

## The Meaning of “Universal Benevolence” Matthew Arbo

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**Abstract:** *For Adam Smith, divine providence concerns itself with the happiness of humankind. History is the story of this divine providence in four epochal stages, each stage succeeding the one before by means of commercial progress. Political authority is made subject to economic force. Adam Ferguson, Smith’s contemporary, argues to the contrary. The historical development of humankind is not economically progressive, and neither is divine providence concerned with maximizing human happiness. Focus on fiscal prosperity often has the reverse effect, undermining political institutions and corrupting human character. When political authority is usurped by economic forces it yields both personal and social ruin. The Christian gospel illustrates how and why the Political must always subordinate the Economic, since the economy of Christ’s death is premised on his Sovereignty.*

In the natural religion of Adam Smith, God is the all-wise Being who oversees and directs existence according to his good pleasure. He is a God that is both transcendent and immanent; a God full of wisdom, love, and goodness. God is Creator, and his creatures are the benefactors of his abundant provisions. And yet, according to Smith, it is not for his own good pleasure that God providentially orchestrates the cosmos, but according to the good pleasure of *mankind*: Godly providence has an altogether felicitous intention. If the true end of virtue is benevolence, and the end of every act of benevolence is happiness, then the benevolent acts of God must be such that each act promotes only the maximal quantity of human happiness. But what exactly is “universal” meant to signify? Quantity of persons? A quality of care?

This essay will explore section VI.ii.3 of Adam Smith's TMS, entitled "Of Universal Benevolence", with a view to connecting Smith's

interpretation of universal benevolence with his later four-stage theory of history outlined in the *Lectures on Jurisprudence*. With this relationship clearly specified we will then turn our attention to Adam Ferguson, an intimate friend of Smith's, whose thought offers a fruitful criticism of political and economic authority within a civil society under divine providence.<sup>1</sup> The treatment will then conclude with a brief theological reflection on authentic universal benevolence and the power of the Christian gospel.

### SMITH ON UNIVERSAL BENEVOLENCE

When Adam Smith takes up the topic of "universal benevolence" in part seven (section two, chapter three) of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* he does so within an extended analysis of the character of virtue.<sup>2</sup> He has already explained the relation of virtue to both personal and corporate happiness and thereby elucidated how nature recommends persons for mutual caring. The fact that this common sentiment of care seems to possess conspicuous limits leads Smith ultimately to consider broadening virtue to include a type of "universal benevolence."<sup>3</sup> Smith recognizes an atypical limitation to the power of human benevolence and remains somewhat vexed by nature's incapacity to express the limitlessness that unites itself to the expression of love. It is precisely in light of this inability to fully describe the natural ordering of human benevolence that he turns his attention to divine providence and the gift of universal benevolence. In paragraph two of chapter three, Smith claims,

This universal benevolence, how noble and generous soever, can be the source of no solid happiness to any man who is not thoroughly

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<sup>1</sup> Adam Ferguson (1723-1816) was an ordained chaplain in the Church of Scotland and later a professor both of Natural Philosophy and Moral Philosophy at the University of Edinburgh. An excellent biography of Ferguson by Jane Fagg is available in *Correspondence of Adam Ferguson: Volume I* (London: Pickering and Chatto, 1995).

<sup>2</sup> Smith has adopted this notion of 'universal benevolence' from Hutcheson but with substantial modifications.

<sup>3</sup> Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Raphael, D. D. and Macfie, A. L., eds. (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1982). See especially VI.ii.intro-6.

convinced that all the inhabitants of the universe, the meanest as well as the greatest, are under the immediate care and protection of that great, benevolent, and all-wise Being, who directs all the movements of nature; and who is determined, by his own unalterable perfections, to maintain in it, at all times, the greatest possible quantity of happiness.<sup>4</sup>

Suspensions of a looming determinism aside, it should be noted that this directive control is deliberately linked to the maintenance of “the greatest possible quantity of happiness.” Capturing sovereignty in these terms may immediately call to mind Leibniz’ “best of all possible worlds” theodicy, and his argument that for an all-good, all-knowing, and all-powerful God to do anything other than to create the best of all possible worlds would be a logical impossibility.<sup>5</sup> But this conceptual similarity between Smith and Leibniz is at best a *partial* inheritance.<sup>6</sup> Notice, Leibniz is concerned with what God must *create*, not what he is obliged to *sustain*. God’s inability to create anything other than the best of all possible worlds is a theodicy intended to undermine arguments from the problem of evil and thus show forth the brilliance of the Creator God. Smith, on the other hand, seems to think that the logic underlying this line of argumentation can be directly applied to Divine sovereignty: not only is this all-wise Being coordinating the manifold movements of nature, but he does so in order to orchestrate the greatest possible quantity of happiness. Thus, Smith’s method employs the logic of Leibniz’ BPW theodicy and expands the purely creational account of Divine excellence to include trans-temporal determinations of all circumstances whatsoever. Perhaps Leibniz’ argument allows this type of expansion. Nevertheless, to say that God directly brings about in every

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<sup>4</sup> *TMS*, IV.ii.3.2 (p.235)

<sup>5</sup> Gottfried Leibniz, *Discourse on Metaphysics*, George Montgomery, trans. (Chicago: Open Court, 1902). For an excellent engagement with some of the incongruities in Leibniz’ argument see Robert Adams, “Must God Create the Best?” *Philosophical Review*, 81 (1972) 317-32.

<sup>6</sup> Whether Smith has in mind Leibniz’ version of this ‘perfectionism’ is somewhat irrelevant, since this was a common enough view of accounting for the existence of evil to have marshaled popular support.

moment the best of all possible worlds is markedly dissimilar to God's continually introducing the maximal quantity of happiness.

Is God obliged to yield the best possible world, or simply the happiest possible world? Or must the best possible world in fact *be* the happiest possible world? Smith is clearly of the persuasion that the best possible world is *identical* to the happiest possible world, and not only must God order the earthly realm to maximize the quantity of human happiness, but the character of this all-wise Being is such that he cannot do otherwise.<sup>7</sup> This maximal happiness, lest one forget, is a *necessary* consequence of universal benevolence and thus for all that has been revealed about the eternal love of God, this love must always include his efforts to awe and overwhelm his creatures with happiness. In part I, Smith claims that the “chief part of human happiness arises from the consciousness of being beloved” and that, “he is happiest who advances more gradually to greatness, [and] whom the public destines to every step of his preferment long before he arrives at it...”<sup>8</sup> Thus, for God to maximize the quantity of happiness for every individual implies that he is obliged to provide individuals with what is publicly recognized as ‘great’, barring that this movement toward greatness does not in any way offend prudence.<sup>9</sup> God’s expression of universal benevolence is the action whereby mankind is given the means for happiness that come with social ascendancy. To illustrate this ascension, let us turn our attention to Smith’s four-stage theory of history and reconstruct his understanding of the *historical* meaning of universal benevolence.

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<sup>7</sup> *TMS*, VI.ii.3.2, “all-wise being who directs all the movements of nature and who is determined by his own unalterable perfections...” Somewhat ironically, Smith’s section on universal benevolence is immediately followed by an extended treatment of Self-command.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, I.ii.5 (p.41)

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, VI.i.5 (p.213) Smith seems to believe that prudence is largely immune to the corrupting powers of riches and status, perhaps even more so than one’s immunity to the bizarrely honourable envy that motivated the acquisitions to begin with.

*SMITH'S FOUR-STAGE THEORY OF HISTORY*<sup>10</sup>

Smith represents the four historical epochs of mankind in economic terms, dividing history into the (i) Age of Hunters; (ii) Age of Shepherds; (iii) Age of Agriculture; and (iv) Age of Commerce.<sup>11</sup> Smith's genealogy of political history follows an intriguing, though conjectural plot. Each body politic must have an origin, and if a politic is to successfully accommodate increased social complexity, then it must proportionately "progress" to meet the pressures and challenges of social circumstance. In the succession of ages—from Hunter, to Shepherd, to Agriculture, to Commerce—man both forms, and is formed by, his immediate experience. In the age of Hunters pre-political man is a purely self-interested savage without property or government. But with the rapid acquisition and accumulation of flocks and herds, the age of Shepherds overtakes the age of Hunters by establishing the appropriate conditions for sociality and enterprise. As exceptional individuals come to possess greater quantities of property, the causes of dominance become visibly distinguishable, with capacity (physical or intellectual) and possession (flocks and herds) signalling their own commanding expressions of authority. Dominant property possessors eventually come to acquire actual lands, however, and to protect and preserve these lands laws are applied to enforce public acknowledgment of property rights. The age of Agriculture is thus initiated by demands for private land ownership, and since mankind is bound to the land for sustenance the structures of authority become newly hierarchical. Where in the age of Hunter and Shepherd the Chieftain

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<sup>10</sup> Adam Smith, *Lectures on Jurisprudence*, Meek, R. L., Raphael, D. D., and Stein, P. G., eds. (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1982). Scottish fascination with socio-political progress is extensive to say the least. See, for example, John Millar's, *An Historical View of the English Government, From the Settlement of the Saxons in Britain to the Revolution in 1688*, volumes i-iv, eds. Mark Salber Philips and Dale R. Smith (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2006); Henry Home, Lord Kames, *Sketches of the History of Man*, three volumes, ed. James A. Harris (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2007); and David Hume's, *The History of England from the Invasion of Julius Caesar to the Revolution in 1688*, 6 vols. (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund 1983). For a non-progressive view see, Adam Ferguson's *The History of the Progress and Termination of the Roman Republic* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005).

<sup>11</sup> For a lucid overview of Smith's theory see James Alvey, *Adam Smith: Optimist or Pessimist?* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2003), 81-88.

required consent of the populace to execute his interests; within the age of agriculture the order of dependency has been reversed and the peasant is now entirely dependent upon the nobleman for survival. Such conditions are soon strained, however, by the increased number of persons taking up novel varieties of work and who subsequently come to possess their own plots of productive property. But society's increased demand for private property quickly demands recognition on the part of the Sovereign, who is thus required to consecrate a kind of parliament to represent the interests of the citizens authoritatively. Once established, the optimal conditions for public enterprise are given life by the superior political institutions of the commercial age.

This retelling of the story of the history of civil society is full of interest and insight, and provided here is an unfortunately brief summary of how Smith views society's advancement "from Savage to Scotsman." Yet as enlightening as these observations might be in themselves, what is of greatest importance to the present inquiry is how Smith's interpretation of political history illuminates his doctrine of universal benevolence. There are, I believe, three correlating implications that emerge from Smith's four-stage theory of history. First, political order becomes subject to forces of economic circumstance. In each stage of his account, Smith indicates how the acquisition and usage of property contributes to significant changes in economic practices that thereby confer order and authority to political institutions. In this sense, then, the economic *precedes* the political, and the formation of political institutions becomes entirely reliant upon the manipulative powers of economic interest. The answer to the question of why we have *this* particular type of political establishment as opposed to another has only to be traced back to what economic circumstance or power gave rise to that particular establishment. The superior political system is that system which offers the greatest contribution to economic flourishing, and this means that political institutions must always be susceptible to the whims of either actual or supposed monetary advancements.

The second implication for Smith's interpretation, the essentially progressive nature of human history, means that every age is altogether superior to the one it left behind and that new possibilities shaped by new advancements contribute only to the improvement of mankind. This

implicitly superior progress is a contributor to the deeper logic that underlies the third implication for Smith's interpretation of history, that the economic realm is the primary arena for achieving social 'greatness' and Divinely sanctioned happiness. With status and rank come the standards by which greatness is measured.<sup>12</sup> By procuring for oneself publicly recognized ascendancy, one has obtained the maximal happiness bestowed by God's universal benevolence. The movement of history as conceived by Smith reflects a Providence that rewards with economic prosperity those who diligently pursue it; so long, that is, as the pursuit does not transgress the principles of virtue.<sup>13</sup> Thus, in the way of summary, we may locate two distinct conceptual subordinations. First, Smith's subjection of political authority to economic force; and second, the subjection of economic structure to the pursuit of divinely sanctioned human happiness. Economic forces help to create and sustain the political order, and yet economic force has itself been equally formed by the profound pressures of human longing for greatness and recognition.<sup>14</sup> Above all, however, the advancement of mankind through the practical refinement of commerce is a *divinely sanctioned* enterprise, and thus to act for the betterment of oneself and one's situation within the economic realm is to have submitted to God in humble obedience.

### *FERGUSON'S ESSAY ON THE HISTORY OF CIVIL SOCIETY*<sup>15</sup>

Having sketched a general picture of Smith's natural theology; with its reversal of political to economic authority and doctrine of universal benevolence requiring God to coordinate states of affairs to render the maximal quantity of human happiness, we may now turn our attention to

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<sup>12</sup> Smith's appreciation for wealth and rank are especially clear in parts I, II, and III of *TMS*.

<sup>13</sup> Such principles of virtue, as shall be critically addressed by Adam Ferguson, are (again) presumably unsusceptible to the potential corruptions brought on by increased rank and wealth.

<sup>14</sup> Smith's argument for the justification of envy is notably absent in *TMS*. Presumably, since everyone in civil society naturally envies the person of 'higher' station, the naturalness of this longing must mean that it cannot itself be wrong or problematic.

<sup>15</sup> Adam Ferguson, *An Essay on the History of Civil Society*, Fania Oz-Salzberger, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995). Hereafter, given as *Essay*.

Adam Ferguson's *Essay on the History of Civil Society*. Despite having been an intimate friend of Adam Smith, a camaraderie warmly appreciated by both parties, this did not prevent Ferguson from expressing boldly his adamant disagreement.<sup>16</sup> There are, I believe, four critical arguments against Smith's account of "stage historicism" and in what follows, I shall outline Ferguson's counter-arguments addressing (i) particularity, (ii) the character of progress, (iii) conflicts and negations, and (iv) theological providence; after which I will then take up Ferguson's response to the question of political versus economic authority, and close with a reflection on the authentic meaning of universal benevolence.

Rather than make sweeping generalizations about the great disparity between history's epochs, it is Ferguson's contention that attention to how events have transpired should be of an appropriately *particular* nature. Each member of civil society possesses a particular nature and occupies a particular place and generally speaking, should be characterized more by uniqueness than by uniformity. Indeed, society *requires* a great variety of intellectual and physical capacities in order to sustain the holistic needs of its people. Although one can make great efforts to engage in rigorous disciplines of mind and muscle, many kinds and degrees of genius are simply impossible for some to acquire. What one shall do and how well one shall do it is often a matter of circumstantial forces outside one's direct control. Societies upon the coastline or river, for instance, differ considerably from societies placed within fields or deserts, each occupying itself with the materials specific to its *placement*. Smith's humanistic characterization of social progress, which attempts to explain how human ingenuity discovers the means to increase wealth, is according to Ferguson, disproportionate and misconstrued. Supposed economic 'stages' cannot be reduced to evolutions in human innovation or industry. Industry must be *applied*, and to apply some particular skill implies there is a place in which to perform, and an object to perform it upon. Civil society is formed as much by the place it inhabits as a place is formed by the society inhabiting it; the formative roles are essentially reciprocating. And thus we are

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<sup>16</sup> For a vivid picture of the true nature of the Smith-Ferguson friendship, see *Correspondence of Adam Ferguson*, 2 vols., Merolle, Vincenzo, ed. (London: Pickering and Chatto, 1995), and *Correspondence of Adam Smith*, Mossner, E. C. and Ross, I. S., eds. (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1987).



confronted with a central concept in Ferguson's understanding of political and moral identity, namely, that the true "patriot" is he who gives allegiance to the *patria*—the "land of his fathers"—committing to the institutions and establishments inherited through tradition and custom. Authentic patriotism is embodied by service to the people to whom one has been given.<sup>17</sup>

Among the more essential of Ferguson's aims in the *Essay* is to identify the actual character of progress. He does not deny the reality of societies exhibiting *degrees* of progress, as these are clearly evinced by the diverse achievements of modern science; rather, his claim is meant to nuance the very concept of progress. For Smith, social developments were thought to be recognized as (naturally) more advanced and superior, whereas Ferguson wishes to bring the quality of progress before the scrutiny of public discrimination. Smith had attempted to characterize progress as though inherently good; to be pursued for its own sake and to its own end. But Ferguson wishes to ask, 'what makes any progress good?' If scientific advancement is undeniable, and scientific advancement is not intrinsically good, then the qualities of advancement must be brought to service the good in some publicly recognizable way. Progress must affirm, not confuse the common good. With one of his many teasing comments Ferguson states that in the age of Greek and Romans, the "individual was nothing and the public everything," while in the modern age, the "individual is everything and the public nothing."<sup>18</sup> This species of progress is highlighted by its implicitly *moral* constitution; to put oneself in the service of the public is morally superior to rendering service purely to oneself, and this is particularly true when one understands that service to the public is itself a *condition* to proper self-service. Acceptable 'progress' is thus morally acceptable prior to its being considered a legitimate improvement.

Individual persons can be said to progress, of course, but only in specific ways and to discernible limits. At societal levels this is what Ferguson calls "civilizational" progress, and civilizational progress is a movement always susceptible to negation. This is Ferguson's third

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<sup>17</sup> A strikingly similar claim is made by Hannah Arendt in *On Revolution* (Middlesex: Penguin, 1965).

<sup>18</sup> *Essay*, 57

argument against progressivism. Civil society is ever-vulnerable to a series of critical polarities—virtue and vice, unity and disunity, progress and degradation. Mankind not only improves, but also lapses and degenerates. Ferguson’s is the ancient claim that progresses can be achieved only by encountering potential negations, resistance and conflict becoming the means for actualizing progress. This is a progress strictly in the moral sense only, as Ferguson explains: “appearances have given rise to a general apprehension that the progress of societies to what we call the heights of national greatness is not more natural than their return to weakness and obscurity is necessary and unavoidable.”<sup>19</sup> The commercial age which Smith so adamantly wished to establish as the climax of history, in the end, cannot possibly satisfy as history’s ultimate pinnacle. For if the commercial age is regarded as the age of greater convenience and reduced adversity, this can only mean the inevitable end of convenience and reduced adversity. The “polished” age, which is meant to signify the period of reduced or eliminated physical exertion, actually opens the way for societal ruination as it seeks to eliminate the field of possible conflicts. “When human nature appears in the utmost state of corruption, it has actually begun to reform,” suggests Ferguson, and the same holds true for broader society. As articulated by Smith, the concept of societal progress is ultimately self-defeating: Progress is but the consequence of *negations*.<sup>20</sup>

The three arguments presented thus far find their final conclusions in Ferguson’s fourth argument—the argument for divine Providence. In section two of part three, fittingly entitled “The History of Subordination,” Ferguson offers his most concise account of unintended consequences:

Like the winds that come we know not whence and blow whithersoever they list, the forms of society are derived from an obscure and distant origin; they arise long before the date of philosophy, from the instincts, not the speculations of men...Every step and ever movement of the multitude, even in what are termed enlightened ages, are made with equal blindness to the future; and

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<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 198

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 264

nations stumble upon establishments which are indeed the result of human action, but *not* the execution of any human design.<sup>21</sup>

Political establishments and institutions cannot fall within the jurisdiction of nature because nature is a creature, and therefore incapable of holding ultimate sovereignty. Historical causality must eventually transcend the mere study of human nature and fall exclusively within the realm of divine Providence; mankind being neither the maker of its own fortune nor the securer of its own advancement. The glory or depravity of social circumstance is exclusively derived from the judgment of the Ruler of heaven and earth, under whose authority civil society is given shape to action. In Ferguson's view, God reigns with an incorruptible character, and as such does not and cannot command that which brings (or may bring) about the ruin of his children, in this case the pursuit of personal and social progress. Why, in other words, would God provide maximal happiness when the objects of maximal happiness—wealth and ascendancy—are individually and socially destructive?

The broader intention to Ferguson's *Essay*, to which the concept of progress is but a single element, seeks to clarify the nature of the economic and political relationship. It has become apparent that Ferguson is rather disparaging of Smith's account of socio-economic progress by pure human innovation.<sup>22</sup> One's natural capacities and place of inhabitancy contribute far too much to social development for mere innovation to be the supreme cause of human progress. Ferguson does not deny Smith's claim that the market exerts various sorts of force upon the nature and function of political institutions, as the marketplace is an institution sanctioned by the political authority itself, and as such must disclose itself in specific ways. But this is, I would argue, the *only* claim that Ferguson is prepared to allow, because the next step in Smith's argument, as seen above, is that not only will political authority *accommodate* economic advances, but will

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 119

<sup>22</sup> "And it may be safely assumed as a maxim under every establishment whatever, that the present order, if tolerable, is to be *preferred to innovation*, of which, even in very small matters, it may be difficult, and is often above the reach of human wisdom, to foresee all the consequences or effects." From *Principles of Moral and Political Science*, vol. II (London: Garland Publishing, 1978), 498.

*reform* its basic constitution so that as advances are made in methods of monetary acquisition, the political authority can then protect all the relevant advances and promote these practical methodologies within society. The function of government in Adam Ferguson's view, on the other hand, is certainly *not* a matter of protecting and promoting economic innovations, for on his account the contributors to authentic political strength and degradation lie very much outside the influence of innovation.

For Ferguson, there are only two possible sources of societal strength or degradation; either by its collective moral *character*, or the pressures of its *circumstance*. The character of a society and the circumstances with which it is confronted determine, to whatever proportion, the extent to which that society is good or evil, virtuous or vicious, ordered or disordered. These principles of social unity and disunity disclose themselves as both internal (in the form of character) and external (in the form of circumstance and action) in nature. Societies landlocked within central Sahara will inevitably suffer greater economic setbacks than inhabitants of either the port city of Istanbul, or the mineral rich provinces of northern Brazil; each develops its own unique methods for negotiating their respective placements. Yet this does *not* imply that any one society can be judged as superior in character to another simply because superiorly placed, for it is often the case that circumstances often thought to be most nurturing of civic virtue are, in truth, the most destructive to that end.

In parts 4-7 of his *Essay*, Ferguson addresses problems of privileging aspirations of economic advancement. In a cautious and orderly movement he leads his reader to the conclusion that the market can initiate and coordinate complete societal *ruination* just as easily, if not easier, than it can multiply rewards. For Ferguson, the trouble for market participants is that the true and useful objects of pursuit, subsistence and care, are too readily confused and the faculties of judgment misdirected. Although one may not initially enter the market with aspirations of affluence and rank, it is in the character of the market to draw attention to itself by enhancing and fostering commitments to the idol of wealth and luxury. Thus when wealth and luxury are acquired, particularly when by a popular number, the unacceptable result is one of political relaxation and extensive political *inaction*. Enhanced luxury directly discourages political action and once

this movement has commenced, and wealth becomes a central object of individual pursuits, the natural consequence will be the loosening and potential severance of social cohesion. The love of wealth is, then, the beginning of corruption.

As personal corruption spreads throughout the ranks of civil society and the bonds of union are loosened or severed, the next politico-economic moment is one of disorder. As the garden quickly becomes overgrown without the attention of its gardener, so too does the *polis* become disordered in the absence of civilian political action: Political establishments and institutions are vulnerable to being undermined by a great variety of enemies, whether by foreign invader, internal faction, or even widespread public sloth. It is not simply market forces that are given shape by human exertion, but human exertion too is reciprocally shaped by market forces. In every exchange there is giving and receiving *with* the market, just as there is giving and receiving *within* the market. To the extent that this market exists to create or increase wealth, society will be proportionately corrupted; and with that corruption members will accordingly seek to manipulate market super-structures to engineer profitable outcomes. As society itself becomes gradually preoccupied with generating increased wealth, one may then locate the moment when social corruption transitions from mere internal vulnerability into outright political slavery. As Ferguson eloquently puts it:

...when fortune, instead of being considered as the instrument of a vigorous spirit, becomes the idol of a covetous or a profuse, of a rapacious or a timorous mind; the foundation on which freedom was built may serve to support a *tyranny*, and what in one age raised the pretensions and fostered the confidence of the subject, may, in another, incline him to servility, and furnish the price to be paid for his prostitutions.<sup>23</sup>

With the advent of political slavery, the economic usurpation of political authority is imperceptibly thrust upon civil society and the functions of societal control are compromised. As the market has been steadily

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<sup>23</sup> *Essay*, 248

nourished and cultivated without much regard to its temperament or powers, it has subsequently utilized this inattention and ignorance to gain still greater jurisdiction over political institutions. The problem, then, is not merely that political institutions have been (or are being) undermined by the uncontrolled market, but that *the Market now commands destructive power within or above political authority*. As a result, though Smith recognized the severe power that economic forces exert upon political institutions, he nevertheless failed to see that by placing the establishment of political institutions under the jurisdiction of economic interest he introduced a compromised authorial structure and the potential disintegration of civil society as such. Ferguson's disapproval of this argument is rather straightforward: to subordinate political to economic sovereignty not only runs the risk of *undermining* political institutions, but additionally provides the potential for complete economic domination; a domination that is itself (on Smith's account) entirely dominated by the maximal happiness offered in universal benevolence. But what is to restrain the market renegade in its revolutions? How is the undermining of authority precipitated? Ferguson explains that in a politically compromised state of affairs, "where power is already established, where the strong are unwilling to suffer restraint, or the weak unable to find a protection, the defects of law are marks of the *most perfect corruption*."<sup>24</sup> As a military man, Ferguson nearly always has in mind a rival nation's army poised dangerously offshore ready to attack at the opportune moment of weakness. And so when he makes the argument that "the admiration of riches leads to despotical government," he is in principle absolutely right,<sup>25</sup> the logic of this assertion can be directly applied to his disapproval of economic usurpation: *A market without restraint readily becomes the tyrant*.

There are numerous contemporary illustrations of this gradual usurpation of political power, but here I will mention briefly only three, distinctly American occurrences which may have analogues within the broader international community. First, the Medicare Prescription Drug, Improvement, and Modernization Act of 2003, an act that has recently

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<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 230 (emphasis mine)

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 248. Even despite his having envisioned a uniquely militant despot (e.g., Bonaparte).

been estimated to cost anywhere between 720 billion and 1.2 trillion over the next ten years, is a 400 million dollar drug benefit for senior and underprivileged citizens.<sup>26</sup> The bill provides minor medical services and prescription medication for the underprivileged and elderly by increasing tax revenues and channelling a larger proportion of monies into entitlements benefits such as social security and Medicaid. Far from having their capitalizing practices restrained, with the passage of the Medicare Modernization Act pharmaceutical corporations were given privileged governmental sanction and future monetary support without profit conditionals or suggestions of a ‘just price.’ The second example concerns the 2008 Comprehensive American Energy Security and Consumer Protection Act. Had this bill come before congress at the climax of the crude oil crisis as was originally intended it would have permitted offshore drilling in state and federal waters for the first time in American history. The principle rationale for this measure, we were told, was to ensure American energy independence and strengthen national security. While one may reasonably doubt whether such a proposal can in fact make a nation more autonomous, this particular piece of legislation illustrates another troublesome reality within the present economic situation; that when fiscal interests are at stake, political compromises can be made in immediate appeasement.<sup>27</sup> Lastly, as a third and obvious example, are the recent national bailouts of the investment finance and banking sector. Although these measures have once again temporarily placed finance oversight in the hands of political bureaus and agencies, no long-term regulations (or laws) have yet to be placed upon corporations themselves to limit further risky profiteering and shadow investing, and nor for that matter have any chief executives or board trustees faced criminal or civil charges for the catastrophic consequences caused by risky profiteering. What these examples illustrate, I think, is an increased

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<sup>26</sup> <http://www.cms.hhs.gov/MMAUpdate/downloads/PL108-173summary.pdf>

<sup>27</sup> In saying that one “might reasonably doubt” whether off-shore drilling provides the United States greater autonomy, I means simply to flag the assumption that increasing domestic oil production causally establishes national autonomy. The argument is missing a crucial premise linking increased oil production with increased autonomy. With predictions of “peak oil” on the horizon, is off-shore drilling *really* a means for breaking free from international energy dependency?

capacity for economic forces to seize upon political controls, each bill instituting political compromises without any apparent form of restraint or consequence befalling those deserving parties. Healthcare, energy, and banking are examples of markets that have recently manipulated political controls in order to usurp specifically desired political powers through the institutions of law.

In supposed popular governments such as exist in representative democracies, political power is not—contrary to popular opinion—held by the collection of individuals comprising the majority, but by those who possess the greatest monetary resources; who, in order to command political control must first be market beneficiaries *prior* to becoming political magistrates. The problem that arises with this arrangement is no simple conflict-of-interest between economic gains and public service; but rather a profound blindness to the forces that give rise to political power as such. When it is finally recognized that possession of wealth gives rise to political power the undermining of political institutions by the Market is finally complete, for when wealth becomes the primary means to political power the object of societal corruption has itself become institutionalized.

### CONCLUSION

In re-establishing the link between universal benevolence and the Good, and re-appropriating sovereignty in the political and economic relationship, Ferguson has made several implicitly *theological* moves.<sup>28</sup> Smith's economic history not only loses sight of salvation history, but may in fact altogether depart from it. The true end of universal benevolence is not located in the provision of maximal happiness but in the *person of Jesus Christ*, whose life, death, and resurrection signify the lifecycle of human personality under God—action, negation and transformation. The true meaning of universal benevolence is participation in the life of God. Christ's death upon the cross, a death that can only be considered as the supreme height of universal benevolence is not a moment of euphoric,

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<sup>28</sup> Admittedly, Ferguson is never greatly explicit about his theological commitments. But if taken on the whole, incorporating the totality of his writings, especially the *Essay*, *Principles*, and *Correspondence* one can reconstruct a theoretical system that centralizes the truths of Christian faith..



artificial happiness, but of profound destitution and forsakenness: “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” And we have only to read in the sentences that follow of the earth-shaking sadness expressed by the Father at the death of his Son.<sup>29</sup> The chief moment of universal benevolence was not at all happy: it was *good*. “Good” signifies what God is and how God acts; and this being the description given to creation at its founding—“good”—so is it the principal end of all mankind. One who has been created good must do good. Happiness and goodness will remain perhaps the most uncomfortable of bedfellows.

If the crucifixion of Christ reflects the goodness, as opposed to happiness, of universal benevolence then the resurrection of Christ reflects the true order of sovereignty in relation to the political and economic realms. The heavenly Father did not allow his Son to perish in exchange for the iniquity of mankind without first making it clear that his Son possessed the kind of authority that made the death properly economic. Thus, the death of Christ can be said to be atoning because had he not been triumphantly raised then the ultimate exchange of death for life could never have been completed. Only by defeating death and becoming the Ruler of heaven and earth could the *potential* salvation available in his death—the redemption of the created order—become *actual*. In this way political authority can never be subject to all or every economic interest or practice, as this would be to confuse or conceal the basic ontology of authority as vested in Christ’s rule. “Let the nations be *glad*,” sings the Psalmist, “for God will judge the peoples righteously and govern the nations on earth.”<sup>30</sup>

Smith’s contention has been that happiness comes with personal betterment and social ascendancy. Yet Christ’s marvellous ascension was not at all an effect of pursuing ascendancy, but of allowing himself to be brought low, humiliated, and utterly negated. Indeed, his authentic ascension was a direct consequence of his death and resurrection, and came

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<sup>29</sup> “Then, behold, the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom; and the earth quaked, and the rocks were split...” (Matthew 27:51)

<sup>30</sup> Psalm 67:4

at a time when he was socially *unrecognized*, without respect or rank.<sup>31</sup> The example set by Christ designates humility—not status or envy—as the path to true ascension, for “exaltation does not come from the east or from the west, but from God.”<sup>32</sup> In his death, resurrection, and ascension the meaning of universal benevolence is authentically revealed in that “while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”<sup>33</sup>

The meaning of Universal Benevolence, therefore, has nothing at all to do with the provision of maximal happiness, whether self-manufactured or conferred through public esteem, but is comprehended only in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Our responsibility is to *think* about our economic lives in light of that Gospel, to allow its essential generosity, contentment, and transformation to pervade our lives. Jesus was well-aware of how objects of this world lead us to compromise our allegiance to him, for he stated plainly on more than one occasion that “whoever of you does not renounce all that he has and follow me cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14:33). Possessions impinge upon our discipleship, burdening it to the point of impossibility. The apprenticeship is difficult, but also sublime. Service to him must remain the enduring nexus of one’s economic pursuits. The totalizing force of the marketplace has shrouded much of our economic lives in a veil of ambiguity and leaves us with the perplexing reality of not knowing where our monies often go or to what our work is ultimately devoted; it is a construct with many layers of complicity. Part of our task should then be to identify how, exactly, we are complicit in that “system,” correcting injustices, giving generously, and working *as unto the Lord*. Ferguson has shown that the moral problems in modern economy are endemic, compromising the integrity of the law and leading public conscience astray. Our task begins with identifying our complicity—how we participate or contribute to the continued dissolution of moral goods in the marketplace—and to act upon that knowledge. One must resign oneself to doing what is right even if it means losing profit or status. At some stage this will almost certainly mean acting benevolently. When this

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<sup>31</sup> The gospel accounts, of course, indicate his appearance to about five-hundred, and yet also indicate that even when making an appearance to his followers, he was still largely unrecognized.

<sup>32</sup> Psalm 75

<sup>33</sup> Romans 5:8

happens we will have begun to envision Christ's example of Universal Benevolence—seeing our lives as a means to other's sustenance.

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