explain this curiosity.

In addition, Smith's key text on the matter—the article, "Of the Expence of the Institutions for the Education of Youth," from Book V in *The Wealth of Nations*—has been called "contradictory," "awkward," "vague," "unspecific," "muddled," "odd," "deficient," "eclectic," "ambiguous," "wandering" and "unformulated."<sup>3</sup> It would also seem to lack the proper tenor, scope, practicality, and conviction of a supposed meaningful reform initiative.<sup>4</sup> Nonetheless, the scholarship has done little to probe the peculiarities of the text that generate such sentiments. The failure to do so is particularly unsettling when considering how much these sentiments stand in conflict with initial reactions to Smith's article. Early commentators

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<sup>3</sup> 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)

<sup>4</sup> For perceived shortcomings of this nature see: Playfair (1995, p. 252); Milgate & Simpson (2009); Viner (1927, p. 228); Reisman (2014, p. 371; 1976, p. 156); Hyard (2007, p. 90); Cropsey (2001, p. 106); Peacock (1975, p. 561); Lynn (1976, p. 372); Leathers and Raines (2003); Heilbroner (1973, p. 258). For claims of the importance of the work in the history of education see: Silver (1965, p.86); Alexander, Salmon and Alexander (2014, p. 8); Himmelfarb (1984, p. 56-64).

characterized Smith's article as rich, thorough, scientific, and conclusive. The 1802 French translator of WN, Germain Garnier, 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 Smith's treatment 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 Samuel Parr described it as having "clear and extensive views, from his copious and exact information" (Parr 1828 [1785], p. 186). Two periods of time have had two dramatically different responses to the article.

While a small body of heterodox interpretations exists in contemporary scholarship, it remains more searching than developed. Perhaps Smith was conflicted or cautious,<sup>5</sup> unsure of who should pay,<sup>6</sup> unwilling to recommend but marginal subsidization,<sup>7</sup> or appreciative of alternative solutions.<sup>8</sup> Each is provocative but leaves one to wonder whether a more precise or certain position may be more fully substantiated.

The current article, therefore, reopens the question of how attached to government provision Smith was. 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

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<sup>5</sup> e.g., Lynn (1976, p. 372); Barnard (1961, p. 46).

<sup>6</sup> e.g., Kennedy (2005, p. 225); Browning (1983, p. 17); Peacock (1975, p. 561); Lucas (1972, p. 363).

<sup>7</sup> e.g., Young (1997, p. 200); Otteson (2011, p. 166); Hanley (2016, p. 505).

<sup>8</sup> e.g., Compayré (1886, p. 510); Clark (1903, p. 230); D. Friedman (1997); M. Friedman (1776); West (1964b; 1990); Phillipson (2012, pp. 233-234).

to resolve more of the text, to more clearly and confidently articulate the tenor, scope and purpose of Smith's call for "attention of 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 the 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 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 tease of greater complexity to his thinking. It would seem that any interpretation should gauge this passage's utility as an interpretive tool.

The current article examines this passage and its relationship to the article 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 as much as university and religious education? It is believed that answering these questions provides the keys to more precisely characterizing Smith's position regarding public education.

## **2. Interpreting the Tension in the Article**

Interpretations have frequently sought to deal with a seeming tension in the article between advocacy and criticism. Advocacy for subsidization is foremost 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).<sup>9</sup> A package of reforms seems to include: endowed support of a school; small honors and encouragements; and impositions to demonstrate ability. To these, some also add compulsory attendance.

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: 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

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<sup>9</sup> All references to passages within the article in question will henceforth only be designated with its paragraph number, unless context requires additional clarification.

independent of their success and reputation” (45). Government subsidization is implicated in so far as it provides salaries.

How then did Smith come to terms with endowments? A few common tendencies to resolve the tension are seen in the literature. The first is to assert that Smith’s reservations about endowments are moot. Private schools could not provide widespread access; many benefits would be unrealized.<sup>10</sup> While the article is amendable to such thinking, 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 (paras. 17, 20, 30, 33, 45, 49) can possibly achieve its ends.

The second tendency 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 for elementary education which relied on both government and private funding.<sup>11</sup> 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 unsatisfying. What would be an acceptable portion for government responsibility given that it has the capacity to corrupt? Almost total provision (C. Winch 1998, p. 371)? “The better part” (Muller 1993, p. 199)? “Less than half” (Hanley 2016,

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<sup>10</sup> (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). 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 effective operation of government and democratic society (e.g., Freeman, 1969; Rothschild, 1992; Werhane, 1991; Haakonssen, 1989; Robertson, 1983; Schliesser, 2006).

<sup>11</sup> Ross (1984, p. 183); Fay (1930, p. 31); Anderson (1995, p. 27); Himmelfarb (1984, p. 58); Muller (1993, p. 151); Buchan (2006, p. 113); Skinner (1996, p. 193); Weinstein (2013, p. 204); Hill & Montag (2015, p. 78); West, (1964b, p. 466); Norman (2018).

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.<sup>12</sup> I tentatively suggest that perhaps Smith identifies no clear guidance because he did not strongly favor this option. It should be noted that the “Conclusion of the Chapter” does not indicate an interest in mixed-modes.

The third tendency to resolve tension is to assert that Smith’s criticism of endowments only applies to colleges, universities, or religious institutions.<sup>13</sup> In this approach, the tension goes away; the criticism was never meant to enter into the discussion of education of youth. But on what textual grounds does this compartmentalization occur? Scholars have not provided textual evidence. And again the “Conclusion of the Chapter” does not add any.<sup>14</sup>

The final tendency is to retain the tension. It has produced the intriguing but underdeveloped set of heterodox narratives mentioned previously. Namely, Smith should be placed in some psychic middle ground of internal conflict. These interpretations hedge but some obfuscation ensues. Arthur Taylor determines vaguely, “Smith offered [the private market] a modicum of encouragement” (1972, p. 47). 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

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<sup>12</sup> Weinstein (2013) provides, perhaps, the most eclectic interpretation, suggesting the mixture could be government plus private grants, corporate sponsorship, and revenues from advertising on the athletic score boards and from soda vending machines, etc.

<sup>13</sup>Morrow (1927, p. 326); Robbins (1965, p. 90); Himmelfarb (1984, p. 58); Rothschild (1998, p. 210); Reisman (1998, p. 376); Ortman (1999, p. 303); Birch (1998, p. 34); Evensky (2005, p. 228); Dankert (1974, p. 165); Milgate and Stimson (2009, p. 114); Stone (2005, p. 69-71); Leathers and Raines (2007)

<sup>14</sup> As an example, 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.



real danger that the providers will become unaccountable and inefficient” (2012, p. 795). The middle ground entertains disparate and underdefined positions.

The current article will now present the case that, first, an additional tension exists in the article which has received little scholarship; second, significant textual and historical evidence can resolve the now multiple tensions.

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

In the “Conclusion of the Chapter,” 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 publicly-minded third party could “have occasion” for the lower ranks to have education (West, 1994). Is charity a feasible solution and what are the broader implications? The historical record is rich on this matter and suggests answers.

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, “voluntary contribution” was a common term with an institutional meaning. It was a voluntary source of funding for public or social projects, and it worked through three channels—local government, church, and private organization. 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 projects were frequently in aid of the poor.<sup>15</sup> In the church, voluntary

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<sup>15</sup> 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.

contributions complemented obligatory tithing. The voluntary contributions supported the church's charitable endeavors (including schooling), while the obligatory part maintained the church.<sup>16</sup> Finally, voluntary contributions were the primary funding source for private charitable 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 18<sup>th</sup> century. "Voluntary contributions" was a prominent fixture in civic and social life and, regardless of which of these three institutions it worked through, it would have unambiguously conveyed the idea of voluntary efforts and charity.

There is some evidence that Smith succeeded in conveying his interest in charity to his audience. In 1785 Reverend Samuel Parr reasserted his faith in the charity model against a proposal by ethicist John Brown for a government model. 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, rendering many peculiarities of the text 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).<sup>17</sup> Although this passage serves as primary evidence of his interest in government provision and control, it should be clear that three

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<sup>16</sup> (WN V.i.g.1); Lawson (1703, p. 177); Forbes (1705, p. 45); Besse (1726, p. 275); Rushworth (1701, v2, p. 123).

<sup>17</sup> The peculiarity is noted but not explained by Berry (1997), Cropsey (2001), Hyard (2007).

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.

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, the public, to mean government provider of education (Eden 1797, V.1, p. 428). Without additional textual support, assenting to either interpretation would require a leap of faith.

Such additional textual support exists, but setting it in historical context, it does not well substantiate seeing “the public” as a proxy for government. The frequently cited textual support for government 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 would direct his reader to discount charity? Smith does not make a strong case against it. Rather 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."<sup>18</sup> 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 provide some historical context on 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.<sup>19</sup> 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 was a prominent social phenomenon. 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). Philanthropists throughout Britain brought attention to charity schools with parades, sermons, and published tracts. And the middle class embraced charity schools as their own social project (Lavington 1746, p 15-16; Goldsmith 1759, p. 91; Lawson & Silver 1973, p. 181).

Charity's 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],

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<sup>18</sup> Additionally one, the other, or both also need to improve their curriculum.

<sup>19</sup> Jones (1938), Hans (1951), Jewell (1998), Lawson and Silver (1973), Vaughn and Archer (1971), Green (2013).

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 national charity” (Porteus 1776, p. 19). There was a common impression that, as long as wealth increased, voluntary efforts would also increase and resolve whatever deficiencies the system experienced (e.g., *Edinburgh Magazine* 1849, p. 573). There was, thus, a seemingly justified faith in the charity system, and the fact that it was “not so universal” would unlikely to have been read as a major flaw requiring a change in course.

In contrast, it is hard to see where faith in the Scottish parish system would derive from. 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 deficient in many ways. 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 restrictive wage *ceiling*. 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.<sup>20</sup> 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 (Smout 1696, p. 461; *General Assembly*, Vol 7., p. 14).

Such was the state of education in Britain as Smith wrote. I argue it constitutes a common knowledge of the time which has been lost to a certain romanticism in later periods of scholarship and political discourse. This history 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 Smith made a poor effort or had a different intention.

It may be prudent to actually seek that different intention given that Smith is a writer who, as most recognize, is "systematic and rigorous as a matter of principle" (Minowitz 1993, p. 6). What intention, then, could make sense of his somewhat agnostic and simplistic summary of alternatives? I propose the possibility that his intention is simply to identify *the solution set* available to the public. There is no adjudication because he didn't intend to offer it 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. The public may act either through the state toward a parish system or through social leaders toward a charity one.

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<sup>20</sup> *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 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.

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. 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 what to do 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 signal 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).

Is it credible that Smith’s portrayal of such a dire social situation can be coupled with such political restraint? The answer is a resounding yes. Such a coupling was indicative of the times, and his readers would have likely seen such restraint as natural. 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.<sup>21</sup> 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

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<sup>21</sup> 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).



render the poor “serviceable” (William 1713, p. 14), and make them “a Treasure and a Blessing” to the nation (Hayter 1753, p. 7).<sup>22</sup>

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.<sup>23</sup> 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, such grounds would have been a shockingly inadequate.

The most direct textual challenge to this argument 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

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<sup>22</sup> William Hendley’s lengthy response to Mandeville covers a lot of territory (1725).

<sup>23</sup> Granted that they may have each had self-interested reasons to wish to stay with the charity model.

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, even if Smith at first leaves the options open, he concludes by embracing direct government action.

Some caution here is again necessary. While these passages 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 times 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 (and 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.<sup>24</sup> If anything it would only imply an interest in certain or reliable solutions.

Historical use of the phrase “attention of government” makes the point quite clearly that one should be careful in inferring specific intention from it. The phrase “attention of government” was frequently used in the decade when Smith wrote WN (Drylie 2016, p. 173-174). Its popularity corresponded with the energetic constitutional efforts to define the role of the state. The examples of its use reveal that actions we associate with 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

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<sup>24</sup> Reacting to one as if it is the other is a common heuristic substitution fallacy. The easily accessible intensity of feeling substitutes for the indiscernible scope of policy (Kahneman 2011, pp. 98-104).

(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).

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 believing that what he wrote would have conveyed support for government provision. First, in regard to education, the most prominent facilitating action for government in public discourse at the time was the distribution of “special corporation rights” (West 1990, p.88). General corporation rights did not exist yet, and the case by case basis of providing special rights had proven problematic. Stipulations and capriciousness in the provision regularly jeopardized the success of charity schools, including those from the SPCK.<sup>25</sup> Against these practical historical realities, Smith’s recommendation of “facilitating” actions would have likely implied to his readers actions such as getting out of the

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<sup>25</sup> 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).

way, or even as Parr wrote, offering greater support, tolerance and “protection” to the current schools (1828 [1785], p. 185).

Second, his audience at the time would have likely required a more direct assertion of government provision. The political, academic and philosophical leaders were hostile to the poor having education at all, let alone one provided by government. The hostility held some resemblance to that toward the Poor Laws which had “given rise to an administration which, by every competent observer, was deemed ruinous and demoralizing” (Mackey 1898, p. 39; see Fielding 1751, p.18; 55; 71; Howlett, 1788; Malcom 1805, p. 154; Eden 1797, Vol. 1, p. 481). But more so, the hostility stemmed from a specific line of thinking traced to John Locke (1689;1692) and Bernard Mandeville (1723). In short, the worry was that education of the poor was dangerous to society.<sup>26</sup> 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).<sup>27</sup> The hostility also bore itself out in the pedagogical silence about the poor in some two hundred philosophical treatises 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 19<sup>th</sup> century.

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<sup>26</sup> Regarding hostility, see also (Gay, 1998, p 190); Hampton (1968, p. 110); Viner (1991, p. 283).

<sup>27</sup> 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.

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 at all (Sturt 1967, p. 41; Green 2016, p. 204-236; Dean 1991). Against this historical reality, it would have been shocking, and would have required a clearer assertion, if Smith has intended to recommend widespread education for the lowest ranks *as well as* government taxation, provision, regulation, and control. Moreover, it would have almost certainly created public debate—which the historical record does not reveal to have occurred.

The alternative interpretation I proffer is that Smith leaves the public a *solution set* of charity, private, and government arrangements to cautiously consider. The rest of the article will develop and improve upon this interpretation, but it is worth noting that there is some precedent for it. In writing of Smith's methods 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 similarly explains that Smith places policy contemplations first and foremost in "the public" sphere (1975, p. 556). Both commentators suggest that direct persuasion on policy topics may not always be Smith's objective.

Two passing interpretations of the article on education follow along similar lines. Knud Haakonssen sees some indeterminacy in Smith's recommendations. Rather than being critical of it, Haakonssen views it as a product of Smith's understanding of governance. Governance for Smith encompassed "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, sat within "a wide variety of leadership roles in local communities" (2006, p. 20). Historian William Boyd also

noted that Smith's choice of the term, "the public" was indeterminate and felt that it "leaves open the possibility of other educational authorities" (1932, p. 324).

But we should also be cautious of thinking that Smith withholds judgement or that defers entirely to the public's opinion as to mix of various civic providers. There is a philosopher's place someplace between dictate and deference. Several scholars believe Smith operated in that middle ground between the two. Charles Griswold, for example, 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 that a particular message had to be earned by the reader (Melzer, 2014).

The remainder of the article will seek to determine the likelihood that Smith held strong opinions which he communicated in rhetorically complex ways for specific effects.

#### **4. Justice: A Framework for Recognizing Smith's Guidance**

Smith uses the word "justice" in the context of schooling just once. Located in the previously discussed paragraph in the "Conclusion of the Chapter," it suggests that a subtext of

justice exists in the article itself, and that any view he might have would be based on justice.

However, Smith identifies three such senses of justice in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (TMS VII.ii.I.10). If justice is to be informative, determining which, if any, apply is important.

Three senses of justice exist for Smith. The first two are commonly used to understand his views of government across an array of roles, including education. 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, his tax maxims (WN V.ii.b), lend to cautiously entertaining the idea that some taxation may avoid violations of commutative justice. For example, taxation in support of schooling *might* be just if those who are taxed are remunerated in kind (or made whole) through benefits accruing to society. The second form of justice 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). A passage in TMS lends to the idea that Smith might cautiously endorse a government’s compulsion of such charity or generosity (TMS II.ii.8).

Problematic for employing these two justices to explain Smith’s policy on education is the additional 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). This is important language. Smith seems view the issue of education through the lens of propriety and to be adjudicating through shades or degrees. Such language suggests he is employing a sense of justice different than either of those above.

Most clearly, Smith would appear to not be applying *commutative justice*. Commutative justice 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 shades or degrees. Moreover, for Smith, taxes violate commutative justice (Haakonssen 1989, p. 96), and thus if he were to accept a role for government, it would be *in spite of* the violation. He would be accepting it through appealing to some other evaluative sense of goodness, which must yet be identified.

It is very likely that *distributive justice* is ill-suited to the situation as well. 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 interpreting 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 were to cautiously contemplate compulsion, his contemplation would again require a different sense of goodness.

The third sense of justice can shed light on his language choice, and can provide the likely other source of goodness. It is a justice which Daniel Klein terms *estimative justice* (2017) or which Craig Smith calls “Platonic” justice (2014, p. 258).<sup>28</sup> Estimative justice is the proper estimation or appreciation of objects (TMS VII.ii.I.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,

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<sup>28</sup> The difference in terms can be attributed to the fact Smith does not name it but describes it as Plato’s view of the act of “esteeming.”



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.

A new interpretation of Smith's article thus follows: Smith has put the solution set in the position of being *the objects* under estimation. The appeal of this interpretation is that it renders the peculiarities in the conclusion of the chapter more fully intelligible. The first peculiarity is the fact that justice is mentioned in the first sentence and propriety in the second creating a sense of incongruence or even sloppiness. But the twin sentences mirror the working of estimative justice. Namely, government subsidization may be *justifiable*, and yet not be the most *proper* solution. The second peculiarity is that Smith uses a double negative, "without injustice," to describe the government solution. For Smith, there is a sober middle ground in the act of esteeming propriety in a way there isn't for commutative justice. An act, judged in terms of propriety, can fall between the extremes of praiseworthiness and blameworthiness (II.ii.1.6). Accordingly, government schooling may avoid injustice (blameworthiness) but not achieve a high, or virtuous, degree of 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. A novel policy of government involvement in schooling cannot rest on simple rationalizations. Smith may thus esteem the idea of educational access *to some degree*, but he 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. He may instead retain faith in creative alternatives. And he may wish his readers to do the same.

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 rest of the article builds the case that Smith arrives at a moral certainty of the superiority of private education, and that there are textual markings of this certainty even as he entertains roles for government.

The article should be seen as containing four sections with clear demarcations and purposes. Each is of nearly equal length, providing a certain balance and tempo to the article. The first three sections (thus three-quarters) of the article preceding Smith's question of what to do about the poor fall into the form of a scientific analysis.<sup>29</sup> Identifying each section, its unique characteristics and its relationship to the rest is the key to understanding the magnitude of his project and the confidence of his observations. The article starts with a hypothesis about human nature and an observation of contemporary schools (paragraphs 1-17). It continues with what should be seen as an 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, and it ends with a conclusion (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.

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<sup>29</sup> 7,934/10,724 words = 74%

### 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.<sup>30</sup> 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.<sup>31</sup> 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).

If government is a possible means, it is natural then to have to inquire as to the merit of existing means. 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 indication that Smith will be evaluating the options along criteria of practical ends. Second, “Have they contributed to encourage the diligence, and to improve the abilities of the

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<sup>30</sup> 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.

<sup>31</sup> 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).

teachers?” Here he is concerned with the means toward those ends: the effort and the quality of instruction. These concerns would have put him in lock-step with the discourse on education of the time, which showed a strong preoccupation with effort and 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 types of practical ends: personal utility and social utility. Smith concludes: “It should not seem very difficult to give at least a probable answer.” The sentence is 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,<sup>32</sup> 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 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 and regardless of the level of education. In contrast to an interpretation made by numerous scholars, including by Albion Small who misquotes Smith to maintain it, the purpose is not to identify the failings of *private* endowments in an effort to justify *public* endowments (1907).

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<sup>32</sup> See Jones (1939, p. 180) for the history.

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. He then makes no distinction for teachers: “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.<sup>33</sup>

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

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<sup>33</sup> 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

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.

Other schools fall into four categories. First are schools for Greek or Latin.<sup>34</sup> These schools are run “principally, in some cases almost entirely, upon the fees or honoraries of his scholars” (17). Here is an example of the private school at work. 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 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

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<sup>34</sup> 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).

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 he 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 learn 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. Private schools will *generally or usually* be superior.

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

Paragraph 18 would be the logical spot for Smith to summarize his position. Smith instead provides a short paragraph challenging himself. In its brevity the paragraph demarcates the text, and provides an impetus requiring another quarter of commentary by Smith. 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 which will take the remainder of the journey with him on this topic. The appearance of an interlocutor sets up a scenario whereby the text assumes a structure which Vivienne Brown elsewhere calls “dialogic.” She proposes that Smith allows alternative voices to challenge him so as to enable him to mature his argument.<sup>35</sup> 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).<sup>36</sup> In the current situation, Smith responds by launching into a specific criticism of universities and then communicating directly to his interlocutor in a rhetorically charged way. He rebukes the man of system.

Smith’s response 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 “ecclesiastical tribunal” (19-20). They were, in other words, not subject to the market forces. The 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). The argument is also didactically causal in nature. Namely, he concludes that a useful curriculum occurs “with *more or less*

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<sup>35</sup> She is specifically examining TMS in her analysis.

<sup>36</sup> 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).”

diligence, according as the constitution of each particular university happens to render diligence *more or less* necessary to the teachers” (33, emphasis added).

In simple terms, the value of the lengthy account is that, as a case study, it enriches his portrayal of the poverty of endowed curricula. But the rhetoric of his summary reveals this section as an elaborate rebuke of a common sentiment. He makes four ironic points aimed at his interlocutor (34-37). 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.<sup>37</sup> The rich and elite have harmed their position through one of the means they used to try to retain it.<sup>38</sup> Third, Smith writes that the corrupt state of British endowed universities was to blame for the common practice of sending children 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 would return home “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.

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<sup>37</sup>Smith will employ a very similar demographic inversion in paragraph 47 with regard to women.

<sup>38</sup> Education for the poor was frequently shunned by the upper ranks for fear it would alter the hierarchy of society.

Smith's answer to his interlocutor has been 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 danger of them. 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.<sup>39</sup> In paragraphs 38-47 (approximately another quarter of the article) Smith again employs this common technique of argumentation. He announces his intention 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 then examines histories of four categories 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

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<sup>39</sup> 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).

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 negros of Africa," "the antient Celtes," and "the antient Scandinavians."<sup>40</sup> 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."<sup>41</sup> 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.

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

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<sup>40</sup> Another ironic inversion of ranks.

<sup>41</sup> As for gymnastics, it is more simply debunked by this fourth point alone.

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 that 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, any tendency in his time to support government 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.”<sup>42</sup> 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 in his writing. 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).

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*

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<sup>42</sup> West (online) states that Smith finds encouraging demand to be “efficiently workable.”

*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; 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 specifically 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.<sup>43</sup> In short, his voicing of some willingness to stimulate supply suggest he would do so with prudence.

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<sup>43</sup> In addition, Epicurus’s garden is private.



### 5.5. *The Error of “Men of Ingenuity”*

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

Smith disputes the historians’ interpretations as discussed above, but he 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 (45). The authorities (and those who rely on them) are not just wrong; they are wrong because of biases. They have romanticized the ancient successes as a product of design. Smith “cannot be induced” to follow such thinking (45). In Smith’s world view, these comments of the illusion of design and intention are a harsh condemnation.

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

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 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.<sup>44</sup> 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 they 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).<sup>45</sup> Priestly (1765; 1768) responded swiftly and aggressively with a three-pronged critique that seems to have won or mirrored the sentiment of the age.<sup>46</sup>

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,

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<sup>44</sup> An exception, Fletcher (1943).

<sup>45</sup> 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.

<sup>46</sup> 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).

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.<sup>47</sup> And in all cases, those tradesmen are *anonymous* agents—the nameless figures who 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.

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<sup>47</sup> 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).

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” on the subject (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 biased and 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**

At the three-quarter mark, paragraph 45 constitutes the rightful conclusion to his entire analysis. He brings numerous themes to a close, rendering it the longest paragraph in the article. Given that it has drawn little attention in the scholarship, it is worthwhile to dwell on it a moment. It is a rhetorically powerful paragraph that makes his points clear.

The overarching objective of the paragraph is to assert that common views of ancients and modern schooling are based on *misimpressions*, and that his theory produces a device to arrive at a correct impression. In regard to the ancients, it is here that he states that people “overrate” the role of government. He “cannot be induced” to follow what he knows to be an errant bias. In regard to modern examples, people might be said to *underrate* private schools. The underrating is not so much bias as it is a misinterpretation of data. The problem: the examples of private schools are not pure examples of what private schools can do. Because endowed schools exist and are subsidized, private schools must push salaries to a bare minimum in order to compete, attracting only the “lowest order of men of letters.” In this manner, endowments have “not only corrupted the diligence of publick teachers, but have rendered it

almost impossible to have any good private ones” (para. 45). Similarly, they have rendered it almost impossible to judge of the potential of private ones.

Ancient history, however, provides the counterfactual for what private schools could accomplish. He employs three rhetorical devices to make the ancient history profoundly instructive here. First, he invests in it through metaphor:

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)

The reference to auditing is, surprisingly, the only one in either WN or TMS, and its use here should be seen as capitalizing on a newer sense of the word in Smith’s time. “Auditor” no longer just held the Latin meaning of “listener” or “audience,” but also bore the technical meaning from accounting of “investigator” or “adjudicator.”<sup>48</sup> In private education, the student is not just a listener but also an empowered judge of quality and usefulness. It is a message Smith emphasized throughout the article. The teacher may achieve an “empire,” but it is clearly a commercial one, granted by the satisfied consumer. It is not authoritative and oppressive.

Smith also turns to absolutist language to characterize the ancient example. “The demand for such instruction produced, what it *always produces*, the talent for giving it; and the emulation which an unrestrained competition *never fails* to excite, appears to have brought that talent to a

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<sup>48</sup> Soll (2014) provides a noteworthy history of auditing.

very high degree of *perfection*” (45, emphases added).<sup>49</sup> The ancient example instructs him and empowers him to confidently praise the free market.

Finally, in perhaps the most subtle of his rhetorical devices, he makes a change in register in this paragraph. Namely, he employs the general language of markets. He now writes of “competition,” “trade,” “sale,” “goods,” “price,” “profit,” “demand,” and “bankruptcy.” Nowhere else in the article is there such language. Smith appears to be looking at the issue from a broader framework, from his general views of markets. Having made his conclusion, Smith is now treating education as *unexceptional*. He concludes as he begins: education is like other markets.

Paragraph 45 is confident and celebratory. There is no parsing or hedging here. His views of markets apply to education, and they would appear to do so for all forms, from youth to university. He asserts a theory, corrects impression, rejects alternatives, and he brings to bear the principle lessons of *The Wealth of Nations* upon the market of education.

He follows this conclusion with two paragraphs that also are rhetorically charged. Here, though, he is aiming his rhetoric at his interlocutor. He makes three ironic points which draw a parallel to his first set of responses to the interlocutor. 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). The interpretations of this sentence are wildly disparate in the scholarship. Taking a moment to untangle the negatives, the reader ought to be rewarded with the following underhanded sentiment: Endowments ensure we have universities which supply things we don’t

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<sup>49</sup> 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.

want. The second point Smith makes is that the aspirations and the end results do not correspond well: “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 between men and women as he had previously done 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). Again, the interpretations in the scholarship are wide-ranging. However, I propose that the sentiment here is that women, through a different treatment in society, have ironically been spared.<sup>50</sup> So his study ends.

What then to do for the poor? Paragraph 48 introduces the final section. It is a set of interrogative responses to Smith’s position. “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 questions are: No action at all? If something, 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

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<sup>50</sup> 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).



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).<sup>51</sup> The poor "cannot, in any civilized society, be so well instructed as people of 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

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<sup>51</sup> 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).

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 and 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 probation and examination 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 jurial 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 19<sup>th</sup>-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 is conducive to such thoughts (e.g., 51). But his suggested actions are marginal and practical, restrained by his knowledge that larger actions would end in dangers to the growing nation.

## 7. Interpreting the Enigma of His Final Words

Given the interpretation proffered so far, the enigma of the “Conclusion of the Chapter” is why Smith does not elevate private school and charity more confidently.

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 in this manner (1859, p. 25-30).<sup>52</sup>

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).<sup>53</sup> 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.<sup>54</sup> 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).

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<sup>52</sup> And Andrew Skinner describes Smith’s uncertainty as such (1995, p. 90-91).

<sup>53</sup> see also Shapiro (1983, Ch. 1)

<sup>54</sup> See Shapin (1991); Wood (2006) for accounts of the gentleman scholar.

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 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 tempers his findings when summarizing them. It is not incredible to think he did so at this point given that he employed such esoteric tempering elsewhere in the article. When he rebuked his interlocutor, he did so with irony which is a partial shrouding of a message for more attentive readers to enjoy. When he chastised Montesquieu, he concealed his criticism within a seeming respect. Smith has chosen a lighter touch. Perhaps it is Melzer’s “pedagogical esotericism” at work; perhaps it is Griswold’s protrepticism. The conclusion appears to place the decision of what to do into the public realm. He may want the public to steer clear of direct subsidization, but he chooses not to summarily make such a final strong pronouncement of his preferences, 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 also 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 in which 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 they 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).<sup>55</sup>

Charities were different (Salmon 1908, p. 10). They were not based on trusts from prior generations, but rather 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

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<sup>55</sup> Mill argues to not give up on endowments—there may still be administrative fixes for them.

endowments (emphasis added, 1826, p. 303-304).<sup>56</sup> 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, provide two comments on charity which suggest a similar view. First, in the “Conclusion of the Chapter” he could have compared “subscriptions” and “taxation,” but he instead chooses to employ novel language: “voluntary contributions” and “general contributions.” His choice of language juxtaposes the two options – one being socially elicited, the other governmentally coerced. It is a very likely a final commentary about how else one might naturally esteem the two. Second, in the ensuing article on religious education, he make a more overt qualitative distinction between the charity and endowments. (Moreover, he casts that distinction *back onto* the arena of education of youth.) Here one sees that Smith is clearly in line with his contemporaries in making a qualitative distinction:

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)

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<sup>56</sup> See also Parr 1828, vol 2, p.183, 187; Ker 1819, p. 110).

Smith has thus provided two important commentaries about the superiority of charity. It is credible to believe that a common knowledge among readers in his time would have ensured that neither comment would have gone unnoticed. My effort here, as throughout, has been to identify the likely common knowledge for the contemporary reader, and to recover what has been lost to time.

## **8. Conclusion**

The interpretation I propose stands in contrast to a doctrine which has been perpetuated since the Progressive Era. That Smith should be an advocate of public education relies on a series of inferences which are insensitive to the history of education and its discourses. Relinquishing them, three different aspects of the text become apparent: resemblances to discourses at the time, rigorous analysis, and complex rhetorical turns. From these, it becomes clear that the article never specifically urges government provision. Instead, it barely seems to tolerate it. Without deviation, the first three-quarters of the article builds upon a compelling reason to be critical of endowed provision and to be suspicious of any state-run emulation of it. Teachers, as all producers of a good, must be subject to the disciplining forces of the market. Quality and useful education predictably follow from such forces; useless and destructive education follow from their absence.

This interpretation leads me to reject those who espouse the most statist views. For those scholars, Smith sought “universal” public provision and prescribed compulsory attendance.<sup>57</sup> He

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<sup>57</sup> For clear assertions of universality: Arrow (1979); Rothschild (1998, p. 209); Ross (1984, p. 183); Muller (2002); Hanley (2016); Baum (1992); Göçmen (2012). For clear assertions of compulsion: Robbins (1965, p.92); Rothschild (1998, p. 210); Rasmussen (2008, p. 107); Hill (2007); Hyard (2007); Schliesser (2006); Buchan (2006, p. 113); Aspromourgos (2013); Thomas (2017).



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), “nothing less than public education” (Hill and Montag 2015, p. 75), and as a result he would have accepted “practically all the tasks that modern welfare liberals... would put under government purview” (Fleischacker 2004, p. 234). I see no merit in such views.

The interpretation also finds little commonality with most heterodox scholarship, which frequently portrays Smith as conflicted, uncertain, or only partially committed to a government solution. Instead, Smith should be seen as being largely at ease with the options of private education and charity. The central tension perceived in the article is not one *within* Smith, but rather between Smith’s confident science and those sociable sentiments which would seek to do something anyway.

It is important to note, though, that this interpretation does *not* question Smith’s legacy as an important reformer and advocate of the poor. He makes a compelling call to action. He extends the sphere of societal agency, and he summons reticent or hostile governments to participate *in some capacity*. As such, the article is indeed progressive. Moreover, in being the most sophisticated and comprehensive analysis of education in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, it does the important topic of education justice. However, his insights point us to institutional reform instead of government provision.

This interpretation is at odds with nearly all scholarship, but it is not without precedent. It realigns Smith with characterizations more commonly espoused by its *first* commentators. Many of them felt the criticism overawed the entirety of his article and affirmed his position in opposition to government (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). Others honed in on his appeal to charitable instincts and support for charity schools (Parr, 828 [1785]; Clark 1903, p. 230).

As a final word, the particular attention I have given to charity schools helps to restore a line of thinking in reading Smith. In Smithian scholarship, it has been correctly noted that there is a degree of “polarization around the dichotomy of purely voluntary market choices and collective-coercive group decisions.” This polarization has often 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, a rich exploration of solutions occurred. Smith’s article represents an extensive and disciplined exploration, and it reveals his appreciation of voluntary affairs. A discussion of voluntary affairs and diverse institutions arrangements is one that enriches public discourse. His article continues to invite that richer discourse today.

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