

As If: Clueless About the Invisible Hand

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Abstract

This paper examines the causes and effects of the routine error of inserting the words “as if” into Adam Smith’s comments about the invisible hand, rendering his observation that “led by an invisible hand to promote an end which was no part of [our] intention” into the very different assertion that we are led “as if by an invisible hand.” Through a consideration of Smith’s grammar and style and, most importantly, Smith’s comments on rhetorical figures in his *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*, this paper demonstrates the ways in which this common error betrays Smith’s strong opinions about linguistic precision and imports a potentially biased reading of Smith into discussions of these key moments in his texts.

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I. Introduction

Adam Smith, father of modern economics, is probably best known for his observation that each individual, in pursuing their own good, is led as if by an invisible hand to increase the welfare of others.

The problem is that Adam Smith never said that.

What Smith ([1776] 1981) does say, in *The Wealth of Nations*, is: “By preferring the support of domestic to that of foreign industry, [an individual] intends only his own security; and by directing that industry in such a manner as its produce may be of the greatest value, he intends only his own gain; and he is in this, as in many other cases, led by an invisible hand to promote an end which was no part of his intention” (IV.ii.9).

And what he does say, in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, is: “[The rich] are led by an invisible hand to make nearly the same distribution of the necessaries of life, which would have been made, had the earth been divided into equal portions among all its inhabitants, and thus without intending it, without knowing it, advance the interest of the society, and afford means to the multiplication of the species” (Smith [1759] 1982, IV.I.10).

In neither case¹ does Smith use the words “as if.”

This paper demonstrates the prevalence of the as-if error, argues that Smith, who began his career as a professor of rhetoric, was fully intentional in the choice of his original, specific phrasing, and considers the potential problems for Smith scholarship that arise when Smith’s carefully chosen language is consistently and silently written over.

II. The Error

Two aspects of the as-if error in quoting Adam Smith on the invisible hand are particularly worthy of note. The first is that the error is remarkably consistent. In nearly every case in which the mistake is made, the words “as if” are inserted into Smith’s sentence, most often just after the verb “led.” Changes in the formula are rare. Occasionally, a writer will insert “as though” rather than “as if,” and sometimes the insertion comes before the verb rather than after. But in general, the error is remarkable in its uniformity.

That uniformity is probably attributable to the prevalence of Samuelson’s 1948 textbook, *Economics*, which “dominated college classrooms for two generations” and from which most popular textbooks “borrow heavily” in matters of tone and pedagogy (Skousen 1997).² In it, Samuelson (1948) writes of Smith:

Even Adam Smith, the canny Scot whose monumental book, “The Wealth of Nations” (1776), represents the beginning of modern economics or political economy—even he was so thrilled by the recognition of an order in the economic system that he proclaimed the mystical principle of the “invisible hand”: that each individual in pursuing his own selfish good was led, *as if by an invisible hand*, to achieve the best good of all, so that any interference with free competition by government was almost certain to be injurious. This unguarded conclusion has done almost as much harm as good in the past century and a half, especially since too often it is all that

¹ There is a third invisible-hand reference in Smith’s “History of Astronomy,” but as it is not affected by the error that forms the subject of the paper, I note it here merely for completeness: “Fire burns, and water refreshes; heavy bodies descend, and lighter substances fly upwards, by the necessity of their own nature; nor was the invisible hand of Jupiter ever apprehended to be employed in those matters” (III.2). See Smith, *Essays on Philosophical Subjects* (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 1982).

² I owe Ross Emmett from the Center for the Study of Economic Liberty at Arizona State University thanks for the reference to Samuelson.

some of our leading citizens remember, 30 years later, of their college course in economics. (p. 36, emphasis mine)

Note that Samuelson, summarizing Smith's discussion of the invisible hand in *The Wealth of Nations*, inserts an "as if." Samuelson argues that the "unguarded conclusion" drawn from too firm a faith in good outcomes arising from the actions of the invisible hand is dangerous, particularly since "too often it is all that some of our leading citizens remember." I am more concerned that Samuelson's "as if" may be all that some remember of Smith!

For example, the Digital History website, which "was designed and developed to support the teaching of American History in K-12 schools and colleges and is supported by the College of Education at the University of Houston" annotates an excerpt from Smith's *Wealth of Nations* with some comments on his thoughts about international trade.³ The authors then proceed to observe that "Smith argued that the natural workings of the free market would result in social progress, 'as if by an invisible hand.'" Digital History redoubles Samuelson's error by inserting "as if" inside quotation marks, making it appear that it is Smith's original phrasing.

The Foundation for Economic Education, in an article celebrating the bicentennial of the publication of *The Wealth of Nations*, misquotes Smith as well, commenting that "when these moral and legal requirements are met, then the people will be led into a system of social cooperation under the division of labor 'as if by an invisible hand.'"⁴

Investopedia, in an article titled "What Is the Invisible Hand in Capitalism?," presents an impressively scattershot misquotation of the entire invisible-hand passage from *The Wealth of Nations*, including an inserted "as if":

"every individual endeavors to employ his capital so that its produce may be of the greatest value. He generally neither intends to promote the public interest, nor knows how much he is promoting it . . . he is led in this as if by an invisible hand to promote an end that was no part of his intention. By pursuing his own interest he frequently promotes that of society more effectually than when he really intends to promote it."

³ S. Mintz and S. McNeil, "Adam Smith Criticizes the British Colonial System," DigitalHistory.uh.edu.

⁴ Edmund A. Opitz, "Adam Smith and the Invisible Hand," FEE.org.

But the “as if” does not just appear in direct misquotes. Sometimes it is appended as a lead-in to an accurate quoting of Smith’s words. Ilya Somin (2015) does this in his book *The Grasping Hand: Kelo v. City of New London and the Limits of Eminent Domain*, writing that “in *The Wealth of Nations*, Adam Smith famously argued that private property and decentralized market transactions generate prosperity as if ‘by an invisible hand’” (p. 1).

Most often though, the “as if” crops up in Samuelsonesque paraphrases of Smith’s thinking.

David Sloan Wilson (2013) from the Evolution Institute pleads for a “return to the original texts of Adam Smith.” Then in the following paragraph, he inserts an “as if” into his paraphrase of the invisible-hand passage. While Tim Worstall (2012) from *Forbes* magazine and Jonathan Schlefer (2012) from *The Harvard Business Review* disagree with one another about nearly every aspect of Smith’s invisible hand, they are in complete agreement over the insertion of “as if” before every single instance of it in their pieces. PBS’s Commanding Heights website, which is designed to promote better economic understanding, similarly summarizes Smith with an added “as if.”⁵ Penguin Press even inserts the “as if” into its catalog descriptions of its edition of *The Wealth of Nations*, and its Great Ideas series book on the invisible hand.⁶

The “as if” is everywhere.⁷ Most often it appears, I suspect, because writers are remembering Samuelson’s discussion of Smith, rather than consulting Smith himself. And every time the “as if”

⁵ *Microsoft Encarta Encyclopedia*, “Adam Smith.”

⁶ Penguin Random House, “The Invisible Hand”; Penguin Random House, “The Wealth of Nations by Adam Smith.”

⁷ In “I, Pencil: The Movie,” the voiceover states, “as if led by an invisible hand to promote an end which was no part of the intention.” See I, Pencil, “I, Pencil: The Movie,” YouTube video, November 14, 2012. An AdamSmithWorks video immediately corrects itself after the error. See AdamSmithWorks, “An Animal That Trades: Part 1, The Invisible Hand,” YouTube video, April 13, 2019. In a Johan Norberg video (at 19:32), you can hear a Milton Friedman voiceover from *Free to Choose*: “His key idea was that self interest could produce an orderly society benefitting everybody. It was as though there were an invisible hand.” See izzitEDU, “Free Trade,” YouTube video, August 19, 2015. In the same video, see Johan Norberg at 15:40: “Adam Smith would say that it was as if they were led by an invisible hand, when they rolled out this technology.” The Washington Center for Equitable Growth (2016) gets the quote correct in the text but wrong in the title of the web page “Must-Read: Adam Smith (1776): ‘As if by an Invisible Hand . . .’” See also Jack R. Weinstein, “Smith, Adam,” *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*; Libertarianism.org, “The Other Adam Smith, Part 1,” September 24, 2013; Young (2012); Wladawsky-Berger (2019); Cato Institute (2015).

appears, it increases the likelihood that it will appear again. We have heard it so often that surely it must be right.

Although there is a certain amount of fun to be had in collecting occurrences of “as if,” and even more in insisting that those who use “as if” check Smith’s original text to see what he actually said, rather than what their memories dictate, a mere catalog of misquotes and paraphrases is of no particular scholarly interest or importance. But the inserted “as if” is more than just a repeated slip. It is a betrayal of some of Smith’s most deeply held beliefs about language, and it is an interpretive gloss on Smith’s thinking that enters the text without warning. Thus, it is an error that stands in grave need of correction.

III. The Rhetoric

It is worth taking Smith’s use of language seriously in this matter because Smith himself took language seriously. His first job was as a lecturer in rhetoric and belles lettres. Although the full texts of these early lectures did not survive, the detailed lecture notes taken by students who attended them did. Those notes are strong indications of some of Smith’s particular preoccupations when it came to the correct use of language. One of these preoccupations is a marked dislike of rhetorical figures.

In the second lecture in his *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* Smith (1985) criticizes Shaftesbury for a writing style that relies too heavily on ornamentation: “It is plain this author had it greatly in view to go out of the common road in his writing and to dignify his stile by never using common phrases or even names for things, and we see hardly any expression in his works but what would appear absurd in common conversation” (2, i.14). Shaftesbury’s style is so focused on ornamentation and originality that it sacrifices coherence and even risks absurdity.

And it is not just coherence that is lost through overly ornamented language. Smith (1985) is concerned that too much attention to rhetorical figures can distract writers from their primary responsibility—communicating with their audience:

In these [figurative expressions] as we mentioned they tell us all the beauties of language, all that is noble, grand, and sublime, all that is passionate, tender and moving is to be found. But the case is far otherwise. When the sentiment of the speaker is expressed in a neat, clear, plain and clever manner, and the passion or affection he is possessed of and intends *by sympathy* to

communicate to his hearer, is plainly and cleverly hit off, then and then only the expression has all the force and beauty that language can give it. It matters not the least whether the figures of speech are introduced or not. . . . the figures of speech contribute or can contribute towards it only so far as they happen to be the just and naturall forms of Expressing that Sentiment. They neither add to nor take from the beauty of the expression. When they are more proper than the common forms of speaking then they are to be used but not otherwise. They have no intrinsick worth of their own. (6.1.v. 56, emphasis in original)

Smith values language that displays neatness, plainness, clarity, and cleverness. Language with these qualities allows for communication of the author's ideas and feelings and is best able to inspire sympathy in a reader. The presence of rhetorical ornaments is entirely secondary. While most teachers of rhetoric focus on these figures to the exclusion of everything else, Smith argues that such figures have no "intrinsick worth" and should be used only when they happen to be "just and natural."

Because, for Smith, language's primary purpose is to be an instrument of communication and inspirer of sympathy, and only secondarily an exemplar of beauty, Smith (1985) strongly cautions his students to avoid the temptation to use overly ornamented language: "What are generally called ornaments or flowers in language, as allegoricall, metaphoricall, and such like expressions are very apt to make ones stile dark and perplexed. Studying much to vary the expression leads one also frequently in a dungeon of metaphysical obscurity" (2, i.14). Smith's little-noted dry humor is neatly evidenced here as he warns students about the dangers of rhetorical figures and then finishes his discussion with one. But in addition to the charm of his little professorial joke, Smith has given us reason to pay attention when he does use figures of speech.

Given his distaste for them, and particularly for the way they clutter one's style rather than clarifying one's content, it seems reasonable to assert that when Smith does use allegorical or metaphorical language, as he does above, he does so with great care, consideration, and intention. This assertion is all the more reasonable with regard to *The Wealth of Nations* and *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, both of which Smith revised extensively after publication. Smith is neither a quick nor a casual writer. Readers should be confident that phrases like "led by an invisible hand" that survive multiple revisions

and editions of a work have been carefully considered and reconsidered by the author.

This matters because when “as if” is added to “led by an invisible hand,” it changes the rhetorical figure from a metaphor to something else. To say “we are led by an invisible hand” is to follow carefully Smith’s (1985) own rules for metaphor:

In every metaphor it is evident there must be an allusion betwixt one object and an other. Now as our objects are of two classes, intellectual and corporeal, the one of which we perceive by our mind only and the other by our bodily senses; it follows that metaphors may be of four different kinds. 1st when the Idea we borrow’d is taken from one corporeal object and applyed to another intellectual object, or 2nd from one intellectual object to an other corporeal . . . Now it is evident that none of these metaphors can have any beauty unless it be so adapted that it gives the due strength of expression to the object to be described and at the same time does this in a more striking and interesting manner. (6, i.65–66)

Smith is making an allusion between something corporeal (a hand) and something intellectual (the mystery that makes markets function). Whatever else those two things are like, they are like one another.

When “as if” is inserted into the image, however, the image changes. The first edition of Fowler’s (2009) *Modern English Usage* begins to clarify precisely how in its entry for *as if, as though*: “These should invariably be followed by a past conditional and not by a present form” (p. 32). A past conditional tense implies doubt, uncertainty, or a counterfactual statement as in “I felt as if I had been hit by a truck,” which is rightly followed by an unstated “But I had not been hit by a truck.” Thus, inserting “as if” into Smith’s statement that we are “led by an invisible hand” is to reengineer his point thusly: “We are led (as if) by an invisible hand. But we are not led by one.” The two words transform Smith’s statement into a counterfactual.⁸

⁸ Nancy Vander Veer (in a Facebook message to the author) usefully points out that the Latin for “as if” is *quasi* and that when it is followed by the subjunctive, the statement is a counterfactual. This may help cement *as if*’s mood of doubt for modern readers. Those familiar with the movies *Bill and Ted’s Excellent Adventure* (1989) and *Clueless* (1995) will also be aware of the use of the expression “as if” as a scornful, negative response to a question.

The grammatical problem is made all the more challenging for modern readers of Smith because subjunctives and conditionals have nearly disappeared from English usage and because—even if they were not disappearing—the past tense and past subjunctive tense of the verb “to lead” are the same: “led.” The Gramming website, for example, recommends that readers, when faced with a sentence that uses “as if,” remember that “clauses that start with as if / as though describe an unreal or improbable situation if they are followed by an unreal tense (the past subjunctive or the past perfect subjunctive). Otherwise, they express that the statement is true.”⁹ While this test is not inaccurate, it is also not helpful when the past tense and past subjunctive tense are the same.

It may seem excessive to give so much weight to the alteration in tone and meaning that can result from the addition of two small words. But as Hans Vaihinger (2009) has argued in his book *The Philosophy of “As If”*, small words—particles—are often crucial for conveying meaning: “The connections of sentences through particles are the real logical joints by means of which the individual members are held together. A whole chain of thought is often compressed into a particle, and a logical analysis of a given chain must therefore direct particular attention to the connecting particles” (p. 91). The gears inside a watch are much smaller than its face, but without the gears, the face can tell us nothing important.

Vaihinger (2009), as his title suggests, gives particular weight to “as if”:

What logical function, or what type and modification of the general form of a judgment is expressed by the linguistic formula “as if” (as though)? What turn of thought is suggested and given expression to by this phrase? . . . First we have—this lies in the “as”—quite clearly an equating of two terms, a comparison actually made or demanded. . . . But to this primary thought another secondary one is added, which is expressed by the conditional phrase. The form of this conditional statement affirms that the condition is an unreal or impossible one . . . The case is posited but, at the same time, its impossibility is frankly stated. This impossible case is, however, in a conditional sentence of this sort, assumed or posited for the moment as possible or real. (pp. 258–59)

⁹ Gramming.com, “As if/as Though.”

For Vaihinger, “as if” is almost a form of *praeteritio*, letting the author suggest a possibility while, at the same time, dismissing it as an impossibility.

What may be most useful is to consider the way that Smith uses the as-if construction in other places in his works. Smith uses “as if” rarely. The phrase appears fourteen times in *The Wealth of Nations* and eighteen times in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (see appendix). In all but one case, “as if” is used as part of a counterfactual. For example, in *The Wealth of Nations* Smith ([1776] 1981) writes, “Taxes upon the necessaries of life have nearly the same effect upon the circumstances of the people as a poor soil and a bad climate. Provisions are thereby rendered dearer, in the same manner *as if* it required extraordinary labour and expense to raise them” (IV.ii.35, emphasis mine). In *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* he observes that “a wife, in the same manner, may sometimes not feel that tender regard for her husband which is suitable to the relation that subsists between them. If she has been virtuously educated, however, she will endeavour to act *as if* she felt it” (III.5.1, emphasis mine). In these and all but one other instance of “as if” in Smith’s major works, the as-if statement is clearly counterfactual. Provisions are as expensive as if they required extraordinary labor, but they do not. A virtuous wife will behave as if she loves her husband, even though she does not.

Even Smith’s single use of “as if” in a non-counterfactual statement is not entirely straightforward. He writes, “The clergy of every established church constitute a great incorporation. They can act in concert, and pursue their interest upon one plan, and with one spirit as much *as if* they were under the direction of one man; and they are frequently, too, under such direction” (Smith [1776] 1981, V.i.g.17, emphasis mine). Smith’s added phrase “and they are frequently, too, under such direction” undermines the pure counterfactual of the earlier part of the sentence. I suspect he means to leave room here for Catholic clergy under the direction of the pope as well as for the range of ecclesiastical polities among Protestant denominations. In any case, the statement uses “as if” to make a counterfactual, even though it then qualifies the counterfactual somewhat.

For Smith “as if” expresses, at the very least, doubt and uncertainty. As generally used in his work it suggests something that is contrary to fact. Adding “as if” to his statements about the invisible hand imports into Smith’s construction a doubtfulness and even a complete negation that is not there in Smith’s original.

IV. The Consequences

This paper resists the temptation to engage in the debate over the available contexts and meanings of the term “invisible hand” in Smith’s time in favor of pointing to a problem with the language used in contemporary discussion of Smith’s invisible hand. But those contexts and meanings exist. Smith was aware of them.¹⁰ The addition of “as if” is not just a problem because it ignores Smith’s original construction or because it fails to note his careful thinking about figurative language. It is a problem because it allows for the importation—intentional or accidental—of significant bias into our reading of Smith’s invisible hand.

The *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* provides one example. While the authors correctly quote the invisible-hand passage from *The Wealth of Nations*, their skepticism about its accuracy is evident in the analysis that follows it:

In this passage, Smith argues that “the capacity of [the rich person’s] stomach bears no proportion to the immensity of his desires, and will receive no more than that of the meanest peasant” (*TMS* IV.1.10). Thus, because the rich only select “the best” and because they can only consume so much, there ought to be enough resources for everyone in the world, *as if* an invisible hand has divided the earth equally amongst all its inhabitants.

As an economic argument, this might have been more convincing in Smith’s time, before refrigeration, the industrial revolution, modern banking practices, and mass accumulation of capital. (Weinstein 2021, emphasis mine)

Scholarly debate about the correctness of Smith’s arguments about markets should be encouraged, of course, and the authors of this entry in the encyclopedia are free to disagree with Smith and others as much as they like. Leaving aside the content of their critique entirely, it remains important to note that as the critique begins, the “as if” slides, unremarked, into their text.

Jonathan Schlefer’s (2012) *Harvard Business Review* article, bluntly titled “There Is No Invisible Hand,” similarly begins a critique of what he sees as Smith’s arguments for market equilibrium by stating, “After more than a century trying to prove the opposite, economic

¹⁰ For some extended discussions about eighteenth-century context and meanings for the expression “invisible hand” see Sheehan and Wahrman (2015); Rothschild (1994); and Schliesser (2017, chap. 10).

theorists investigating the matter finally concluded in the 1970s that there is no reason to believe markets are led, *as if* by an invisible hand, to an optimal equilibrium—or any equilibrium at all” (emphasis mine). Leaving aside, again, the content of the critique, the “as if” has been inserted as an author encourages readers to view Smith’s arguments with skepticism.

No matter how strongly one may disagree with Smith’s arguments or his modern-day proponents, it does not seem quite fair for authors to insert doubt into Smith’s arguments and then to claim that the arguments are dubious.

More important, and harder to detect, is the way in which that as-if error disrupts the discussion of Adam Smith and religion. This is a particularly hotly contested topic in Smith studies, as it is possible to construct any number of plausible theologies for Smith—from devout Christian to atheist—and coming to a reading of Smith’s invisible hand is an important part of nearly all such arguments.¹¹ To whom does the invisible hand belong? Does it belong to God? To Providence, which is mentioned in the sentence that follows the invisible-hand reference in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*? Does the absence of a specific referent for the invisible hand mean that Smith is silently opening up the possibility of a godless creation?

Had Smith written that humans are led “as if by an invisible hand” the critics who would like to present him as a confirmed unbeliever like his friend David Hume or as a forerunner of empirical, scientific economics would have a fairly solid case.¹² As it is, however, Smith’s religious commitments remain unclear. Whether intentionally or inadvertently, when critics and their readers allow the “as if” to slip without comment into discussions of the invisible hand, they accept without question or analysis the doubt that these two small words bring into the text and they attribute to Smith a level of explicit skepticism that is not evident in this passage. That the words “as if” pass unremarked so often means that those who wish to read Smith as an “unbeliever” are able to claim unwarranted

¹¹ For a thorough review of the importance of the invisible hand in debates about Smith and religion, see Oslington (2012).

¹² Jerry Bowyer (2011) recounts one such conversation in a recorded interview with Don Luskin about Ayn Rand, atheism, and economics. Luskin, making an argument for Smith as an atheist, inserts the “as if” into the invisible-hand passage from *The Wealth of Nations*, and Bowyer counters with a correct quotation and a reference to the use of “Providence” in the passage from *Theory of Moral Sentiments*.

certainty for their side, and those who wish to read Smith as a “believer” often cede argumentative ground they need not cede.

Warren Samuels’s *Erasing the Invisible Hand: Essays on an Elusive and Misused Concept in Economics* wrestles with the ambiguity that the as-if error imports into Smith’s already ambiguous uses of the invisible hand. He notes and disapproves of the “common error” of inserting “as if” into Smith’s discussion of the invisible hand. At the same time, he reads a great deal of doubt in Smith’s original passage: “One of the more striking aspects of Adam Smith’s uses of the invisible hand is that Smith himself anticipated the ambiguity and inconclusiveness of the notion of an invisible hand. . . . Smith made mankind’s coping with an invisible hand that is ambiguous and inconclusive a feature of a striking theme, one in which a belief is offered in the absence of a truth, a process that introduces absolutist formulation that sets minds at rest” (Samuels, Johnson, and Perry 2011, p. xvi).

For Samuels, the invisible hand is a convenient fiction that Smith created to soothe humans who require something imaginably concrete to trust in when systems are too complex to comprehend. He later suggests that for Smith, the invisible hand was something of a black box process. We can see the inputs and the outputs, but we cannot access the route by which the former transforms into the latter. As a result, “there is no explanation, only an assertion, and it runs to only a few lines. It is likely, possibly very likely, that at best he had only an incoherent vision or understanding when he used the term in his *Moral Sentiments* and *Wealth of Nations*” (Samuels, Johnson, and Perry 2011, p. 8).

For Samuels the ambiguity of the invisible hand—even without an inserted “as if”—is a problem. It is a problem because it encourages a multiplicity of possible interpretations, which Samuels sees as adding up to much less than the sum of their parts: “When the invisible hand is given some four dozen identities, the term is, for most, if not all, practically and theoretical purposes, empty” (Samuels, Johnson, and Perry 2011, p. 135). As a result Samuels concludes that it is a waste of time and effort and a distraction from the serious business of economics to spend time trying to understand the precise meaning of “invisible hand” for Smith.

He may be right. If one wants merely to make a case for the importance of free markets there are better tools available than Smith’s invisible hand. Certainly one can easily share his frustration with the challenges of exploring the research on language and

metaphor to which one is inevitably led by any exploration of the invisible hand: “The literature on metaphor is not a solution; it is an aggravation” (Samuels, Johnson, and Perry 2011, p. 157).

But it is a mistake to take that aggravation and ambiguity as justification for dismissing Smith’s use of the invisible hand and to claim that “precisely because the term ‘invisible hand’ likely corresponds to nothing in reality, it contributes nothing to knowledge” (Samuels, Johnson, and Perry 2011, p. 146). Economists from Hayek (1945) on have pointed to the importance of tacit knowledge as a vital way of knowing and understanding “which by its nature cannot enter into statistics.” Don Lavoie (2016) puts it even more explicitly: “In the relevant sense of the term, the data do not exist. . . . Much of the knowledge practically necessary for economic production cannot be articulated” (pp. 56, 59). It is not necessary to be a poet or a painter to understand that there are enormously important ways of knowing that cannot be reduced to clearly articulated declarative statements. Foucault’s (2008) discussion of the “unavoidable text” of the invisible-hand passage in his 1979 lectures, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, similarly reads it as an articulation of the inarticulable:

For there to be certainty of collective benefit, for it to be certain that the greatest good is attained for the greatest number of people, not only is it possible, but it is absolutely necessary that each actor be blind with regard to this totality. Everyone must be uncertain with regard to the collective outcome if this positive collective outcome is really to be expected. Being in the dark and the blindness of all the economic agents are absolutely necessary. The collective good must not be an objective. It must not be an objective because it cannot be calculated, at least, not within an economic strategy. Here we are at the heart of a principle of invisibility.

Samuels’s rejection of tacit knowledge is accompanied by a wholesale dismissal of metaphor. He notes, “I suspect that the reason why economists do not go further in pursuing the metaphoric character of the invisible hand is that there is nothing there” (Samuels, Johnson, and Perry 2011, p. 157) and says of figurative language in general that it does not “constitute a contribution to knowledge” (p. 143n5). Though such an assessment may, at first glance, appear to align with Smith’s own skepticism about figurative language, it does not. Smith rejects inaccurate, overly ornamented,

and careless use of figurative language. He does not reject the idea that, properly used, it can have power and importance. That he is often skeptical of figurative language is not a reason for readers of Smith to follow Samuels and reject Smith's figures on those rare occasions when he uses them. It is a reason for paying fuller and more careful attention to the few figures that he does use.

Samuels is absolutely correct that "invisible hand" is ambiguous enough in Smith's original uses that we should not import additional ambiguity by importing an "as if." He is wrong, however, that the ambiguity is a reason to simply pass over the invisible hand in silence.

The invisible hand may well be Smith's attempt to express the idea of tacit knowledge long before the idea had been formulated elsewhere. The ambiguity in the passage may reflect Smith's own ambiguities and perplexities, or it may be a necessary aspect of attempting to articulate the idea that some things cannot really be articulated. It may be a way of talking about God. It may be a way of talking about how there is no God. It may be a black box process into which Smith puts all the aspects of market function that he cannot satisfactorily explain. It may, though I think it unlikely, just be a passing literary allusion.

The invisible hand may be any or none of these. But we can be certain that for Smith, the invisible hand was not an empty concept. It had content and it had import. He does not undercut the concept by negating it with an "as if" in the moment it is introduced. And we should be careful not to do so either. Smith's (1985) *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* gives high praise to writers who evidence "precision and a close adherence to a just expression" (2 i.11). It would be wise for those of us who study him to take that seriously.

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Appendix: Smith's Uses of "As If" in *Wealth of Nations* and *Theory of Moral Sentiments*

Wealth of Nations:

If a London merchant, however, can buy at Canton, for half an ounce of silver, a commodity which he can afterwards sell at London for an ounce, he gains a hundred per cent. by the bargain, just as much as if an ounce of silver was at London exactly of the same value as at Canton. (I.v.20)

It is commonly said that a sugar planter expects that the rum and the molasses should defray the whole expense of his cultivation, and that his sugar should be all clear profit. If this be true, for I pretend not to affirm it, it is as if a corn farmer expected to defray the expense of his cultivation with the chaff and the straw, and that the grain should be all clear profit. (I.xi.b.32)

A particular banker lends among his customers his own promissory notes, to the extent, we shall suppose, of a hundred thousand pounds. As those notes serve all the purposes of money, his debtors pay him the same interest as if he had lent them so much money. (II.ii.29)

He would have a stock of goods of some kind or other, which, though it might not be worth all that it cost, would always be worth something. No trace or vestige of the expense of the latter would remain, and the effects of ten or twenty years' profusion would be as completely annihilated as if they had never existed. (II.iii.38)

Whether the merchant whose capital exports the surplus produce of any society, be a native or a foreigner, is of very little importance. If he is a foreigner, the number of their productive labourers is necessarily less than if he had been a native, by one man only; and the value of their annual produce, by the profits of that one man. The sailors or carriers whom he employs, may still belong indifferently either to his country, or to their country, or to some third country, in the same manner as if he had been a native. (II.v.16)

It is not impossible, therefore, that some of the regulations of this famous act may have proceeded from national animosity. They are as wise, however, as if they had all been dictated by the most deliberate wisdom. (IV.ii.29)

Taxes upon the necessaries of life have nearly the same effect upon the circumstances of the people as a poor soil and a bad climate. Provisions are thereby rendered dearer, in the same manner as if it required extraordinary labour and expense to raise them. (IV.ii.35)

When you dam up a stream of water, as soon as the dam is full, as much water must run over the dam-head as if there was no dam at all. (IV.v.a.19)

They would neither lose nor gain, therefore, upon the whole transaction, and they would in this, as in all the foregoing cases, be exactly in the same situation as if there was no seignorage. (IV.vi.26)

A rabble of any kind could be introduced into the assemblies of the people, could drive out the real citizens, and decide upon the affairs of the republic, as if they themselves had been such. (IV.vii.c77)

But if it was for the benefit of his sovereign; if it was in order to make court to the person who appointed him, and who might prefer him, that he had committed any act of oppression; redress would, upon most occasions, be as impossible as if the sovereign had committed it himself. (V.i.b.15)

The discipline of colleges and universities is in general contrived, not for the benefit of the students, but for the interest, or, more properly speaking, for the ease of the masters. Its object is, in all cases, to maintain the authority of the master, and, whether he neglects or performs his duty, to oblige the students in all cases to behave to him as if he performed it with the greatest diligence and ability. (V.i.f.15)

The clergy of every established church constitute a great incorporation. They can act in concert, and pursue their interest upon one plan, and with one spirit as much as if they were under the direction of one man; and they are frequently, too, under such direction. (V.i.g.17)

Theory of Moral Sentiments:

He not only feels a sorrow of the same kind with that which they feel, but, as if he had derived a part of it to himself, what he feels seems to alleviate the weight of what they feel. (I.i.2.4)

If his indignation rouses at last, they heartily applaud, and sympathize with it. It enlivens their own indignation against his enemy, whom they rejoice to see him attack in turn, and are as really gratified by his revenge, provided it is not immoderate, as if the injury had been done to themselves. (I.ii.3.3)

The poor man goes out and comes in unheeded, and when in the midst of a crowd is in the same obscurity as if shut up in his own hovel. (I.iii.2.2)

But though his hands are innocent, he is conscious that his heart is equally guilty as if he had actually executed what he was so fully resolved upon. (II.iii.2.5)

For a moment we look upon them both as the authors, the one of our good, the other of our bad fortune, and regard them in some measure as if they had really brought about the events which they only give an account of. (II.iii.2.6)

When any unlucky consequences happen from such carelessness, the person who has been guilty of it, is often punished as if he had really intended those consequences. (II.iii.2.8)

And when all this fine philosophy was over, when all these humane sentiments had been once fairly expressed, he would pursue his business or his pleasure, take his repose or his diversion, with the same ease and tranquillity, as if no such accident had happened. (III.iii.4)

‘When our neighbour,’ says Epictetus, ‘loses his wife, or his son, there is nobody who is not sensible that this is a human calamity, a natural event altogether according to the ordinary course of things; but when the same thing happens to ourselves, then we cry out, as if we had suffered the most dreadful misfortune. We ought, however, to remember how we were affected when this accident happened to another, and such as we were in his case, such ought we to be in our own.’ (III.iii.11)

They are upon these occasions commonly cited as the ultimate foundations of what is just and unjust in human conduct; and this circumstance seems to have misled several very eminent authors, to draw up their systems in such a manner, as if they had supposed that the original judgments of mankind with regard to right and wrong, were formed like the decisions of a court of judicatory, by considering first the general rule, and then, secondly, whether the particular action under consideration fell properly within its comprehension. (III.iv.11)

Though his heart therefore is not warmed with any grateful affection, he will strive to act as if it was, and will endeavour to pay all those regards and attentions to his patron which the liveliest gratitude could suggest. (III.v.1)

A wife, in the same manner, may sometimes not feel that tender regard for her husband which is suitable to the relation that subsists between them. If she has been virtuously educated, however, she will endeavour to act as if she felt it. (III.v.1)

On the contrary, when we abstain from present pleasure, in order to secure greater pleasure to come, when we act as if the remote object interested us as much as that which immediately presses upon the senses. (IV.ii.8)

The spectators express the same insensibility; the sight of so horrible an object seems to make no impression upon them; they scarce look at the prisoner, except when they lend a hand to torment him. At other times they smoke tobacco, and amuse themselves with any common object, as if no such matter was going on. (V.2.9)

He cannot therefore but approve, and even applaud, that proper exertion of self-command, which enables them to act as if their present and their future situation affected them nearly in the same manner in which they affect him. (VI.i.11)

The absent son, the absent brother, is not like other ordinary sons and brothers; but an all-perfect son, an all-perfect brother; and the most romantic hopes are entertained of the happiness to be enjoyed in the friendship and conversation of such persons. When they meet, it is often with so strong a disposition to conceive that habitual sympathy which constitutes the family affection, that they are very apt to fancy they have actually conceived it, and to behave to one another as if they had. (VI.ii.1.8)

Colleagues in office, partners in trade, call one another brothers; and frequently feel towards one another as if they really were so. (VI.ii.1.15)

Even though the leaders should have preserved their own heads, as indeed they commonly do, free from this fanaticism, yet they dare not always disappoint the expectation of their followers; but are often obliged, though contrary to their principle and their conscience, to act as if they were under the common delusion. (VI.ii.2.15)

If you appear not to respect him as he respects himself, he is more offended than mortified, and feels the same indignant resentment as if he had suffered a real injury. (VI.iii.35)