

Divine Economy
The Role of Providence in Early-Modern
Economic Thought before Adam Smith

Joost Hengstmengel

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Modern Economic Thought before Adam Smith

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Erasmus University Rotterdam

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**Divine Economy
The Role of Providence in Early-Modern
Economic Thought before Adam Smith**

**Goddelycke Economie
De rol van de voorzienigheid in het vroegmoderne
economische denken voor Adam Smith**

Thesis

to obtain the degree of Doctor from the
Erasmus University Rotterdam
by command of the
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Economic Science has grown up in Christian lands and could not escape the influence of its environment. The relations between religion and economics are well worth discussing even though they are somewhat obscure.

William Cunningham, *Christianity and Economic Science* (1914)

[T]he point of view of economists has always been in a large part the point of view of the enlightened common sense of their time. The spiritual attitude of a given generation of economists is therefore in good part a special outgrowth of the ideals and preconceptions current in the world about them.

Thorstein Veblen, *The Place of Science in Modern Civilization* (1919)

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¹ At this place I would like to specifically mention Lizzy Patilaya-Ternatus, who for many years served as secretary of the Faculty of Philosophy and passed away this year at the age of 54.

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Introduction

1.1 Economic revolutions

The ages between, say, the discovery of America in 1492 and the publication of Adam Smith's *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* in 1776 witnessed a real economic landslide. Historians for good reasons try to dissuade us from dividing history into clear-cut periods and to suppose sudden breaks between them. Yet irrespective of when precisely the change was set in motion, during the early-modern period in the West traditional medieval society with its agrarian order was transformed into a market economy. Agricultural innovations such as four-field crop rotation, to give one example, turned a subsistence-based approach to farming into a market-driven one. In manufacturing an ongoing division of labour strongly increased the volumes of trade. Expanding overseas trade routes and maritime inventions like the flyboat opened up a widening global market for exotic goods. Markets for food and manufactures were no longer local and attuned to consumption but international and driven by production. The proliferation of trading companies, the widespread enclosure of common lands, the establishment of central banks, and many other developments all in their own way contributed to the breakdown of the static economic order of the Middle Ages. The 'rise of capitalism', the phrase commonly used to denote the developments just described, was nothing less than revolutionary.¹

The economic transformation in the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries went hand in hand with a new take on 'the economic'.² In pre-modern times economic affairs were counted among the lower activities of life. A sharp distinction was made between the ordinary life of production, exchange and consumption and higher activities like contemplation and asceticism. Economic activities lacked intrinsic value and were at most seen as infrastructural to the good life. Fuelled by the Renaissance and Protestant Reformation, the latter of which abolished the distinction between the sacred and the profane and placed the locus of good life within life itself, this view began to disappear. The centuries that followed saw an unprecedented 'affirmation of ordinary life', resulting among other things in a new valuation of its economic dimension. For the first time in history people began to imagine their social existence as an 'economy', i.e. a

¹ Appleby, *The Relentless Revolution*.

² This paragraph draws on Charles Taylor's *Sources of the Self*, prt. 3 'The affirmation of ordinary life' and *A Secular Age*, ch. 4.3 'The economy as objectified reality'. Cf. Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation*, ch. 5 'Manufacturing the goods life'.

mutually beneficial exchange of goods and services. Civil society too came to be viewed through the lens of this new social imaginary, first in a metaphorical sense and later, when economic prosperity was identified as its dominant end, in a literal one. Even though there was no such thing as ‘the economy’ before the late nineteenth century, the life of production, exchange and distribution was conceptualized as a sphere with its own dynamics and regularities.

The early-modern promotion of the economic is clearly reflected in its attitude towards the merchant. Since time immemorial appreciations of this profession were predominantly negative.³ Especially when driven by a desire for profit and luxury, trade was thought to be counter-natural and conducive to vice and sin. According to a long-standing tradition in Western philosophy and theology, it was better for the virtuous and pious man to stand aloof from commercial practices. Turning this view completely on its head, Renaissance writers began to stress the dignity of the trader. Caspar Barlaeus in *Mercator sapiens*, his 1632 inaugural address at the Illustrious School of Amsterdam, as a “follower of Aristotle” ventured to argue that tradesmen are very much like philosophers. In spite of what Church Fathers like Gregory, Chrysostom and Augustine had written against merchants, trade and commerce do involve virtues, help to spread knowledge and wisdom, and contribute to the welfare of man.⁴ Similar pro-mercantilistic sentiments were expressed throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.⁵ English moralizers like Joseph Addison, Richard Steele and Daniel Defoe in their periodicals exuberantly praised the merits of trade and traders. Contrary to what had always been ignorantly claimed, merchants were the most useful members of society. The *homo mercator* posed no threat to civic virtue, as the classical republican tradition suggested, but rather enhanced it.⁶

Linked to this development, trade and commerce for the first time received full political attention.⁷ Changing international (trading) relations made obsolete a style of politics limited to internal order and self-defence. Modern forms of warfare required for national security created an insatiable demand for financial and economic expansion. More than ever before the political and military survival of nations came to depend on commercial success, both domestically and internationally. The still present republican critique of mercantile activity, which portrayed it as a source of corruption for morality and patriotism, had to give way to new political theories that rather embraced it. In the seventeenth century, as David Hume saw it, trade and commerce for the first time became an “affair of state”, a matter of public interest that could not be left to individual initiative. Redefining *raison d'état* in terms of economic growth, European rulers sought

³ Viner, *Essays on the Intellectual History of Economics*, prt. 1, lecture 1 ‘Early attitudes toward trade and the merchant’.

⁴ Caspar Barlaeus, *Mercator sapiens, sive oratio de conjugendis mercaturæ et philosophiæ studiis* (1632).

⁵ Myers, *The Soul of Modern Economic Man*, pp. 13-18.

⁶ Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment*, chs. 13 and 14; Velema, ‘Homo mercator in Holland’, pp. 428-431.

⁷ This paragraph builds on Hont, *Jealousy of Trade*, esp. pp. 5-17 and ch. 2 ‘Free trade and the economic limits to national politics: neo-Machiavellian political economy reconsidered’.

new ways to overcome scarcity of material resources. To this end long-distance trade and colonization proved most reliable. The inevitable result was a breath-taking competition between the maritime nations. Thomas Hobbes's "jealousy of kings", who used to counterbalance each other with arms, was surpassed by an international "jealousy of trade", caused by a restless pursuit of economic pre-eminence.

The rise of a new 'science'

Not less indicative of a changing climate of economic opinion was the emergence of a new written economic discourse. Building on the wisdom of ancient and scholastic writers on economics, the early-modern period produced an unprecedented stream of publications on economic affairs. Literally thousands⁸ of pamphlets, tracts and treatises on such diverse subjects as bookkeeping and agriculture, money and taxation, population and poverty, trade and colonies saw the light. Typical and frequently used titles included *Oeconomia ruralis*, *Traité des monoyes*, *Political Arithmetic* and, with tens of examples in the English language alone, *Discourse of Trade*. Capitalizing on the popularity of these subjects, the market for books was enriched with mercantile handbooks like Jacques Savary's *Le parfait negociant* (1675), digests of commercial laws, sea-laws and poor laws like Gerard Malynes's *Consuetudo, Vel Lex Mercatoria* (1622), economic dictionaries like Malachy Postlethwayt's *Universal Dictionary of Trade and Commerce* (1751-5), and histories of trade, navigation and colonies like Pierre-Daniel Huet's *Histoire du commerce et de la navigation des anciens* (1716).⁹ To bring some order to the rapidly expanding genre, Joseph Massie and André Morellet began to compile the first bibliographies. The former's unpublished *Catalogue of Commercial Books* listed some 1500 works dating from 1557 to 1763, the latter's *Catalogue d'une bibliothèque d'économie politique* 740 works between 1539 and 1769.

The economic thought of the ages before Smith's *Wealth of Nations* is usually divided into a number of different currents.¹⁰ In the fourth part 'Of systems of political oeconomy', the alleged father of modern economics himself distinguished between the "mercantile system" and "agricultural system". The first, pejoratively intended term

⁸ The catalogue of "literature of economic interest" from the third quarter of the eighteenth century as provided in Higgs, *Bibliography of Economics, 1751-1775* already contains about 7,000 items. For cameralism alone, Humpert's *Bibliographie der Kameralwissenschaften* lists about 14,000 items between 1520 and 1850. With more than 19,000 items between 1450 and 1776, the Goldsmiths'-Kress Collection is even richer, yet this number includes translations, later editions, letters, remonstrances, proclamations, etcetera. For statistics on France, see Théré, 'Economic publishing and authors, 1566-1789'.

⁹ For an analysis of eighteenth-century French dictionaries, see Perrot, 'Les dictionnaires de commerce au XVIII^e siècle', in *Une histoire intellectuelle de l'économie politique*, pp. 97-125.

¹⁰ There is no need to go into detail here. The best and most comprehensive introductions to early-modern economic thought (on which I rely throughout this book) are Schumpeter, *History of Economic Analysis*; Hutchison, *Before Adam Smith*; Spiegel, *The Growth of Economic Thought*; and Béraud & Faccarello, *Nouvelle histoire de la pensée économique*, vol. 1, *Des scolastiques aux classiques*.

stood for what today is known as mercantilism.¹¹ This somewhat problematic label refers to a collective of nationalistic pamphleteers who from the sixteenth century on sought to influence economic policy, often out of self-interest and urged by pressing economic problems. Smith's second system referred to the Physiocrats, a group of French writers on economics around François Quesnay, active in the third quarter of the eighteenth century. These so-called *économistes* are best remembered for their frantic efforts to reform the French economy, chiefly by stressing the primacy of agriculture over commerce and proposing a new system of taxation. To be clear, only the Physiocrats may properly be called a school of economic thought. Unlike the mercantilists, they were inspired by one leader, worked on a joint project, and shared a well-defined set of economic ideas. As is clear from *De l'origine et des progrès d'une science nouvelle* written by one of them, the Physiocrats regarded themselves as exponents of a "new science" of society, set on foot by a "man of great genius" and part of the "emerging enlightenment".¹²

Nowadays in addition to the 'systems' identified by Smith more currents of economic thought are distinguished. Firstly, the manifestations of mercantilism in France and the German speaking countries are sometimes denoted as 'Colbertism', named after the seventeenth-century French minister of economic affairs, and 'Cameralism' (or *Polizeiwissenschaft*) respectively. Especially the latter deserves special mention, seeing that it involved much more than proposals to increase the economic power of the state. Often serving as consultant administrators of one of the many German principalities, the Cameralists were concerned with the well-being of the prince and his subjects in the broadest sense of the term and consequently wrote on a wide range of political, legal and religious issues. Secondly, there were significant writers in the scholastic and natural-law tradition.¹³ While primarily concerned with questions of a non-economic kind, the late ('Spanish') scholastics and modern natural-law philosophers in their works analysed micro-economic concepts like value, price and interest from a theological or legal point of view. By doing so they also contributed to the economic discourse of the period, not seldom by exercising a direct influence on typically economic authors. Finally, Scottish political economy should be mentioned, a label referring to the economic contributions of the Scottish Enlightenment. More than the Continental philosophers, these "men of genius" (Hume) were interested in economic affairs and approached the subject from a historical point of view.

¹¹ In the secondary literature there has been an intense discussion about the meaning and usefulness of this term. Without minimizing the significance of these questions, in this book the term is used in a loose sense to describe the nationalistic, interventionist and practice-orientated economic thought (so not the policies or a system) of the period from the end of the Middle Ages up to and including the Age of Enlightenment.

¹² [Pierre Samuel Dupont de Nemours], *De l'origine et des progrès d'une science nouvelle* (1768), p. 8: "la lumière naissante" and p. 9: "un homme du génie le plus vigoureux".

¹³ Depending on the viewpoint, the latter writers on the *ius naturae et gentium* are somewhat confusingly denoted as either natural-law philosophers, natural rights theorists or writers on international law. Henceforth I will use the first term. For a clear introduction to the group that I have in mind, see Haakonssen, 'Divine/natural law theories in ethics'.

Most of the period's economic publications can be classified under 'political economy', a term coined in France in the first quarter of the seventeenth century.¹⁴ As extension of the Greek *oikonomia* it aimed at enriching and supplying the needs of the great household called the state. Often responding to acute economic and financial problems, economic writers and pamphleteers sought to influence national economic policy or to give (unsolicited) advice to those in charge of national economic affairs. Though their contributions were frequently stimulated by practical concerns, this did not prevent writers on political economy from producing abstract and objective ideas. Under the influence of (natural) philosophy, and particularly the theories of Francis Bacon, René Descartes and Isaac Newton, the discourse gradually developed in a scientific direction.¹⁵ Economic analyses were increasingly informed by ideas and methods derived from other disciplines, but did not lose their practical and political character. Eventually absorbed by the Enlightenment movement, especially the three decades after 1750 displayed a remarkable concentration of scientific effort, resulting in an even greater number of publications and translations.¹⁶ Whereas before writers on economics mostly operated in isolation, in the course of the eighteenth century a true economic republic of letters developed.

Step by step the 'science of political economy', as it was later called, began to take shape. For one thing, the economic discourse reached a higher degree of abstraction. As evidenced by such titles as Richard Cantillon's *Essai sur la nature du commerce en général* (1755), Anne-Robert-Jacques Turgot's *Réflexions sur la formation et la distribution des riches* (1766) and James Steuart's *An Inquiry into the Principles of Political Oeconomy* (1767), to give some of the better-known examples, more and more attention was paid to general principles and universal truths. The operations of the economy showed some order that allowed for seemingly objective observations and conclusions. For another, in the eighteenth century the first scientific economic institutions emerged. Starting in the 1720s with chairs for 'Oeconomie, Policey und Cammersachen' at Halle and for 'Kameral-Ökonomie und Polizeiwissenschaft' at Frankfurt an der Oder, in the German-speaking countries the first professorships in political economy were established. Around the same time, the first official journals dealing with agriculture, trade and political economy, such as the French *Journal oéconomique* (1721-72), the German *Die Oeconomische Fama* (1729-31) and the Dutch *De koopman* (1768-76) among many others, rolled off the presses. Thinking about economics, in sum, gained in importance and popularity.

¹⁴ Perrot, 'Économie politique', in *Une histoire intellectuelle de l'économie politique*, pp. 63-95; Groenewegen, 'Political economy'.

¹⁵ Letwin, *The Origins of Scientific Economics*.

¹⁶ Winch, 'The emergence of economics as a science 1750-1870'.

1.2 Political economy and religion

In the secondary literature the rise of early-modern economics is sometimes linked to a secularization of economic thought.¹⁷ It is rightly observed that mercantilism, the first of its currents, largely developed outside the sphere of influence of Church and theology and unlike medieval economics analysed economic questions from a non-religious point of view.¹⁸ A major problem in speaking about secularization, however, is that the concept has no unequivocal meaning. Terms like ‘secular’ and ‘secularized’ are employed in all sorts of intellectual disciplines, applied to a wide range of historical phenomena, and in many cases have different connotations and associations. The question of secularization, and its relationship to modernity, has been a subject for debate for more than a century now.¹⁹ The start of the secularization debate at the turn of the twentieth century more or less coincided with the emergence of sociology, which attributed the declining influence and significance of religion in the West to the process of rationalization, urbanization and industrialization or, in short, ‘modernization’. The modernization of society and the disappearance of religion and religious doctrines and symbols were thought to be two sides of the same coin. This ‘secularization thesis’, in which secularization was at first defined in terms of a disenchantment of the world (Max Weber) or functional differentiation at the expense of religious authority (Émile Durkheim), found new proponents in the second half of the twentieth century. Hotly contested ever since, the secularization theory continues to attract academic attention.²⁰

A few years ago, the debate was refuelled by Charles Taylor’s *A Secular Age* (2007). In this book, Taylor retells the story of secularization in the modern West and seeks to clarify what the process of secularization really amounts to. He distinguishes between three senses of secularity.²¹ In the first sense the public space of society has been emptied of references to God. Religion no longer is everywhere but became a private matter that constitutes a domain of its own, independent also of political institutions.

¹⁷ For example, consider Letwin, *Origins of Scientific Economics*, p. 81: “The final outcome of the decline in the authoritativeness of theological pronouncements on economic matters was the emergence of economics as an inquiry independent of religious and ethical considerations”; Spiegel, *The Growth of Economic Thought*, p. 81: “the sixteenth century witnessed the rise of an economic literature written by lay people. Gradually learning became secularized”; Backhouse, *The Penguin History of Economics*, p. 66: “Underlying [the new economic literature] was an increasingly secular outlook ... which had profound effects on the way in which people thought about economic questions”.

¹⁸ Note that the distinction between medieval economics and mercantilism is an artificial one, merely introduced here for the sake of simplicity. As McGovern, ‘The rise of new economic attitudes’ shows, several scholars have convincingly argued that new economic sentiments and attitudes of a mercantilist and secular nature already emerged in the later Middle Ages and Renaissance.

¹⁹ For surveys, see Swatos & Christiano, ‘Secularization theory’; Bruce, *God is Dead*, ch. 1 ‘The secularization paradigm’; and Norris & Inglehart, *Sacred and Secular*, ch. 1 ‘The secularization debate’.

²⁰ Two recent examples of edited volumes are Brown & Snape, *Secularisation in the Christian World* and Latré, Van Herck & Vanheeswijck, *Radical Secularization?*.

²¹ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, pp. 1-4. For the author’s views on secularization theory, see especially pp. 423-437.

One of the factors of this development, Taylor explains, was the process of differentiation that privatized spheres of life that were once supervised by the church. Secularity in the second sense is concerned with religious belief and practice. A secularizing society witnesses a decline in religious participation and public expressions of faith. The reasons for people to abandon their faith are usually sought in the rise of other beliefs, for example in philosophy and science. The final sense, which interests Taylor most, focuses on the conditions of belief. In societies which are secular in this respect, belief in God is one option among many others. Religious belief is not an unchallenged starting point anymore but an (embattled) human possibility. What changes in the third sense of secularity is the context, or world view, in which all spiritual and moral questions are answered. According to Taylor, articulating shifts in the conditions of belief explains secularization better than simplistic ‘subtraction stories’ which suggest that reason and science gradually superseded religion and superstition.

The secularization at issue in the secularization of early-modern economic thought escapes Taylor’s third sense. In the period, belief in God and a created order of nature basically was the only credible option available, and expressions of disbelief were rarely voiced. The option of exclusive humanism, in Taylor’s terminology, only came available at the end of the eighteenth century. What the secularization of economic thought does show, however, are early signs of secularization in the first and second sense. One could say that mercantilism that emerged in the sixteenth century was a form of intellectual differentiation, one of the causes of secularity 1. The mercantilist discourse was independent of theology and was mostly contributed to by lay writers such as merchants, consultants and lawyers, not by theologians. In the Middle Ages, economics was still inextricably linked to theology. Economics in fact was embedded in moral theology and economic questions were the province of scholastic theologians and ecclesiastical jurists. The principal source of economic teachings were manuals for confessors, sermons and the *Summae* of the schoolmen. The primary concern of medieval economics was with ethics. In order to distinguish right from wrong personal conduct, different kinds of economic behaviour were subjected to moral casuistry. In this, avoiding sin and doing justice were regarded as far more important criteria than economic expediency. Economic interests in the end were subordinate to the individual’s morality and salvation.

As compared to medieval economics, the early-modern ‘systems’ as Smith termed them were quite amoral and irreligious.²² Rather than on ethical aspects of individual economic behaviour, they focused on practical questions of national interest and aimed at an increase in material wealth. Moral-theological considerations, still present in sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century writings on economics, were gradually pushed

²² On mercantilism, see Heckscher, *Mercantilism*, vol. 2, pp. 285-307 (‘Ethics and religion’). Cf. p. 155: “Mercantilism was indeed a new religion, and in deifying the state it opposed the medieval religion, which had worshipped at quite other shrines”. On the differences between mercantilism and scholastic economics as well as the lasting impact of the latter, see De Roover, ‘Scholastic economics’.

aside or substituted by utilitarian ones.²³ This, one could argue, is a first indication of Taylor's secularity 2. While religious belief and practice as such were still omnipresent, new interests and principles lacking a clear link to the transcendent received increasing attention. Although these new 'beliefs' could go hand in hand with typically religious convictions, they were often at odds with each other and eventually meant the disappearance of theological standards from public economic debates. Issues like usury and the just price, once so central to medieval economic thought, were stripped of their moral aspects and analysed from an economist's point of view. Typical religious matters as almsgiving, celibacy, holy days and tithes were assessed in terms of their (negative) effects on economic life such as the revenues and size of the population. Religious toleration was advocated to allow for the immigration of dissenting craftsmen. Even such a despicable thing as luxury was eventually defended on economic grounds, culminating in the secularizing message of Bernard Mandeville's *Fable of the Bees*.²⁴

If we define secularization in terms of intellectual differentiation or the growth of mundane beliefs, the secularization of post-medieval economic thought is an inescapable truth. Although it did not lose its normative character altogether, the new economic discourse was well on its way to emancipation from theology, ethics and the political alike.²⁵ "Religion is one thing", Mandeville in 1723 characteristically claimed, "and trade is another", and thus have different standards and principles.²⁶ True enough, the social science in the making was no independent inquiry yet. In the 'Système figure des connaissances humaines' of the famous French *Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers* (1751-72), *économique* and *politique* are listed still under moral philosophy. But the new mode of writing about economic questions that was launched with mercantilism gradually took on a self-contained form. Increasingly, scientific methods of reasoning were applied to abstract and impersonal economic forces. Political economists abstracted from ethical considerations and showed a willingness to consider the economy as an intricate mechanism rather than a moral sphere. As early as the turn of the seventeenth century, the English mercantilist writer Gerard Malynes compared the commercial reality of his days to a "clocke where there be many wheels, the first wheele being stirred, drieueth the next, and the third, and so foorth, till the last that moueth the instrument that strikes the clocke".²⁷ Malynes himself was still very much

²³ Appleby, *Economic Thought and Ideology in Seventeenth-Century England*, ch. 3 'The moral economy in retreat'. Unexpectedly, Johnson, *American Economic Thought in the Seventeenth Century* draws a different conclusion for New England. "Economic discussions", according to Johnson, "assumed a moral tone as the Scriptures were searched for the rules of business life. In consequence, much of the seventeenth-century economic discussion reveals a definite medieval flavour. The real purpose of life should be salvation, and to this all-important end every other interest ought to be subordinate" (pp. 7-8; cf. ch. 5 'Ethics and economics: the vindication of wealth').

²⁴ Young, 'Christianity, secularization and political economy', pp. 36-37.

²⁵ Dumont, *Homo aequalis*, ch. 2 'Les conditions d'émergence de la catégorie économique'.

²⁶ [Bernard Mandeville], *The Fable of the Bees: or, Private Vices, Publick Benefits* (1723), p. 411.

²⁷ Gerrard De Malynes, *A Treatise of the Canker of Englands Common wealth* (1601), p. 95. Note that the author borrowed the clock metaphor from *A Discourse of the Common Weal of this Realm of England*, a dialogue written in 1549.

concerned with economic justice but could not prevent the eventual exclusion of such categories either.

The idea of economic secularization in the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries finds support in the research that has been done in the wake of the so-called ‘Weber-thesis’.²⁸ As is well known, the German sociologist Max Weber in *Die protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus* (1904-5) defended the thesis that there may have been a connection between the rise of Protestantism and the rise of capitalism. The capitalist spirit, in which an unlimited pursuit of wealth was elevated to the highest aim of life, probably was fostered and justified by the ethical views of ascetic Protestantism, including its proverbial work ethic.²⁹ Their relationship was unintended and unwished for, however, resulting in a growing divergence between the two. Foremost in the political-economic literature, Weber argued, certain economic beliefs were “secularized” because their “religious root” died out and was replaced by “utilitarian” interpretations.³⁰ For example, the theological importance attached to work in a calling and to being contented with one’s station of life could degenerate into the conviction that only by means of low wages could the mass of poor labourers be forced to productive labour. Also Richard Tawney, another leading voice in the debate on capitalism, in *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* (1926) insisted on the secularizing tendencies of the new “objective and passionless economic science”.³¹

The question of divine providence

Probably because of the intensive controversy on the Weber-thesis in the first half of the twentieth century, the relationship between early-modern economics and religion or theology is often reduced to ethical questions. This may give the impression that ethics was the only channel through which Christianity could exercise an influence on economic ideas. Of course, that economic thought secularized in terms of a disappearance of religiously-inspired ethical considerations is not to say that it did so in every respect. Traditionally, another possible connection between theology and the economy was the doctrine of divine providence. From the patristic writers onwards, the idea of divine government and care, both active in divine interventions and passive in divine orders for

²⁸ Fischoff, ‘The Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism’. For an even shorter overview, see the first section of Walker, ‘Capitalism and the Reformation’, pp. 1-3.

²⁹ Weber, ‘Die protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus’, p. 191 gives the following summary: “die religiöse Wertung der rastlosen, stetigen, systematischen, weltlichen Berufsarbeit als schlechthin höchsten asketischen Mittels und zugleich sicherster und sichtbarster Bewährung des wiedergeborenen Menschen und seiner Glaubenschtheit mußte ja der denkbar mächtigste Hebel der Expansion jener Lebensauffassung sein, die wir hier als ‘Geist’ des Kapitalismus bezeichnet haben”.

³⁰ Weber, ‘Die protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus’, p. 198.

³¹ Tawney, *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism*, esp. pp. 6-10 and 175-193 (‘The growth of individualism’). See also his ‘Religious thought on social and economic questions in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries’, p. 461: “it was a change in the character of religious thought which gave secular political economy an opportunity to develop”.

nature and society, was indeed invoked to explain, justify or criticize economic affairs. Although this strategy sometimes resulted in ethical conclusions, the doctrine of providence itself was part of what is called ‘theology proper’, dealing specifically with the being, attributes and works of God, rather than theological ethics. Therefore, in order to determine if and to what extent sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth-century economic thought went through a process of secularization, this dimension of providentialism should also be taken into account. In fact, Weber himself already established that in spite of the transformation of the Protestant ethic in a utilitarian direction the providential interpretation of the economic order after the Middle Ages only developed further.³²

A few years before Weber published his famous research, the American economist Thorstein Veblen in a series of articles had argued that the difference between economics as an evolutionary science and economics as a pre-evolutionary science is not a matter of the facts that they try to explain but a difference of “spiritual attitude” towards them. In contrast to the evolutionary kind that he himself advocated, classical and pre-classical economics had departed from a “preconception of normality”, a constraint that lends a “spiritual coherence” to the facts dealt with.³³ According to Veblen, especially the Physiocrats and Adam Smith were guilty of reverting to animism, teleology and metaphysics in accounting for economic phenomena. To both of them the ultimate ground of economic reality had been the providential order of nature designed by the Creator to serve the ends of human welfare.³⁴ It goes without saying that Veblen’s outdated and coloured historical account cannot be accepted at face value. Nevertheless his depiction of the early economists as theologically or metaphysically minded thinkers is in sharp contrast with those who attribute to them a secularizing role in the history of economic thought.³⁵

Surprisingly the role of providentialism in economic thought before Adam Smith has received but little attention.³⁶ One of the few historians who dealt with it more extensively was Jacob Viner, according to some “quite simply the greatest historian of economic thought that ever lived”.³⁷ Apart from occasional remarks on the subject in his other works, notably in the impressive *Studies in the Theory of International Trade* (1937) and the first of his Wabash Lectures, the renowned Canadian economist specially

³² Weber, ‘Die protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus’, p. 171 speaks of “einer Weiterbildung jener providentiellen Deutung des ökonomischen Kosmos ... , welche schon der Scholastik geläufig war”.

³³ Veblen, ‘Why is economics not an evolutionary science?’.

³⁴ Veblen, ‘The preconceptions of economic science’.

³⁵ Taylor, ‘Tawney’s religion and capitalism, and eighteenth-century liberalism’, p. 727.

³⁶ This, incidentally, is true of the role of religion and theology in general. Most publications on economics and religion, including Brennan & Waterman, *Economic and Religion*; Dean & Waterman, *Religion and Economics*; Waterman, *Political Economy and Christian Theology Since the Enlightenment*; Harper & Gregg, *Christian Theology and Market Economics*; and Bradley Bateman & Spencer Banzhaf, *Keeping Faith, Losing Faith* focus on early-Christian, medieval, classical and neo-classical economics, or like the relevant contributions in Oslington, *The Oxford Handbook of Christianity and Economics* are by and large limited to (late) eighteenth-century economic thought.

³⁷ Mark Blaug quoted in Barber, ‘Jacob Viner’, p. 343.

devoted his 1966 Jayne Lectures to the subject. In the opening lecture he reasoned that in the seventeenth and eighteenth century “it was for many men psychologically impossible to believe that God did not constantly have man in his providential care”. That the economic order was thought to be one of the mechanisms that the Creator had designed to serve this purpose he demonstrated in the three lectures that followed. Providential argumentation, in Viner’s diagnosis, not only was widespread but also of demonstrable importance for the development of the new economic discourse. Providentialism “played a major role in the fashioning of the social thought” of the period and was “frequently used in a functional way, that is, to influence national economic policy”.³⁸ Viner planned to expand his lectures in a scholarly monograph but unfortunately did not live to complete it. After being published under the title *The Role of Providence in the Social Order* (1972), the lectures became the common reference point for a subject that almost no one further elaborated on.

1.3 Aim, scope and outline

Gratefully building on the pioneering work of Viner, in this book I attempt to give a more or less representative overview of economic providentialism in the early-modern period.³⁹ Instead of demonstrating to what extent the later science of economics depended on a providential preconception, as Veblen phrased it, that was developed in earlier centuries, my more modest aim is to show how the idea of providence, originating in Western theology and philosophy, was employed in the economic discourse of the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The central questions are what the content of these economic-theological ideas was, in what language they were voiced and what function they had. These questions are emphatically approached from the perspective of the history of economic thought rather than from an economic-historical viewpoint. However interesting, if and how providential ideas helped to shape contemporary economic practices and developments, or the rise of a capitalist spirit more specifically, is a different project.⁴⁰ Here the focus is on the history and development of economic *ideas* as could be found in pamphlets, treatises and handbooks, and the way they were influenced and shaped by beliefs about divine government and care. Other theological aspects, such as for example the changing attitudes towards usury, labour and property, remain undiscussed. A secondary aim of this book is to determine what this all implies for the idea of a

³⁸ Viner, *The Role of Providence in the Social Order*, pp. 19, 23 and 42.

³⁹ In a sense, it thus adopts the following challenge posed by Groenewegen, ‘New light on the origins of modern economics’, pp. 139–140: “Religious thought has been exhaustively discussed in connection with the rise of capitalism from a wide variety of perspectives and, in the end, with relatively little fruit. Perhaps ... a plea can be made for further discussion and research on the relationship between moral theology, secularization and the rise of economic liberalism”.

⁴⁰ For New England, precisely this question has been investigated by Valeri, whose *Heavenly Merchandise* “uncovers the relationship between the ways merchants did business and their beliefs. It reveals the extent to which religious convictions, from ideas about providence and political sentiments to regimens of moral discipline in local congregations, informed commercial decisions”. See also his ‘William Petty in Boston’.

secularization of economic thought as introduced above. The question at issue is if the idea is still tenable in view of the discussions in the following chapters and, if so, how secularization should then be defined.

The findings of this book are based on a study of a large body of primary texts.⁴¹ The many quotations from well-known and lesser-known writers provided here to illustrate my argument only constitute a part of all the relevant material that has been collected to derive more general conclusions. The choice to focus on the period's economic thought implies that other equally important discourses such as theology, philosophy and law could not be covered. Occasionally, however, also works from these disciplines will be discussed to prove that ideas were more widespread or originated elsewhere. As a matter of fact, the question what counted as *economic* literature and what did not is notoriously hard to answer. Economic ideas were also produced by theologians, philosophers or legal writers, either parallel to or in response to political economists. What is more, economics, if existing at all, was less demarcated than today, and next to subjects that we recognize as economic in contemporaries' eyes also included discussions of agriculture, manufacturing, navigation, population, political arithmetic, economic policy, the history of commerce, and commercial jurisprudence. To do justice to the breadth of early-modern economic thought, most of these branches have been surveyed in search of expressions of providentialism.

Further restrictions apply to the languages or countries and the timespan studied. As to the first, this book deals with English, French, German, Dutch and, occasionally, Latin writings, and thus covers most debates in Western Europe. Since in this period the locus of political economy was in England and later in France and Scotland, the writers from these countries will be cited most frequently. Unfortunately, Spanish and Italian contributions which sometimes were just as important for the development of modern economics, apart from a few exceptions, had to be neglected, simply because I do not read these languages and translations are seldom available. In the second place, the term 'early-modern period' in this book is used as a shorthand for the sixteenth, seventeenth and the first three quarters of the eighteenth century.⁴² Although the term usually spans a somewhat longer period, say from the Fall of Constantinople in 1453 to the French Revolution in 1789, I have included writings from early sixteenth-century mercantilism up to eighteenth-century economics before 1776. The latter date of course is chosen because this was the year in which Adam Smith published his *Wealth of Nations*, the book that is considered the starting point of the classical school of economics, the definitive breakthrough of political economy as a science.

⁴¹ The collections that I have researched include Early English Books; Eighteenth Century Collections Online; the Dutch Knuttel Collection; the McMaster University Archive for the History of Economic Thought; and Google Books. Furthermore the printed collections by Eugène Daire, Gustave de Molinari and J.R. McCulloch; Monroe, *Early Economic Thought*; Tawney & Power, *Tudor Economic Documents*; Thirsk, *Seventeenth-Century Economic Documents*; Meek, *Precursors of Adam Smith*; and Clark, *Commerce, Culture and Liberty* have been taken into account.

⁴² On the flexibility of the term 'early-modern', see Van Bunge, 'Early modern philosophical systems', pp. 651-652.

The remainder of this book is organized as follows. The next, introductory chapter commences with a general survey of the doctrine of divine providence. It discusses the ancient origins of the idea, the way it was recorded in sixteenth-century confessions of faith, and some contours of the early-modern debate. I pay attention not only to the abandonment of traditional views but also to the continued importance of the doctrine in the period's more popular discourses, including that of natural theology. In the final section of this introductory chapter a first step is made from natural theology to the political-economic discourse. Chapters 3 through 7, which can be read as stand-alone studies, deal with five different economic themes of which the discussions involved providential arguments. Except for chapter 4 that goes into the idea of the division of labour, all the others – about respectively international trade, value and price, self-interest, and poverty and inequality – proceed from Viner's earlier account. Although some of these chapters do discuss alternative theories or perspectives, they in no way should be read as comprehensive overviews of early-modern thinking on these subjects. The emphasis of this book is on writers who employed providential reasoning in their economic theories and arguments, and how in those cases theology and the economic were associated. Final and overall conclusions can be found in chapter 8, which also proposes some directions for further research.

Divine providence, natural theology and the economy

2.1 Introduction

“He who believes, in the common acceptation, that there is a God, and that the world is rul’d by Providence, but has no faith in any thing reveal’d to us, is a deist; and he, who believes neither the one or the other, is an atheist. Of these I don’t believe there are many”.¹ Dating from 1720, these words by the Dutch-born writer Bernard Mandeville, many times accused of atheism himself, recall one of the peculiarities of the age under discussion. If we are to believe the public opinion of the seventeenth and eighteenth century, the spectre of atheism was haunting Europe, threatening every aspect of established religion. Yet, without denying the reality of early-modern scepticism and atheism, Mandeville may have been right that avowed infidels existed only in small numbers. Apparently ‘atheism’ had a different, or at least broader meaning than it has today.² Frequently it served as a term of abuse for various forms of unorthodoxy, freethinking and heresy. Even subtle theological deviations from age-old Christian truths seemed to deserve the epithet. The charge of atheism was levelled in particular against those who denied the doctrine of divine providence, that is to say rejected it, misunderstood it, or simply left no room for it.³ After all, according to ancient wisdom, to deny the providence of God means denying the very existence of God. The doctrine of providence indeed was taken highly seriously and did not allow for all-too liberal interpretations. But what was the orthodox reading of it and why was it that ‘atheists’ deviated from it?

Actually the (far from unanimous) early-modern views on the subject were only the intermediate outcome of a debate that had raged since the emergence of Western philosophy.⁴ Providence as one of God’s attributes was not a Christian innovation but the offspring of early philosophical responses to Greek mythology. The first to ascribe the Greek term *prónoia* to the gods were the historian Herodotus and tragedians like Sophocles and Euripides in the fifth century BC. Subsequently it became a matter of philosophical debate in Platonism, Aristotelianism and Stoicism. More than 200 years before the

¹ B[ernard] M[andeville], *Free Thoughts on Religion, the Church, and National Happiness* (1720), p. 3.

² Hunter & Wootton, *Atheism from the Reformation to the Enlightenment*. For shorter introductions, see Robichaud, ‘Renaissance and Reformation’ and Kors, ‘The Age of Enlightenment’.

³ On the centrality of the doctrine, see Kors, *Atheism in France, 1650-1729*, vol. 1, *The Orthodox Sources of Disbelief*.

⁴ Lobstein, ‘Vorsehung’; Köhler, ‘Vorsehung’; Lloyd, *Providence Lost*.

birth of Christianity, Chrysippus wrote his *Περὶ προνοίας*, possibly the first in line of a never-ending series of discourses on providence. The theologians of early Christianity, whose holy book did not have a term for it, eagerly applied the Greek *πρόνοια* and Latin *providentia* to the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Finding support for the biblical idea of a governing and caring God in classical philosophy, they nevertheless struggled with the pagan elements that accompanied it. The tensions between Greek-Roman and Jewish-Christian conceptions of providence continued to challenge theologians and philosophers well into the Middle Ages. With the revival of classical philosophy in the Renaissance old problems again flared up. And at that time the greatest intellectual difficulties, raised by the scientific and philosophical revolution of the seventeenth century, were still to follow.

What precisely is divine providence? According to John Calvin, the influential Protestant Reformer, it is “not that by which God idly observes from heaven what takes place on earth, but that by which, as keeper of the keys, he governs all events. Thus it pertains no less to his hands than to his eyes”.⁵ Especially the latter part of Calvin’s remark - God’s hands and eyes as metaphor for His providence - comes close to a workable definition. Etymologically, the Greek and Latin origin of the term allows for two meanings. On the one hand, providence refers to God’s care for this world, and thus His design and government of it, and on the other hand His foreknowledge and foresight required to do so. Providence, in short, stands for the deeds and wisdom of God. The precise definition, however, has never been a major point of disagreement. The actual debate on providence, which around 1500 was more than 2000 years old, revolved around three recurring questions.⁶ The first is whether such a thing as providence is logically possible at all, and if the idea of divine intervention is not blasphemous. The second question, which clearly caused most ink to flow, is how providence relates to such awkward concepts as chance and fate, i.e. the contingency and necessity of reality. Finally, there was the problematic relationship between providence, evil and human freedom, three phenomena that cannot easily be reconciled.

Since virtually all major Western thinkers contributed to the debate on these and many other puzzling questions, the number of different positions and theories became immense. As early as 45 BC, Cicero in his theological work *De natura deorum* observed that “as to the question ... whether the gods are entirely idle and inactive, taking no part at all in the direction and government of the world, or whether on the contrary all things both were created and ordered by them in the beginning and are controlled and kept in motion by them throughout eternity, here there is the greatest disagreement of all”.⁷ For this reason alone, it will not be attempted in this chapter to give a comprehensive history of the idea of providence. Instead, the main aim is to provide a general background to the remainder of this book by sketching the contours of the early-modern

⁵ Jean Calvin, *Institutio christianaæ religionis* (1559), bk. I, ch. xvi, § 4, p. 62: “non qua Deus è cælo otiosus speculetur quæ in mundo fiunt, sed qua veluti clavum tenens, eventus omnes moderatur. Ita non minus ad manus quam ad oculos pertinet”.

⁶ In addition to the literature mentioned in footnote 4, see Cioffari, ‘Fortune, fate, and chance’.

⁷ Cicero, *De Natura Deorum Academica*, bk. I, § 5, p. 5.

debate. It provides the reader with a general impression of what it meant to employ the doctrine in an economic text and what this said about the theological orientation of the writer in question. More than a first introduction cannot be offered here: as one of the foundations of the early-modern world view, the idea of providence played a role in virtually all major debates in theology, philosophy and science.⁸

All the same, seventeenth and eighteenth-century interpretations can be best summarized by contrasting them with earlier ones. The next section (§ 2.2) therefore discusses traditional views of the doctrine in sixteenth-century theology as well as its main intellectual origins in classical antiquity. These clearly cannot be ignored, since classical-philosophical and Christian conceptions of providence competed throughout history, up to and including the early-modern period. The subsequent section (§ 2.3) describes how the doctrine was contested in the following centuries. As I argue, under influence of the scientific revolution and the rise of deism the belief in providence not so much disappeared as was ‘transformed’. In the next section (§ 2.4) attention is paid to the continued importance of the doctrine for the early-modern world view, and especially its more popular discourse. Despite serious clashes between old and new perspectives, providentialism remained the dominant framework to interpret nature and history. The penultimate section draws some conclusions. In the final section (§ 2.6) a step is made towards the main subject of this book. It discusses the relationship between God and the economy, both from the viewpoint of natural theology and political economy.

2.2 Divine providence: intellectual origins

Whether or not they were aware of it, the concept of ‘divine providence’ as it was known to early-modern writers on economics carried with it a very long history. It goes without saying that in Western Europe it primarily had Christian connotations. As theologians and preachers reminded their audience, providence is a fundamental divine attribute that finds support both in Holy Scripture and the teachings of the Church. At the same time, the doctrine had clearly undergone influences from other traditions of thought, as for instance Thomas Aquinas’s sweeping conception of providence in terms of Aristotelian causality betrayed.⁹ Traces of Stoic theology could be found in the apocryphal books of the Old Testament (which were formed under influence of Hellenistic philosophy) and the early Christian theologians in their discussions of the nature of God felt back on Stoic and neo-Platonic writers. The intellectual rediscovery of non-Aristotelian philosophy in the Renaissance brought back to attention these other sources of thinking about divine creation and government, and thus offered a new vocabulary for thinking about providence.¹⁰ It is to these ‘pagan’ sources that we first turn.

⁸ The role of post-medieval “secular theology” that included themes like God’s omnipresence, omnipotence and providence is discussed in Funkenstein, *Theology and the Scientific Imagination from the Middle Ages to the Seventeenth Century*.

⁹ See, for example, Davies, *The Thought of Thomas Aquinas*, ch. 9 ‘Providence and freedom’.

¹⁰ Kraye, ‘The revival of Hellenistic philosophies’.

As far as we know Plato was the first Western thinker to discuss providence as an integral part of a broader philosophy.¹² Before the fifth century BC the subject was certainly not ignored but all we have left are separate statements that at least show that the concept is still older. That Plato, following the example of his teacher Socrates, believed in something like divine involvement in this reality is beyond doubt. In the tenth book of the *Laws*, which discusses appropriate punishments for acts and statements offensive to the gods, the three interlocutors seek to demonstrate that the gods exists, that they cannot be influenced and, last but not least, that they care about this reality. About the care (*ἐπιμελής*) of the gods it is remarked that it extends to both great and small things, mortal beings not excepted. God, a term used interchangeably with ‘gods’, is compared to a doctor, pilot, commander, statesman, craftsman, charioteer and herdsman - all people who, in order to fulfil their duties successfully, have to pay attention to major and minor things. As one of the interlocutors insists, those who blame the gods for being lazy and neglecting the things that they have created should be accused of ungodliness and be punished accordingly. The denial of providence, Plato suggests, amounts to a denial of the goodness and perfection of the gods and thus their existence as such.

More important for the development of the idea of providence was the *Timaeus*, the only writing of Plato featuring the term *πρόνοια* and a source of inspiration for numerous commentaries in the classical and Christian world. Sometimes called a ‘second Genesis’ due to its similarities with the biblical story, the dialogue tells of the creation of heaven and earth by a divine craftsman (*δημιουργός*). In contrast to the Christian Creator, Plato’s God did not create *ex nihilo* but by bringing to order matter that existed from eternity. What is more, rather than a product of divine intelligence alone, the world is a mixture of reason (*λόγος*) and necessity (*ἀνάγκη*), a fatal power that is out of control even of the gods. Consequently not everything in the universe embodies the pure will of the reasonable Creator. However that may be, Plato unequivocally states that the cosmos was generated by the providence of God (*θεοῦ γενέσθαι πρόνοιαν*). Here *πρόνοια* refers to the creative act of God, not to a form of lasting paternal care. Throughout the dialogue, which rather is a monologue by the Greek Pythagorean philosopher Timaeus of Locri, providence is indeed related to the omnipresence of purposefulness. The recurring question why things are as they are is consistently answered by providing reasons why they have been created. As the product of a reasonable and intelligent Being, regularity and design are manifest everywhere in this reality. God, Plato claims in anticipation of the eighteenth-century optimists, endeavoured to create the best possible world.

¹¹ For general overviews, see Gerson, *God and Greek Philosophy* and Mansfeld, ‘Theology’. Earlier Greek thinkers are treated in Broadie, ‘Rational theology’.

¹² Bos, *Providentia Divina*; Morgan, ‘Plato and Greek religion’; Dragona-Moachou, ‘Divine providence in the philosophy of the empire’.

In Aristotle, the other great thinker of classical antiquity and for many medieval theologians simply ‘the Philosopher’, providence hardly plays any role.¹³ It is true that some of the Church Fathers read a belief in the doctrine between the lines of Aristotle’s work, but even they had to admit that this providence was at most indirect and confined to heaven’s upper spheres. The Stagirite himself explicitly denied the possibility of fore-knowledge on logical grounds and hence left no room for divine foresight either. Nevertheless, two motives from his philosophy to a great extent coloured the later debate on providence. Firstly, Aristotle advocated a teleological view of nature.¹⁴ As he explained upon many occasions in his oeuvre, in all strata of nature from the largest to the smallest things a remarkable finality can be observed. Everything seems to strive for certain ends or to be there for the sake of something else. This teleology is neither the product of blind chance nor of intelligent planning and design: final causes are immanent in nature. All things seek to realize their potentialities and capabilities in the best possible way. Though nowhere in his work teleology is called providential, Aristotle at times does speak of nature in a strongly anthropomorphic way: nature seeks what is serviceable, reaches after the best, and does nothing purposeless. In some cases he nearly deified it, for example by claiming in *De caelo* that “God and nature do nothing without a purpose”.

Secondly, in *Metaphysics* and several other works Aristotle argued for the necessary existence of an invisible, eternal and immutable Being. This ‘unmoved mover’, the cause of all movement in the universe yet not in motion himself, is God (or, as is sometimes suggested, multiple gods under supervision of one supreme God). In contrast to Plato’s demiurge, Aristotle’s God is the source of all motion and change, but not the Creator of heaven and earth. Either directly or indirectly, He attracts all things and beings, which in turn move towards Him in different degrees. As final cause of everything, the unmoved mover can therefore be associated with all activity in the universe. The Aristotelian *De mundo* went even further by stating that all things are held together and preserved by God. Without the slightest effort, the divine nature, by simply moving what is nearest to it, imparts its power to what is next, and so on until it extends over everything. God, who rules the whole world, can accordingly be compared to a steersman on a ship, a leader of a chorus or a general of an army, save for the fact that their labour is full of weariness and toil. However, although having served as proof of Aristotle’s piety well into the eighteenth century, the authenticity of the treatise has been seriously doubted.¹⁵ The God of his other works is in an eternal state of rest and does not actively cause movement. It lacks knowledge of the contingent world and is not even capable of thinking about it. Totally absorbed in self-contemplation, the divine is literally unconcerned with the sublunar world.

¹³ Dragona-Monachou, ‘Divine providence’, pp. 4422-4424; Sharples, ‘Aristotelean theology after Aristotle’, pp. 1-12.

¹⁴ Note that the interpretations of Aristotle’s view of teleology vary widely. Mine is mainly based on Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy*, vol. 6, Aristotle. *An Encounter*, ch. 7 ‘Teleology and its defence: the concept of potentiality’.

¹⁵ Kraye, ‘Aristotle’s God and the authenticity of De Mundo’.

If in the philosophy of Plato and Aristotle the idea is only of secondary importance, in Stoicism divine providence for the first time was given a prominent and systematic place.¹⁶ Together with the existence and nature of the gods, the observation that they govern the world and take care of human affairs are the four main tenets of Stoic theology. Though we are only familiar with the theological views of early Stoics like Zeno, Cleanthes and Chrysippus through fragments and the *Natura deorum* of Cicero, it is beyond doubt that the belief in providence was dear to them. As it happened, the Stoics were at pains to prove its existence from the being of the gods, the relationship between the gods and men, and the beauty and purposefulness of nature. According to Stoic theology, all things are governed and administered by divine wisdom and intelligence. As in Plato, the denial of providence was equated with the denial of the very existence of the gods. *Πρόνοια* as the core of prudence is typical of the gods, since they are in possession of all possible virtues. Their providence is evidenced, among other things, by the purposeful and beneficial organization of the cosmos, the self-sustaining order of nature, and the innate inclinations in humans and animals. Heaven and earth are ordered in the best possible way.

Besides taking a more central place in their philosophy, the Stoic conception of providence in two respects was clearly different from earlier accounts. Firstly, the distinction between God, providence and nature is practically abolished, seeing that the terms were used interchangeably. God is identical to the cosmos and as such exercises a continuous providence. *Deus* is portrayed as ruling power that permeates the universe as mind (*logos*) or soul (*pneuma*). Providence is equal to the course of nature and therefore immanent in the world. Consequently, a strict distinction with fate is lacking: fate is nothing else than the unimpeded fulfilment of God's will through an eternal and deterministic chain of causes. The theological problem of evil resulting from this view was not recognized by the Stoics. Moral evil is caused by man himself and physical evil is only apparent: what is evil to an individual may contribute to the good of the whole. Within the best possible ordering of things physical evil is simply an inevitable side effect. A second novelty in the Stoic conception of providence is the central place given to man as highest rational being. Ultimately the natural order is subservient to his preservation and convenience. In fact, the world as a whole was created for man's sake.

Controversial but of no less importance for the development of the idea of providence, were the theological views of Epicurus and his school.¹⁷ Ever since classical antiquity, the Epicureans were a common enemy of Stoics, Christians and virtually all other schools, for they emphatically denied the existence of divine government and care. Although its critics tended to suggest worse, Epicureanism was not atheistic in that it belied the existence of the gods themselves. Far from it, Epicurus taught that in the minds of most people there is a preconception (*προλήψις*) of their reality. However, the gods seen by man's reason do not play any role in this world, nor in the heavenly spheres. They are

¹⁶ Dragona-Monachou, 'Divine providence', pp. 4424-4436; Dragona-Monachou, *The Stoic Arguments for the Existence and the Providence of the Gods*; Algra, 'Stoic theology'; Lloyd, *Providence Lost*, pp. 67-128.

¹⁷ Particularly clear is Rist, *Epicurus*, ch. 8 'The gods and religion'.

empirically unobservable, free from labour and unconcerned with human affairs. How else could the immortal gods be blessed, in full enjoyment of undisturbed peace and happiness? Since the cosmos is not a creation of the gods but the result of chance, man's natural environment lacks any form of teleology and purposefulness. All signs of intelligent design around us are only apparent because everything is the product of random interactions between atoms. This, in short, was the Epicurean theology that even in pre-Christian times was considered abhorrent.

To Epicurus and his followers, the absence of divine providence was no source of anxiety.¹⁸ On the contrary, together with the denial of the immortality of the soul, it was part of the so-called fourfold "medicine" for the ills of man. Wise men need not fear the gods since they are altogether inactive. The fact that the blessed Beings do not exercise providence implies that they do not show any anger or goodwill either, nor punish man's evil or reward his good actions. Furthermore, according to Epicurean physics, famously summarized by Lucretius in his *De rerum natura*, only the gods are immortal. Man's soul, in contrast, though formed from the same atomic matter, will not survive after death, which rules out the possibility of an eternal judgment. Therefore neither the gods nor death nor the afterlife need to worry us. Knowledge about how the physical universe works, and the subordinate place therein of the gods, rather helps man to arrive at a state of tranquillity of the soul (*άταραξία*). The suggestion of Epicurus's opponents that these views practically lead to atheism is explicitly rejected. Truly impious, he argues, is not he who denies the gods worshipped by the multitude, but he who ascribes to the gods what the multitude fancies about them.

The Bible

However influential classical philosophy was, throughout the ages the book that framed discussions on providence most was the Bible. Though the term is not used a single time in its canonical books (except in later Greek and Latin translations), it is without doubt a central biblical concept. The Jewish Old Testament and Christian New Testament present a God who is deeply committed to His creation.¹⁹ First of all God's government extends over the natural world. Ontologically speaking distinct from the Creator, nature in Scripture is never seen as an independent reality. The heavenly bodies, the elements and the seasons ultimately obey the will of the Almighty. Rain, drought, heat and cold come from God, and without Him the earth would not bring forth its fruits. Yet the divine activity in nature is not what distinguishes *Jahweh* from other gods. Unlike the proverbial God of the philosophers, as Pascal had it, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob is particularly concerned with the individual. It is God who weaves man in the womb, assigns him the years of his life, and blesses or judges him according to his works. He wants man's salvation and before deciding to punish him calls on him to repent. He allows evil and

¹⁸ Warren, 'Removing fear'.

¹⁹ Walker, 'Providence, divine' (on the testimony of Scripture) and Lobstein, 'Vorsehung', pp. 743-749.

suffering to test the righteous, and eventually turns evil to good. The God of the Bible, in sum, is actively engaged with humankind.

Also new was the idea that God actively directs and regulates history.²⁰ In the Old Testament, central themes are the vocation of the patriarch Abraham, the exodus from Egypt of the chosen people of Israel, and the 40-year journey through the desert to the promised land. Just as in the later ages of the judges, kings and prophets, it is God who grants his people victories over the heathen nations and who punishes them for their disobedience and idolatry. In the New Testament, providence manifests itself most fully in the incarnation, resurrection and ascension of Christ, the emergence of the first Christian congregations and, finally, the predicted Second Coming of the son of God. Miracles, as unique divine interventions in time, play an important role in both testaments.²¹ A deluge, the parting of the sea, a rain of fire, the sun standing still, the virgin birth of Christ and his resurrection from death are just a few better-known examples of the more than a hundred miracles recorded in Scripture. The terms used for them in the New Testament indicate their different functions: ‘wonderful things’ (*θαυμάσια*) or ‘wonders’ (*τέρατα*) as portents arouse wonder or astonishment, ‘works’ (*ἔργα*) point to the deeds of God, ‘powers’ (*δυνάμεις*) refer to the extraordinary and superhuman deeds of Christ, and ‘signs’ (*σημεῖων*) are tokens of the presence and power of God.

Traditionally three commonplaces from the New Testament were used to support the existence of divine providence. In the first place there were the words of Christ from the gospels suggesting that God is concerned even with the smallest creatures and things: “Behold the fowls of the air: for they sow not, neither do they reap, nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feedeth them. ... Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin. And yet I say unto you, that even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these” (Matthew 6:26-29; cf. Luke 12:24-27). And, as he stressed elsewhere: “Are not two sparrows sold for a farthing? and one of them shall not fall on the ground without your Father [*sine voluntate Patris vestri*, as the Church Fathers interpreted it]. But the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear ye not therefore, ye are of more value than many sparrows” (Matthew 10:29-31; cf. Luke 12:6-7). The message was clear: if God already cares about birds and flowers and is involved in the most trivial things, He will certainly exercise providence over man, the most worthy among living beings. Seeing that God knows what everyone needs, man should not be worried about food, clothing and what tomorrow will bring, as this is what the gentiles do.

A second oft-quoted passage, which is of interest in light of Greek philosophy, can be found in Paul’s speech on the Areopagus in Athens. Confronted with the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers who gathered there, he declared: “God that made the world [*κόσμον*] and all things therein, seeing that he is Lord of heaven and earth [*οὐρανοῦ καὶ γῆς*], dwelleth not in temples made with hands; Neither is worshipped with men’s hands, as though he needed any thing, seeing he giveth to all life, and breath, and all things; And

²⁰ On the idea of providential or destined history, see Schildgen, *Divine Providence*.

²¹ Driscol, ‘Miracle’.

hath made of one blood all nations of men [*ἔθνος ἀνθρώπων*] for to dwell on all the face of the earth, and hath determined the times before appointed, and the bounds of their habitation; That they should seek the Lord, if haply they might feel after him, and find him, though he be not far from every one of us: For in him we live, and move, and have our being; as certain also of your own poets have said, For we are also his offspring" (Acts 17:24-28). In this theological reflection, which at the end implicitly refers to the Greek poets Aratus and Epimenides, God is characterized as creator of the cosmos, the sustainer of life and ruler over the nations. The ultimate aim of providence, Paul suggests, is that people seek and find God.

The final commonplace, which was often referred to in the context of early-modern natural theology (see pp. 45-49),²² can be found in the epistle to the Romans. Here Paul claims that the truths about God were not only revealed in the holy books but also in nature: "the wrath of God is revealed [*ἀποκαλύπτεται*] from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hold the truth in unrighteousness; Because that which may be known of God is manifest [*φανερόν*] in them; for God hath shewed [*έφανέρωσεν*] it unto them. For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world [*κόσμου*] are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power [*δύναμις*] and Godhead; so that they are without excuse [*άναπολογήτους*]" (Romans 1:18-20). According to this passage, which in Christian theology became the *locus classicus* for the idea of a natural knowledge of God, the power and government of God somehow can be 'read' by everyone from His creation. This means that atheists and heathens are without excuse and accountable for their own unbelief. Sinners will not be able to escape God's judgment, when at the end of time He will judge all humans according to their deeds.

Christian theology

Unlike other Christian doctrines, that of divine providence had predominantly pagan origins. That is, instead of being derived from Scripture and further supported by classical-philosophical ideas, the idea was imported and fitted into Christian theology. Patristic and medieval theologians faced the challenge of embedding an existing belief in providence in the testimony of Scripture. By and large, this did not result in fundamentally new views, at least not as to the reality of providence in the world.²³ Old problems inherited from the ancients concerning the role of providence in evil and the relationship between providence, chance and fate kept on returning, and were dealt with in separate books and treatises. The Church Fathers selectively adopted and combined the cosmological frameworks of Platonism, Aristotelianism and Stoicism, and purified them of their unchristian elements. For example, the Stoic identification of God, nature and provi-

²² Cf. Rowland, 'Natural theology and the Christian Bible'.

²³ Lobstein, 'Vorsehung', pp. 749-755; Köhler, 'Vorsehung', pp. 1209-1211. Some key fragments from the patristic teaching on providence are collected in Walsh & Walsh, *Divine Providence and Human Suffering*.

dence, the Aristotelian reduction of providence to heaven's upper spheres, and the Platonist denial of creation from nothing were fervently contested, while other theological elements were maintained and levelled against the Epicureans. Augustine and Boethius, two early writers who influenced the later theological debates most, both ingeniously combined Stoic and neo-Platonist ideas and thus showed how pagan philosophy could be put to use to defend a Christianized doctrine of providence.²⁴

Though not leading to altogether different interpretations, the Christian theologians did place some new emphases. More than before, they insisted that providence is concerned not only with the universe at large, as some ancients had argued, but also with small and seemingly insignificant things. God's care (*cura*) as much extended to individual human beings as to mankind in general. Truly innovative, and equally in line with Scripture, was the application of the doctrine to the history of the world and the history of salvation. Providence, Origen reasoned, is distinct from God's creation and should be seen at work between the beginning and completion of time, after which the divine judgment will take place. Within this period, the incarnation and resurrection of Christ and the establishment of the Church were regarded as key manifestations of divine providence. After all, God's care for humans is most evident in preparing for their eternal salvation. Finally, the idea of providence clearly acquired an apologetic function, meant to convince outsiders of the truth of Christianity. As Romans 1 suggested, observation of the regularity and teleology of the natural order could not but lead to the conclusion that the world was ordered and is still governed by a divine and eternal Being external to this reality. Manifestations of providence proved the existence of the Christian God.

What is more, the discussions about providence became increasingly complex.²⁵ To give some general impression, the Christian theologians passionately discussed the relationship of God's foresight and care to such other attributes as His omnipotence (divided into a *potestas absoluta*, God's absolute power, and a *potestas ordinata*, His ordained power as it is actualized or realized in the created order of things), omniscience (and the space it left for human freedom), and omnipresence (either through God's being, knowledge or power). As to the doctrine of providence as such, controversial issues included the existence of chance (*casus*), fortune (*fortuna*) and fate (*fatum*), the compatibility of divine foresight with contingency (*contingentia*) and free will (*liberum arbitrium*), and the share of God in natural (*malum naturæ*) and moral evil (*malum culpæ*). Through all this, one debated whether providence pertains to the divine intellect (*intellectus*), knowledge (*scientia*), will (*voluntas*), or all of these, whether God prefers to work immediately or mediately, and if there is a divine predestination (*prædestinatio*) that has preordained all events in time from eternity.

A new vocabulary for speaking about providence that remained popular for centuries was provided in Aristotelian natural philosophy, as recovered and adjusted for

²⁴ Colish, *The Stoic Tradition from Antiquity to the Early Middle Ages*, vol. 2, *Stoicism in Christian Latin Thought through the Sixth Century*, ch. 4 'St. Augustine' and pp. 281ff.

²⁵ Craig, *The Problem of Divine Foreknowledge and Future Contingents from Aristotle to Suarez*; Den Hartogh, *Voorzienigheid in donker licht*, chs. 5 'Providentia in de patristische theologie' and 6 'Providentia in de middeleeuwse theologie'.

Christian purposes in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.²⁶ As Alexander of Hales, Thomas Aquinas and other scholastic theologians showed, Aristotle's distinction between efficient (that what brings something about), formal (something's form or shape), material (the matter out of which something is composed) and final (something's purpose or aim) causality offered a framework in which both divine government and human freedom could be done justice. For example, providence could be defined in terms of the formal and final causes of everything in this reality so that all beings and things tend to God's ultimate aims unless they offer resistance, as in the case of creatures with free will. Space for freedom and contingency could also be created at the level of secondary causes, namely by seeing God as first cause and ultimate final cause and allowing for undetermined, intermediate causes which can be freely chosen from but which all equally fit into the foreseen divine plan. This view of providence working through secondary causes excluded chance, as God remains in control, but not human free will. It simultaneously promoted the idea of the relative autonomy of nature and of natural processes which was to threaten the doctrine later on.

It is to pre-modern theology as well that the doctrine of providence owes its manifold technical distinctions.²⁷ Speaking of God's providence, the question was always which providence one had in mind. Firstly, different kinds of divine care and government were distinguished. Whereas general providence (*providentia generalis* or *universalis*) is concerned with all creatures and phenomena, there is also a special providence (*specialis*) for humanity or for individuals, and a very special one (*specialissima*) for the church and its members. Moreover, one taught an extraordinary providence (*extraordinaria*, in contrast to *ordinaria*) which manifests itself not by natural means but in a miraculous way by God's intervention in the regular order of nature. Secondly, the doctrine was subdivided into three aspects. Providence was thought to preserve the whole creation by keeping it in existence and by safeguarding it against destruction (*conservatio*), to assist in all changes and developments in nature and history (*cooperatio* or *concursus*), and to rule everything in general (*gubernatio*). The latter form of divine government was again associated with four operations: things are allowed for (*permissio*), hindered (*impeditio*) or directed (*directio*), while other things are given boundaries of development (*determinatio*).

A traditional view

Despite the many possible interpretations put forward throughout the ages, in the sixteenth century the idea of providence formed an indispensable part of Christian theology. In both the old Roman Catholic tradition and the recently emerged Protestant religion it was regarded as a central doctrine, an article of faith that could only be denied by notorious unbelievers and atheists. Actually, the Reformation played an important role in the codification of the idea, seeing that the schism of the church asked for new creeds and

²⁶ Gelber, 'Providence'.

²⁷ Lobster, 'Vorsehung', p. 755.

catechisms. In the Roman Catholic *Catechismus ex decreto Concilii Tridentini* (1566) and most Protestant confessional documents from the same period, the doctrine is assigned a prominent place right after the belief in God the Father and God the Creator. Theologically speaking, both identities indeed were closely related to providence since God's fatherhood also applied to his children on earth and, moreover, His creation and its conservation could be seen as an ongoing process (*creatio continua*). Notwithstanding insoluble differences with respect to other articles of faith, the Roman Catholic, Calvinist and Lutheran confessions did agree on the most fundamental aspects of the doctrine of providence.²⁸ This allows us to formulate a traditional conception that can be used as point of reference in the remainder of this chapter:

1. *God not only created this world but also sustains it.* The typically Christian idea that God is not part of nature and nature itself is not divine did not imply that they are independent. After having created the universe from nothing, God the Creator found it necessary to exercise a continuous care over His works. Several confessions accordingly stress that God did not literally rest after the creation, let alone neglected it. "We believe", it can be read in the *Confession de la Rochelle* or *Confessio Gallicana* (1559), "that he not only created all things, but that he governs and directs them, disposing and ordaining by his sovereign will all that happens in the world".²⁹ The Roman Catholic catechism and surprisingly also the *Scotch Confession* (1560) even argue that God guarantees the continued existence of His creation, for otherwise all things would cease to exist. As the former catechism has it, "unless preserved continuously by his superintending providence, and by the same power which produced them, [the works of God] should instantly return into their original nothing". Apparently, the creation is so dependent on divine conservation that it cannot function on its own.

2. *Divine providence extends to all beings, things and events.* Thanks to His omniscience, omnipresence and omnipotence, God is concerned with and involved in the entire creation. The broad scope of providence is beautifully expressed in the definition provided in the *Heidelberg Katechismus* (1563). The *Fürsehung Gottes* is "[t]he almighty and every where present power of God, whereby, as it were by his hand, he still upholds heaven and earth, with all creatures, and so governs them that herbs and grass, rain and drought, fruitful and barren years, meat and drink, health and sickness, riches and poverty, yea, all things, come not by chance, but by his fatherly hand".³⁰ That God keeps an eye on everything without a single exception is also emphasized in other confes-

²⁸ This, of course, was not true of the theological discourse as a whole. Generally speaking, sixteenth-century Protestant theologians left less room for human freedom, had a more active conception of providence, and unlike their Catholic (Jesuit) opponents insisted on its mysterious nature. See Den Hartogh, *Voorzienigheid in donker licht*, chs. 7 'Providentia in de reformatrice theologie (Wittenberg)', 8 'Providentia in de reformatrice theologie (Zürich)' and 9 'Providentia in de reformatrice theologie (Genève)' and Bernhardt, *Was heißt "Handeln Gottes"?*

²⁹ Unless stated otherwise, the quotations from the Protestant confessions are derived from Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, vol. 3, *The Evangelical Protestant Creeds* and from the Roman-Catholic catechism from *Catechismus ex decreto Concilii Tridentini ad parochos* (1856).

³⁰ [Zacharias Ursinus et al.], *Catechismus, oder Christlicher Underricht, wie der in Kirchen und Schulen der Churfürstlichen Pfalz getrieben wirdt* (1563), pp. 26-27.

sions. According to the *Westminster Confession* from 1647, “God, the great Creator of all things, doth uphold, direct, dispose, and govern all creatures, actions, and things, from the greatest even to the least, by his most wise and holy providence”. Clearly influenced by Aristotelian natural philosophy, the Roman Catholic *Catechismus* adds that God is responsible for all motion and action of whatever moves and acts.

3. *Divine providence leaves no room for chance, fortune and fate.* If in Catholic theology there is some space for contingency, be it mainly from a human point of view, the Protestant confessions of faith rigorously exclude the very possibility of unforeseen events. The idea of blind chance or necessity after all is typically pagan and unacceptable to those who believe in universal divine care. As the *Second Helvetic Confession* (1566) expresses it, only “[t]he heathen ascribe things to blind fortune and uncertain chance”. It explicitly condemns the Epicureans who deny the providence of God and all those persons (presumably old-school Aristotelians) “who blasphemously say that God is busy with the heavens and neither sees nor cares about us and our affairs”. Also the Belgic *Confession de Foy* (1561) fiercely attacks the followers of Epicurus: “we reject that damnable error of the Epicureans, who say that God regards nothing, but leaves all things to chance”. From God’s perspective, to give up the creation to fortune or chance would mean forsaking it.

4. *There is both a general and a (very) special providence.* As said, in Christian theology God’s general providence stands for his care for the world in general, while His special and very special providence are respectively concerned with mankind and the true believers among them. “By the exercise of a special superintending providential care over us and our interests”, the Roman Catholic *Catechismus* argues, “he manifests the love of a Father towards us”. Special providence differs from general providence in that the former may be accompanied by miracles, and thus involves a temporary suspension of the order of nature. The *Westminster Confession* claims that although “God, in his ordinary providence, maketh use of [secondary] means, yet is free to work without, above, and against them at his pleasure”. Strictly speaking, however, such events are only extraordinary in the eyes of men, not to God. Since the order of nature must be preserved ceaselessly, a temporary deviation can hardly be called miraculous to God. What is more, also so-called natural regularities testify to the lasting care of the Creator.

5. *The workings of God’s providence are (partly) hidden to man.* Although providence as one of the manifestations of God’s wisdom and power leaves no man inexcusable, as some confessions of faith maintain in line with Romans 1, to humans there is also an inscrutable side to it. For instance, it is beyond human comprehension how God can control all things in this reality simultaneously. “And thus, confessing that the providence of God orders all things”, the *Confessio Gallicana* concludes, “we humbly bow before the secrets which are hidden to us, without questioning what is above our understanding”. The *Belgic Confession*, in turn, mainly stresses the incomprehensibility of God’s power and goodness in light of His judgments. “And as to what he doth surpassing human understanding we will not curiously inquire into it further than our capacity will admit of; but with the greatest humility and reverence adore the righteous judgments of God which are hid from us”. Equally inscrutable is the specific role that providence plays in evil.

6. *God sometimes allows for evil, but in no way is responsible for it.* What is not at stake here is the question how evil can exist if God is all-good and all-powerful. The sixteenth-century confessions in question simply assume that the Supreme Being cannot be the author of evil and sin. Since this is inconsistent with His nature, God is not the cause of any evil and does not approve of it. Nevertheless, evil can be employed in an all-wise manner. According to again the *Confessio Gallicana*, God “hath wonderful means of so making use of devils and sinners that he can turn to good the evil”. In allowing evil to bring man into temptation or to punish him, heaven’s main concern is to turn evil to good. Thanks to general providence, after the Fall some forms of evil, both natural and moral, are transformed in favourable directions. Be that as it may, man is by no means deprived of his responsibility to live a pious and virtuous life. In the end it is not God but man who commits sin.

7. *Divine providence is particularly concerned with the (spiritual) well-being of man.* As said, God not only governs the world at large but also cares for individuals. In his *Enchiridion: Der Kleine Catechismus* (1526), Martin Luther emphasizes that providence extends to the smallest things of life: “I believe that God has created me and all that exists; that he has given and still preserves to me body and soul, eyes, ears, and all my limbs, my reason and all my senses; and also clothing and shoes, food and drink, house and home, wife and child, land, cattle, and all my property; that he provides me richly and daily with all the necessities of life, protects me from all danger, and preserves and guards me against all evil; and all this out of pure paternal, divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness of mine; for all which I am in duty bound to thank, praise, serve, and obey him”. The *Heidelberger Katechismus* agrees that God’s special providence aims at man’s soul and body alike. In both cases, the underlying purpose is to invite mankind to praise, obey and serve the Creator. As the *Belgic Confession* has it, God is not only the creator of all things but “he doth also still uphold and govern them by his eternal providence and infinite power for the service of mankind, to the end that man may serve his God”.

2.3 Towards Enlightenment: providence contested

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the great majority of ordinary people continued to adhere to the traditional doctrine of providence as codified in the major confessions of faith. To the learned, sensitive to the latest developments in theology and philosophy, however, the idea of a divine providence to an increasing extent faced serious challenges.³¹

Old problems concerning the relationship between God as First Cause and humans as secondary causes, between man’s free will and the all-guiding government of God, and between providence, evil and sin occupied the minds of many intellectuals. In

³¹ A good (and quite unique) account of thinking about providence in the early-modern period, both in theology and natural philosophy, is provided in Krolzik, *Säkularisierung der Natur*.

theology,³² the three medieval *viae* of Thomist intellectualism, Scotist voluntarism and Ockhamist nominalism in later centuries translated into heated controversies, running across the borders of different denominations, about the efficacy of grace, and the share of divine foreknowledge and predestination in man's salvation. The sixteenth-century (Spanish) Neo-Scholastic movement, by amplifying Aquinas's distinction between nature and grace, contributed to an independent conception of nature, which rendered God's government and care more abstract and passive. The new Protestant focus on total corruption due to the Fall, prepared for in Franciscan theology, finally, especially among Lutherans raised the question if God's providence could be grasped by natural reason at all, and if God is not a *Deus absconditus*, a hidden God approachable through faith alone. Theological developments like these inevitably left their marks in philosophy and the emerging natural sciences.³³

On the threshold of the modern era, things were being complicated by the revival of Platonism, Stoicism and Epicureanism.³⁴ Partly in response to the popularity of astrology, which attributed powers to the heavenly bodies and supposed an astral influence on human behaviour and destiny, Renaissance writers such as Lorenzo Valla, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola and Pietro Pomponazzi began to defend man's responsibility and freedom in terms of pagan concepts of God. Although undeniably approaching it from a Christian point of view, their reliance on classical philosophy reintroduced old tensions between providence, fate, fortune and freedom of will. More or less successful attempts to harmonize Christian views with pagan ones were published throughout the early-modern period. Justus Lipsius, for example, believing that Stoicism was more pious than Aristotle's philosophy, in his well-known *De constantia* (1584) tried his best to reconcile Stoic fate with the Christian notion of providence. The French priest Pierre Gassendi, in turn, went as far as to do the same for Epicureanism. As he showed in his 1658 philosophical treatise, Epicurean physics could be modified in such a way that providence could be seen as the order and finality imposed on atomic motions.

Due to all innovations in theology, philosophy and science, the discussion of which can be found in every handbook or companion on this period, traditional conceptions of divine interaction with this world in the early-modern period were continuously under threat.³⁵ In this respect it is useful to introduce a currently popular distinction between a radical, moderate and counter-Enlightenment.³⁶ The radical Enlightenment, which emerged in the second half of the seventeenth century, in every respect placed philosophical reason above faith and hence rejected all divine providence, supernatural agency and teleology. The counter-Enlightenment, in contrast, in favour of faith and

³² See Oakley, 'The absolute and ordained power of God in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century theology'; Goudriaan, *Reformed Orthodoxy and Philosophy, 1625-1750*, ch. 3 'The providence of God, secondary causality, and related topics'; Bac, *Perfect Will Theology*.

³³ See, for instance, Harrison, 'Voluntarism and early modern science'.

³⁴ Poppi, 'Fate, fortune, providence and human freedom'.

³⁵ Lloyd, *Providence Lost*, chs. 5-8 discusses the "narrative of shifts and transformations in ideas of providence" in the work of Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz, Voltaire, Hume and Rousseau.

³⁶ This distinction, first made by Margaret Jacob, is central to the following trilogy by Jonathan Israel: *Radical Enlightenment*; *Enlightenment Contested*; and *Democratic Enlightenment*.

authority rejected philosophical reason altogether and remained committed to orthodox interpretations of providence. The moderate Enlightenment, finally, took an intermediate position and tried to reconcile reason and religion. Departing from the idea of a created reality and a divine hand at work in history, moderate thinkers endeavoured to attune traditional ideas about God to new developments in (natural) philosophy. However artificial and overly simplistic this trichotomy may be, it at least shows that (the existence of) divine providence was a bone of contention from the seventeenth century onwards.³⁷

The early-modern transformation ³⁸

The moderate and counter-Enlightenment had the most adherents by far. This is not to say, however, that the idea discussed in this chapter remained unaffected. Like other Christian truths, for example as to the divine inspiration of Scripture, original sin and the two natures of Christ, the doctrine of providence was openly challenged and put into perspective. Yet the belief in God's government and care, also among leading philosophers, did not disappear but was rather transformed in enlightened directions.³⁹ Instead of giving up the doctrine, most writers from the period were at pains to adjust it to the new intellectual circumstances. The transformation that I have in mind consisted of at least five developments, which also characterize some of the economic interpretations discussed in the following chapters.

The first, most fundamental development may be called the *naturalization of providence*. More than ever before, God's presence in this world was equated, in a Stoic sense, with the order of nature itself. As product of higher intelligence, nature literally embodied the care and aims of the Creator and thus was providential as such. Its regularity and stability, its abundance and beneficence all demonstrated that things were once designed for the common good. In order to be involved in nature and history, God did not need to intervene in an existing order but could simply dispose things differently from the beginning. To be clear, traditional views of providence assumed a natural order too but refused to see it as autonomous. Most Catholic and Protestant theologians maintained that the creation required continuous supervision and regulation by the Creator. Seeming regularities like the course of the sun, ebb and flood, and the alternation of the seasons in the end depended on an active general providence. In the early-modern period, the typically Christian idea of God as personal agent, interacting with man and active-

³⁷ Israel, *Democratic Enlightenment*, p. 19 goes as far to claim that “[t]hroughout the history of the Enlightenment, whether we approach it from a scientific, religious, or political standpoint, this fundamental and irresolvable duality between the created and providential and non-created and non-providential schemes of reality was so important that it generally remained the chief factor shaping the Enlightenment's course”.

³⁸ This section draws on Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, chs. 14 'Rationalized Christianity' and 16 'The providential order', and *A Secular Age*, chs. 4 'Modern social imaginaries', 6 'Providential deism', and 7 'The impersonal order'. On each of the subjects discussed here there is a vast secondary literature of which I only present a small selection used in this section.

³⁹ Cf. Gusdorf, 'Déclin de la providence?' and May, 'The decline of providence?'.

ly steering the course of history, was gradually replaced by the assumption of God as the Great Architect of a universe ruled by impersonal laws.

What fundamentally changed man's understanding of the relation between God and this reality was the so-called 'mechanization of the world picture'.⁴⁰ In the seventeenth century, the Aristotelian natural philosophy with its explanations in terms of matter and form, natural tendencies and inherent powers was superseded by a mechanical conception of nature. Thanks to new discoveries in physics and astronomy, natural philosophers began to look upon nature as a machine made up of inanimate bodies and particles moved and controlled by external mechanical forces (or laws). The exclusion of spirit from the physical realm and the portrayal of the universe as a huge independent clockwork inevitably raised the question what role was left for God. Yet the new world view by no means meant the disappearance of the belief in providence.⁴¹ Fearing its materialistic and atheistic conclusions, many writers rather sought to reconcile the new ideas with traditional Christian beliefs. God was emphatically presented as the all-wise Creator of the universe, and its mechanical laws as manifestations of divine government and care. Some went as far as to argue that the Creator had to intervene periodically to adjust the word machine, the first and greatest of His miracles. The reduction of God to a *Dieu horloger* anyhow meant that the idea of providence became more general and abstract.

A second development, closely related to the first, was the *demystification of providence*.⁴² The tendency to understand divine providence in general terms, working through secondary causes alone, caused the belief in particular providences for individuals and peoples to become less plausible. Even more unlikely within the new mechanical conception of the universe, were extraordinary forms of divine government involving miraculous interventions in nature or history. The belief in wonderful events and phenomena such as miracles, marvels and prodigies indeed was increasingly contested.⁴³ In Christian theology, the question whether *opera Dei extraordinaria* are possible had always been answered affirmatively. Miracles were reported in the Bible and in the early Church had played an important apologetic function in demonstrating the existence of God. Denying the very possibility of miracles, as was eventually done by some radicals in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries,⁴⁴ according to orthodox theologians amounted to denying the existence of an omnipotent God. Due to an increasing knowledge of the

⁴⁰ The classic account is Dijksterhuis, *The Mechanization of the World Picture*. For recent studies, see Garber & Roux, *The Mechanization of Natural Philosophy*.

⁴¹ Westfall, *Science and Religion in Seventeenth-Century England*, ch. 4 'Divine providence and natural law'; Kubrin, 'Newton and the cyclical cosmos'; Heimann, 'Voluntarism and immanence'; Deason, 'Reformation theology and the mechanistic conception of nature'; Osler, *Divine Will and the Mechanical Philosophy*; Westfall, *Science and Religion in Seventeenth-Century England*, ch. 4 'Divine providence and natural law'.

⁴² Brown, 'The regularization of providence in post-Cartesian philosophy'.

⁴³ Hazard, *La crise de la conscience européenne 1680-1715*, prt. 2, ch. 2 'La négation du miracle, les comètes, les oracles et les sorciers'; Bron, *Das Wunder*; Redwood, *Reason, Ridicule and Religion*, ch. 6 'Witches, apparitions and revelations'; Burns, *The Great Debate on Miracles*.

⁴⁴ Israel, *Radical Enlightenment*, ch. 12 'Miracles denied' discusses the role of Spinoza.

laws and regularities of the natural world, however, the space for supernatural interventions was further limited. It made some Christian writers believe that the age of miracles was past, after which the Almighty only made use of natural means to bring about His will.

Unlike pre-modern conceptions of nature, miracles in the new mechanical world view came to be understood as violations or suspensions of fixed laws of nature.⁴⁵ Besides leading to natural instability, such interruptions of the regular operations of the world were difficult to imagine from a theological point of view. Why, for instance, would God interfere in a properly functioning order and frustrate His own aims, when the same result could have been obtained by designing things differently from the outset? Genuine miracles, therefore, would defeat God's initial plans and moreover were unnecessary. Despite the growing scepticism about miracles (which was fostered by the emerging biblical criticism that casted doubts on the miracles recorded there),⁴⁶ most intellectuals were unwilling to deny the existence of extraordinary providences altogether. Strategies to leave room for believing in miracles varied from calling suspensions of the laws of nature 'very rare' to assuming that miraculous events had been programmed in the creation from the beginning of time, and portraying miracles as relative, beyond the comprehension of the spectator. It is these attempts to explain or play down seemingly mysterious and unexplainable phenomena which reflect a shift in thinking about providence.

The third development was the rise, at the beginning of the eighteenth century, of *providential optimism*, the idea that what happens to us due to God's actions is the best (*optimum*) possible and best thinkable.⁴⁷ What this position basically denies or ignores is the impact of the Fall of man. The world that we live in is not a suboptimal place, corrupted by evil and sin, but the original product of a benevolent and all-wise Creator. What is commonly called natural or moral evil either is only apparent or somehow contributes to a greater good. Although most of these ideas have old origins, even in Christian theology itself, as a whole they were at odds with some core Christian doctrines. According to the traditional view, the world indeed once was created for the best but after the Fall became permeated with imperfections, standing in need of redemption. God's grace and general providence may temper the worst effects of human sin, but do not completely eliminate suffering and pain. What is more, special and extraordinary providence are necessary to realize the divine plan of salvation. Before the Second Coming of Christ, God's government may involve adversity to punish the wicked or to test the pious. From the point of view of the individual, in other words, in a fallen world the providence of God is not necessarily an agreeable prospect. In the early-modern period, however, the punitive aspect of providence was overtly doubted. The focus was on the benevolence of the Creator.

⁴⁵ Harrison, 'Newtonian science, miracles, and the laws of nature', pp. 531-553 and 'Miracles, early modern science, and rational theology'.

⁴⁶ Cf. Hillerbrand, 'The historicity of miracles'.

⁴⁷ Hazard, *La pensée européenne au XVIIIe siècle*, prt. 3, ch. 3 'Nature et bonté. L'optimisme'; Vereker, *Eighteenth-Century Optimism*; Fonnesu, 'Der Optimismus und seine Kritiker im Zeitalter der Aufklärung'; Mason, 'Optimism, progress, and philosophical history'.

All the same, evil did not disappear and still required an explanation. While moral evil could be made sense of in terms of human responsibility, natural evils like diseases, plagues and disasters proved harder to reconcile with the goodness of God. The great Lisbon earthquake of 1755 in particular, which killed between 10,000 and 100,000 people, among scholars led to a great controversy on the meaning of suffering.⁴⁸ Whereas divines continued to link disasters to the wrath of God, some radical writers came up with purely 'natural' explanations. Both extremes raised the question if the Creator could not have designed things in a better way. Precisely this question was answered in the negative by advocates of metaphysical optimism. The actual world, they argued, is the best of all possible worlds that God could choose from. In an attempt to defend this position, several philosophers of name came up with ingenious 'theodicies' (from Θεός, God and δίκη, justice) that vindicated God's omnipotence, goodness and justice in the light of evil.⁴⁹ In this, providence and evil were contrasted as much as possible. Pain and suffering do not come from God, but are only allowed for, seeing that in each possible world there is necessarily a certain degree of evil. This mentality was typical not only of the eighteenth-century theodicists but also for many of their contemporaries.

The fourth development was the so-called *anthropocentric shift*. Providence became human-centred in that God's purposes were limited to promoting man's happiness.⁵⁰ The Creator's plans for mankind would involve bringing about an order of human flourishing and well-being for those who recognized and obeyed it. Older conceptions of providence were theocentric and put the glory of God first. True, man in the Judeo-Christian tradition always had a privileged position within the divine plan. Everything in the world existed for man's use, and God's special providence aimed at his temporal welfare. Man's highest good, however, had always been defined in terms of a transcendent relationship. True happiness consisted in contemplating or serving God, and required a personal conversion or transformation because of sin. The providential order, and Christ's coming into this reality more specifically, precisely was meant to lead mankind and history to its spiritual destination. In the new vision, God was presented as a gracious benefactor who has designed everything for our earthly good. Rewards in an after-life do exist, but are essentially but magnifications of the happiness that befalls us here in this life.

The limitation of the purpose of providence to man's happiness clearly fitted in with a broader intellectual change.⁵¹ The early-modern period more generally is associated with a secularization of happiness. Under influence of neo-Stoic and neo-Epicurean

⁴⁸ Löffler, *Lissabons Fall - Europas Schrecken*; Israel, *Democratic Enlightenment*, ch. 2 'Nature and Providence. Earthquakes and the human condition'.

⁴⁹ Hazard, 'Le problème du mal dans la conscience Européenne du dix-huitième siècle'; Lorenz, *De Mundo Optimo*; Fonnesu, 'The problem of theodicy'; Nadler, *The Best of All Possible Worlds*.

⁵⁰ Vereker, *Eighteenth-Century Optimism*, ch. 2 'Reason and happiness'.

⁵¹ Hazard, *La crise de la conscience européenne 1680-1715*, prt. III, ch. 5 'Le bonheur sur la terre' and *La pensée européenne au XVIII^e siècle*, prt. I, ch. 2 'Le bonheur'; Mauzi, *L'idée du bonheur dans la littérature et la pensée Françaises au XVIII^e siècle*; Edel, 'Happiness and pleasure', pp. 379-382; Porter, *The Creation of the Modern World*, ch. 11 'Happiness'; McMahon, 'Pursuing an enlightened gospel' and McMahon, *Happiness*, prt. 1.

ideas, traditional concepts like *eudemonia* and *beatitudo* that were originally linked to God were gradually reinterpreted in this-worldly terms. Happiness in the here and now, reduced by some to experiences of pleasure and the absence of pain, was eventually elevated to the true aim of human life. Happiness was to become one of the central themes of the Enlightenment and made the eighteenth century an ‘age of happiness’.⁵² This not so much because this state was thought to be realized, but because the happy life was regarded as a widespread ideal as well as an important measure for progress. Developments in politics and economics were more and more evaluated in terms of their contribution to what Francis Hutcheson called “the greatest happiness for the greatest numbers”.⁵³ At first, the new longing for temporal happiness did not replace trust in providence but was rather grounded in it. As fountain of all goodness, God the Creator as it were guaranteed for an ever-increasing happiness.

The fifth and final development was an increasing emphasis on what may be called *latent providence*, i.e. forms of divine planning that are not yet (fully) realized. According to this idea, rather than an overruling power that is actively engaged in nature and history, providence is the name of a range of potentialities in this world, included in the creation by God from the beginning. These possibilities and opportunities, which await human recognition and realization, together form a favourable setting for human flourishing and progress.⁵⁴ Traditional conceptions of providence stressed the beneficence of the divine plan as well but usually did not require the free participation of man in it. God worked through secondary causes and used humans in bringing about His purposes but mainly so in an unconscious and instrumental way. The unfolding of the divine plan by no means depended on the willingness of individuals to contribute to it. Divine providence was held to be self-realizing and to underlie the normal course of events. In the new conception, the Creator relates to this world primarily in having established some wholesome order of things which can be complied with, or upset, by human beings over time.

That which enables man to cooperate with God in the providential plan was his unique rationality. To get informed about the higher meaning of things, we as reasonable beings are no longer dependent on revelation or grace. The divine intentions and purposes can simply be ‘read off’ the actual creation, namely by examining what is natural and what is designed for our good. The world after all is the product of higher intelligence and therefore carries a divine imprint. As we will see in the next chapters, the geography of the world, the order of society, and various passions of man were all thought to contain clues of what God has in store for us. Some of these constellations were already effected,

⁵² The term ‘age of happiness’ is based on Buijs, *De eeuw van het geluk*.

⁵³ [Francis Hutcheson], *An Inquiry into the Original of our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue* (1725), p. 164.

⁵⁴ Llyod, *Providence Lost*, ch. 8 ‘Providence as progress’. I tend to disagree with J.B. Bury’s claim, in *The Idea of Progress*, p. 73 (cf. pp. 21-22), that “it was not till men felt independent of Providence that they could organize a theory of progress”. As Israel, *Democratic Enlightenment*, ch. 9 ‘Scottish Enlightenment and man’s ‘progress’’ shows, eighteenth-century theories of progress easily could go hand in hand with a belief in providential superintendence.

albeit that they could be frustrated, while the potential of others was not yet actualized. In order to reap the benefits of the latter, they needed to be recognized, maintained and further developed. In this, the attitude required of man came close to the Stoic rule to live according to nature. Participating in the divine plan with this world is living in accordance with the design of things under the direction of our God-given faculties. The divine providence at work here fully respects the autonomy of human reason, and was typical for the early-modern age.

The rise of deism

The five developments outlined above all came together in the current called deism.⁵⁵ This religious movement, which had its heydays between around 1660 and 1730 and which has been identified as the religious philosophy of the Enlightenment par excellence, also had links with writers on economic subjects such as Bernard Mandeville, Jean-Jacques Rousseau and David Hume. The habit, as popular today as then, to see in deism a commitment to secularization or, worse, an ‘atheism in masquerade’ should not readily be adopted. True, from a historical point of view deism maybe was only one step removed from atheism, but its adherents saw themselves as sincere worshippers of the Deity. By definition alone, *Deus* was at the heart of deism, and there are no compelling reasons to see things otherwise. “The modern deists”, it could be read in the French *Encyclopédie*, “are a sect or sort of pretended strong minds, known in England under the name of freethinkers, people who think freely, whose character does not profess any particular form or system of religion, but simply acknowledges the existence of a God”.⁵⁶ The fact remains that at that time the movement was unorthodox in every conceivable respect. First coined in sixteenth-century France, the label ‘deist’ like ‘atheist’ was a pejorative one, meant to discredit the theological views of the author in question. The deists publicly criticized Christianity, and for example were associated with Socinianism and Arianism for rejecting the Trinity.

If deism existed at all, it certainly was no school of thought. Though some of the writers concerned were friends, they mostly operated in isolation and not seldom disagreed with each other. Deists anyway were difficult to detect since hardly anyone presented himself as such and their language was close to that of enlightened theists. A fairly uncontroversial list of writers was provided by John Leland in his *A View of the Principal Deistical Writers* (1754-5), one out of many critical commentaries that appeared during the eighteenth century. It includes Herbert of Cherbury, Hobbes, Charles Blount, Toland,

⁵⁵ Some comprehensive accounts include Betts, *Early Deism in France*; Hudson, *The English Deists and Enlightenment and Modernity*; Wigelsworth, *Deism in Enlightenment England*; and Redwood, *Reason, Ridicule and Religion*. Short introductions are provided in Feil, ‘Déisme’; Champion, ‘Deism’; and Lund, ‘Deism’.

⁵⁶ [Edme-François Mallet], ‘Déistes’, in Diderot & D’Alembert, *Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers* (1754), p. 773: “Les deists moderns sont une secte ou sorte de prétendus esprits forts, connus en Angleterre sous le nom de *free-thinkers*, gens qui pensent librement, dont le caractère est de ne point professer de forme ou de système particulier de religion, mais de se contenter de reconnaître l’existence d’un Dieu”.

Lord Shaftesbury, Anthony Collins, Thomas Woolston, Matthew Tindal, Thomas Morgan, Thomas Chubb, Lord Bolingbroke and, with due attention in later editions, Hume. At the continental side, Voltaire and D'Holbach in France and Reimarus and Mendelssohn in Germany among others were counted among the deists. As staunch opponents of the idea that theological truths can be caught in eternal dogmas, the theological views of these writers were little uniform and never converged into a fixed doctrine. Deists, according to once more the *Encyclopédie*, are persons “who are neither atheists nor Christians, are not entirely without religion, but reject all revelation as pure fiction, & do not believe but what is recognized by the natural light [of reason], & what is believed in all religions”.⁵⁷

Broadly speaking, deism had both a positive-doctrinal and negative-critical side.⁵⁸ To begin with the latter, it criticized Christendom and the clergy more specifically for having obscured true religion. Other than the *Encyclopédie* suggests, the deists did not deny divine revelation *per se* but rather objected to calling its content mysterious. Good biblical scholarship, such as could be found in the work of Hobbes and Spinoza, showed that there is little miraculous or irrational to it. The theologies and hermeneutic methods designed to explain the mysteries of Scripture were manipulative instruments of priesthood, intended to keep laymen away from the simple truths contained in it and to leave religious authority to the Church. Basically it was possible to arrive at the same truths by sound reason alone, so that holy books in a sense were superfluous. The deep desire embodied in the writings of the deists was to return to a purified, natural religion (which should not be confused with natural theology, see below). As the similarity of different world religions already indicated, such a religion had once existed before it fell prey to theologians. Its content was not to be sought in the dogmatic traditions of Christianity, which only promoted ignorance and caused endless religious conflicts, but in the common theological notions shared by all reasonable beings.

A first attempt to define the content of truth given by reason was made by Lord Herbert of Cherbury. In *De religione gentilium* (1663) he formulated five common notions inscribed in the hearts of all men of all nations and ages: “1. That there is one supreme God. 2. That he is chiefly to be worshipped. 3. That piety and virtue is the principal part of his worship. 4. That we must repent our sins, and if we do so God will pardon them. 5. That there are rewards for good men, and punishments for bad men ... both here and hereafter”.⁵⁹ Later Blount supplemented this list with the belief that God governs the world by His providence, a doctrine that apparently was not endorsed by theists only. However, Cherbury's deistic 'articles of faith', which to him formed the pillars on which all religion is built, were certainly not shared by all deists. In particular the immortality

⁵⁷ Mallet, 'Déistes', p. 773: "Le nom de deists est donné sur - tout à ces sortes de personnes qui n'étant ni athées ni chrétiennes, ne sont point absolument sans religion, mais qui rejettent toute révélation comme une pure fiction, & ne croient que ce qu'ils reconnoissent par les lumières naturelles, & que ce qui est crû dans toute religion".

⁵⁸ Gawlick, 'Deismus'.

⁵⁹ John Leland, *A View of the Principal Deistical Writers that have Appeared in England in the last and present Century* (1754), p. 5.

of the soul and the belief that God is concerned with the moral behaviour of individuals, “proved”, according to Blount, “by our admitting Providence”, were controversial. Above all the deistic creed was a negative one. While sticking to the existence of a Supreme Being, deists tended to reject most of the central doctrines of Christianity, including the fall of man, the mediating role of Christ, and the possibility of miracles.

As to the question of divine providence, the deists were divided. Samuel Clarke, one of their prominent opponents, in this respect rightly distinguished between four groups of writers.⁶⁰ The first believe that the world was created by an eternal, infinite and intelligent Being, but at the same time “agree with the Epicureans in this, that they fancy God does not at all concern himself in the government of the world, nor has any regard to, or care of, what is done therein”. This position, Clarke argues, is nothing else than “downright atheism”. The second group believes not only in the Being of God but also in his providence, that is “that every natural thing that is done in the world, is produced by the power, appointed by the wisdom, and directed by the government of God”. What these writers deny, however, is that God takes notice of the actions of men, which belong to the moral sphere. Therefore, by implication, they are equally atheistic. The next group adheres to all the right notions of the “natural attributes of God, and his all-governing Providence”, also among his rational creatures, but contradict the immortality of the soul. As Clarke explains, this view too deprives God of his moral attributes and therefore cannot but lead to atheism. Finally, there are the “only true deists” with a right understanding of God’s being and providence. Nevertheless they are wrong in believing that all theological truths can be discovered by the light of nature alone.

The safest generalization may be that most deists endorsed a general providence, while dismissing the existence or necessity of a particular one.⁶¹ God’s deliberate actions were thought to be limited to the original act of the world’s creation and setting up of the laws of nature. Deism for this reason came to stand for the belief in an impersonal and inanimate order of nature. Its God was compared to a clockmaker who, having created and wound the great clock of the universe, afterwards left it to function independently and no longer exerted any influence. Although there was some truth to this impression that we find among contemporaries and modern commentators alike, in reality the deist conception of God was less negative. Rather than stemming from disbelief, the reduction of divine activity to the beginning of time was an expression of reverence for the transcendence and immanence of the Deity. Frequent miracles and other supernatural interventions were simply deemed unworthy of a perfect and all-wise God. The created order of nature necessarily was the best possible one, not requiring any further adjustments or corrections. Formulated positively, the deists happened to identify providence with the laws of nature by which God governs the world. Having foreseen and

⁶⁰ Samuel Clarke, *A Discourse Concerning the Unchangeable Obligations of Natural Religion and the Truth and Certainty of the Christian Revelation* (1706), pp. 17-39.

⁶¹ See on this specific point Wigelsworth, ‘God always acts suitable to his character, as a wise and good being’; and Lucci & Wigelsworth, ‘God does not act arbitrarily, or interpose unnecessarily’. Compare, however, Waligore, ‘The piety of the English deists’.

fine-tuned everything from the beginning, the creation as a whole could be seen as embodiment of the divine care and intentions.

2.4 Divine enlightenment: providence as ‘popular’ belief

The above account of the transformation of providence is largely in line with the stereotype view of the period of a providential world view being gradually replaced by a naturalistic one. However, it is not the full story. In the literature on the seventeenth-century scientific revolution and eighteenth-century Enlightenment there typically is little attention to a persisting faith in divine interaction with this world among orthodox and moderate thinkers. In reality, the belief in providence proved extraordinary elastic, and was constantly accommodated to new intellectual trends. Equally underexposed is the survival well into the nineteenth century of a popular providential discourse that testified to divine involvement from a variety of perspectives.⁶² Especially (but certainly not exclusively) among ordinary people there existed a tendency to detect the hand of God in the most mundane events. Explainable in natural terms or not, all events in daily life or society at large somehow reflected God’s purposes. Coexisting alongside serious discussions in philosophy and science, stories about astonishing providences, miracles and deliverances attracted the attention not only of the masses but also of the learned. For despite all the progress in knowledge about the natural world there was still plenty of mystery in the works of creation that one could not fully comprehend.

Early-modern man still very much lived in a culture of wonders.⁶³ The process of rationalization or *Entzauberung der Welt*,⁶⁴ which in the eighteenth century was well on its way, could not yet prevent nature from having unstable boundaries. In addition to remarkable providences, people reported visions and apparitions. Angels and devils, ghosts and witches, and demons and monsters did not merely belong to the medieval realm of fantasy but continued to feature in numerous popular stories. Astrology, prophecy, magic, sorcery and witchcraft were seriously debated by the clergy and seemed ineradicable. The ontological distinction inherited from the Middle Ages between the natural, supernatural and preternatural (unexplainable, abnormal or puzzling occurrences outside or beyond the common course of nature) in practice was vague and hard to maintain.⁶⁵ Eventually incorporated into the natural realm, naturally impossible or counter-natural miracles (*miracula*) and preternatural wonders or marvels (*mirabilia*) for a long time were treated with utmost seriousness, also among intellectuals. The public outcry caused by such enlightened books as Pierre Bayle’s *Pensees diverses ... A l’occasion de la*

⁶² Clark, ‘Providence, predestination and progress’.

⁶³ The secondary literature on angels, witches, monsters and other objects of popular belief in the early-modern world is vast. Some well-known surveys are Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*; Daston & Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature, 1150-1750*; and Cameron, *Enchanted Europe*.

⁶⁴ This famous phrase comes from Weber, *Geistige Arbeit als Beruf*, p. 16.

⁶⁵ Clark, *Thinking with Demons*, pp. 261ff; Daston, ‘Marvelous facts and miraculous evidence in early-modern Europe’, pp. 78ff; Kibbey, ‘Mutations of the supernatural’.

Comète qui parut au mois de Decembre 1680, which denied that comet appearances were a form of divine speaking, and Balthasar Bekker's *De betoverde weereld* (1691), which criticized all kinds of popular superstitions, only shows how widespread these beliefs still were.

Divine providence in many ways was linked to this enchanted universe. If wonderful and miraculous phenomena were not caused by God directly, then He at least allowed them or used them for some higher purpose. The readiness to see the finger of God at work everywhere in this world had all to do with the early-modern world view in general. Most fundamentally, this reality was held to be a created reality, inevitably bearing the stamp and traces of influence of its Creator. Nature was seen as a book (*liber naturæ*), in which the presence of God could be 'read off'.⁶⁶ As the *Confession de Foy* had it, God's existence is not only revealed in Scripture (*liber scripturæ*) but can also be known "from the creation, conservation and government of the universal world, which for our eyes is like a beautiful book, in which all creatures, small and large, are like letters that make us contemplate the invisible things of God".⁶⁷ Going back all the way to Augustine in the fifth century, the idea of nature as readable book in the seventeenth and eighteenth century gained great popularity. History, that other sphere of divine influence, was often called a mirror or theatre in which God could be contemplated.⁶⁸ The influential Dutch humanist writer Gerardus Vossius accordingly recommended history as antidote to the school of Epicurus, since on closer observation grand history formed a bright mirror of providence.⁶⁹

In the second place, the early-modern world view generally speaking eschewed chance. As the product of an all-wise Creator, everything either indirectly or immediately was under divine control. The habit of some to attribute things to the wheel of fortune was all the more reason to deny the very possibility of chance, accident or fortune. Although the latter left more room for contingency, Protestant and Catholic theologians agreed that the doctrine of providence implied that God had foreseen everything that was to happen in the world He himself created. *Fortuna* and *fatum* were seen as heathen concepts that could only be used in a metaphorical sense. What seems to be an accident or coincidence from a human perspective, in reality cannot escape the providence of God. Did not the Bible teach that without His will no hair will fall from someone's head nor a sparrow to the ground? And if God's care extends to these trivial occurrences, how much more is His government concerned with the things in life that really matter? That noth-

⁶⁶ Curtius, *Europäische Literatur und Lateinisches Mittelalter*, pp. 300-323; Rothacker, *Das 'Buch der Natur'*; Berkel, *Citaten uit het boek der natuur*, pp. 267-275; Debus & Walton, *Reading the Book of Nature*; Jorink, *Reading the Book of Nature in the Dutch Golden Age, 1575-1715*; Van Berkel & Vanderjagt, *The Book of Nature in Early Modern and Modern History*; Van der Meer & Mandelbrote, *Nature and Scripture in the Abrahamic Religions*.

⁶⁷ [Guido de Bres], *Confession de Foy* (1561), p. 1: "par le monde créé, conduit & gouverné par lequel est deuat nos yeux comme vn beau liure, auquel toutes creatures petites & grandes seruent de lettres pour nous faire contempler les choses inuisibles de Dieu". Cf. Van den Brink, *Als een schoon boec* and Kunz, *Als een prachtig boek*.

⁶⁸ Christian, *Theatrum Mundi*.

⁶⁹ Rademaker, *Gerardus Vossius*, pp. 31-33.

ing could happen without God's permission was far from an unbearable thought. According to the theologians of the age, what would make life really intolerable was the Epicurean idea that all things happen by pure chance.

Visible sermons: providence observed

Of all supernatural and preternatural phenomena, God's hand was most evident in so-called 'remarkable providences' and 'wonder stories', a peculiar discourse that survived throughout the early-modern period.⁷⁰ Some of the secondary literature wrongly suggests that it was reserved to Anglo-American writers, and Puritans more specifically. It is true that Puritans of all sorts were champions in this genre, but observations and experiences of divine activity in this world were also popular in religious denominations in other countries. Unlike theological discourses that tried to prove the existence of providence from Scripture, stories about remarkable providences testified to God's government and care in everyday reality. Since God's hand was not visible literally and providence preferred to work through regular channels and secondary causes, the providences in question required theological scrutiny. Misfortunes and disasters in varying degrees usually were explained as divine judgements, or at least as trials for true believers, while worldly successes and remarkable preservations were expressions of divine goodwill. Theologically speaking, such interpretations of mundane events were not farfetched. Scripture after all tells of Hezekiah, Job, Abraham and Jonah, who were respectively punished, tested, blessed and delivered by the Almighty.

Most accounts of particular or extraordinary providences, recorded in sermons, pamphlets or personal diaries, were concerned with sorrow and luck in the small. Deadly diseases, miraculous healings and fortunate deliverances could not be ascribed to mere fortune or chance but were divine punishments or blessings, corresponding one way or another with someone's way of life. In the eyes of many, life was a moral economy in which one's moral behaviour and religious convictions had consequences. Since man's sins were many, the focus mostly was on the wrath of God. Clergymen tended to ascribe sudden deaths, incurable diseases or local emergencies to the moral defects of the individual or the local community. The period produced numerous 'true' stories about the adversity and misfortune that befell atheists, blasphemers, sabbath-breakers, swearers, adulters, murderers, thieves, usurers, and so forth. That ungodliness could provoke the wrath of God was clear, again, from Scripture. In an attempt to confirm this, an Oxford University fellow called Zachary Bogan published *A View of the Threats and Punishments Recorded in the Scriptures, Alphabetically composed* (1653), a 600-page invento-

⁷⁰ This and the following section draws upon Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, ch. 4 'Providence'; Burns, *An Age of Wonders*; Hall, *Worlds of Wonder, Days of Judgment*, ch. 2 'A world of wonders'; Winship, *Seers of God*; Gillespie, *Devoted People*, chs. 3 'The hand of God: a providential world' and 6 'A world of wonders'; Walsham, *Providence in Early Modern England*; Van Lieburg, *Merkwaardige voorzienigheden*. See also Von Geyser, *Vorsehungsglaube und Kosmologie*.

ry of what punishments were likely to follow upon different kinds of sin, ranging from ‘adultery’ to ‘worship of God neglected’.

Just like the medieval *exempla* (edifying stories of divine judgments and mercies used by priests to enliven their sermons), of which not seldom they were copies, anecdotes of remarkable providences fulfilled a moralizing aim. Besides bringing comfort to the pious, to the larger public they served as reassurance that in the long run sins do not go unpunished and virtues will be rewarded. The already frightening titles of some pamphlets and books accordingly spoke of divine punishments as “trumpet” or “alarm bell”, meant to call sinners and atheist to repentance. Other stories rather were a “looking glass” or “mirror”, allowing people to examine themselves to find out if they suffered from equally dangerous sins and shortcomings. Referring to the ancient metaphor of the theatre of life, still others presented a “divine tragedy” or “spectacle” to make visible the government of God. Remarkable providences, in short, were visible sermons that showed that the Christian doctrine in question was more than an abstract theological concept. Apparently, divine providence manifested itself not only in some general sense in the order of nature but also in the life of individuals.

Yet providential explanations of mundane events were not limited to the private sphere. With the same ease, national disasters like earthquakes, floods, epidemics and famines were accounted for in theological terms.⁷¹ Even if produced by purely natural causes, they could still be seen as God’s response to the sins of people. Well into the eighteenth century, be it to a decreasing extent, natural disasters were explained as warnings of God or, in case they affected hostile nations, as deserved judgments from heaven. Virtually all catastrophes were followed by a flood of homiletic and moralizing commentaries that tried to identify the cause of God’s wrath in some political or religious situation. The same was true of outbreaks and terminations of wars, the coming and going of monarchs, and religious conflicts and revivals. Like natural disasters, these were not just random events but pages in the book of history. In contrast to the facts recorded in the book of nature, however, historical developments lent themselves to a wide range of interpretations, depending on the religious orientation and political affiliation of the writer who commented on them. Seemingly pious reflections on the providence of God hence could go hand in hand with politico-religious polemics and propaganda.⁷² In a deeply divided Europe, the misfortune of one nation of course was God’s blessing of another nation.

What divine punishments in the small and in the large had in common is that they were usually preceded by heavenly warnings.⁷³ Patient and gracious as He was, God did not punish at once but first called for conversion and penance. Building on a long-standing tradition, in the early-modern period so-called portents (*portentum*) or prodi-

⁷¹ Buisman, *Tussen vroomheid en Verlichting*.

⁷² For an illustration, see Worden, ‘Providence and politics in Cromwellian England’.

⁷³ Relevant literature includes Wilson, *Signs and Portents*; Céard, *La nature et les prodiges*; Janković, *Reading the Skies*, ch. 3 ‘Public meteors’; Frijhoff, ‘Signs and wonders in seventeenth-century Holland’; Fix, ‘Comets in the early Dutch Enlightenment’; Jorink, *Reading the Book of Nature in the Dutch Golden Age*, ch. 3 ‘Comets: the debate on the “wonders in the heavens”’.

gies (*prodigium*), unusual happenings in either the natural or preternatural realm, were recognized as providential signs of the wrath of God. Monstrous births, beached whales, thunderstorms, comet appearances and eclipses were regarded as the most credible signs, but actually all wondrous phenomena ranging from unusual weather conditions to apparitions in the sky could be interpreted as such. Astronomical phenomena in particular resulted in wild theological speculations, since they were observable by many people and even in the New Testament were mentioned as divine signs. The late seventeenth-century campaign against the belief in portents was not successful in erasing this ‘superstition’ completely, certainly not among the common people. The fact that some portents had natural causes and could even be predicted, as in the case of comets, was not to say that they ceased to be divine warnings. For just like miracles, they could be part of the original design of God’s creation.

Historical evidence: providence collected

The interest in remarkable providences and wonder stories came not only from unlearned audiences. As early as the sixteenth century, theologians and other men of education trained at renowned universities published compilations of stories like these in encyclopedic anthologies.⁷⁴ Some of them, like Conrad Lycosthenes’s *Prodigiorum ac ostententorum chronicon* (1557), Pierre Boaistuau’s *Histoires prodigieuses* (1560), and Fortunio Liceti’s *De monstrorum natura, cassis et differentiis* (1616), focused on monsters, monstrous births and many other prodigies. English compilations from the first half of the seventeenth century, including Thomas Beard’s *The Theatre of Gods Judgements* (1597), John Reynolds’s *The Triumphs of Gods Revenge* (1621), and Samuel Clarke’s *A Mirrour Or Looking-Glasse Both for Saints and Sinners* (1646), in turn, presented numerous ‘true’ stories about divine judgments imposed on sinners and atheists.⁷⁵ Late seventeenth-century surveys like William Turner’s *A Compleat History Of the Most Remarkable Providences* (1697), with 223 chapters divided over more than 600 pages the high point of the genre, in addition paid attention to remarkable deliverances and admirable curiosities. Although it mainly flourished in the seventeenth century, the genre survived the Enlightenment and was only to disappear from the scene in the nineteenth century.⁷⁶

The anthologies of portents, judgments and providences bear resemblance to the medieval *exempla*-collections. Quite some examples in the early-modern books were simply borrowed from their medieval predecessors, sometimes after having been purified from Catholic superstitions. What is more, both types of collections served the same didactic and exemplary aim. New to the seventeenth and eighteenth-century anthologies was their apologetic aspect. Next to confirming believers in their faith, compilations of

⁷⁴ Schenda, *Die französische Prodigienliteratur in der zweiten Hälfte des 16. Jahrhunderts* and ‘Die Deutschen Prodigiensammlungen des 16. und 17. Jahrhunderts’; Jorink, *Reading the Book of Nature in the Dutch Golden Age*, ch. 6 ‘Books of wonders: from rarity to regularity’.

⁷⁵ Van Lieburg, *Merkwaardige voorzienigheden* and ‘Remarkable providences’.

⁷⁶ See Clark, ‘Providence, predestination & progress’, pp. 564-565 for various titles.

judgements and providences were thought to persuade atheists by empirical evidence. Around the turn of the seventeenth century, Beard remarks that his *Theatre* contains “ample matter and arguments to stoppe the mouthes of all Epicures and atheists of our age, and to leave them confounded in their errorrs, seeing that such a so many occurrents and punishments are manifest proofes, that there is a God above that guides the sterne [steer] of the world, and that taketh care of humane matters”.⁷⁷ Referring to Romans 1, Turner in the *Compleat History* goes even further by claiming that “to record providences, seems to be one of the best methods that can be pursued, against the abounding atheism of this age: for by works of providence, the confession of God, and the truth of his word, have been extorted from those very persons who have boldly denied it”.⁷⁸

A similar anti-atheistic intention was clear from a genre that was popular particularly in the Dutch Republic, to wit surveys of God’s miraculous works in history.⁷⁹ In contrast to the more or less random compilations of remarkable providences, these histories written by ministers provided chronologies of divine interventions (mostly against the Spanish-Catholic domination), meant to underline the divinely elected status of the new republic. Abraham van de Velde’s *De wonderen des Allerhoogsten* (1668), Jacobus Fruytier’s *De Versche Wonderen van den Allerhoogsten* (1718) and Theodorus van der Bell’s *Des Heeren Wonderweg in het verhoogen van het volk van Nederland* (1748) are only a few of the better known examples of books dealing with instances of divine government in the genesis of the Protestant nation. The typically orthodox Reformed (Voetian) historiography not only sought to underline the Protestant truth but also served as apologia for the traditional view of providence that allowed for genuine miracles against or above the regular course of nature. By making visible the hand of God in historical events, it implicitly or explicitly countered the rise of Cartesianism, Spinozism and eighteenth-century deism, which formed a threat to belief in God’s omnipotence and providence and basically paved the way for “atheistery”.

A striking aspect of many seventeenth-century anthologies was their ‘scientific’ approach. The analysis of all sorts of remarkable providences was often conducted in a highly serious and scrupulous way. Several compilers carefully disclosed their sources and, in case they relied on oral testimonies, emphasized the trustworthiness of their informants. Some of them followed a typically seventeenth-century methodology: stories and anecdotes were collected, recorded and commented upon. An interesting example is the so-called ‘Poole project’, named after the Presbyterian clergyman Matthew Poole.⁸⁰ His *A Designe for Registering Illustrious Providences* (1675) set out a project to map the “activities of the Lord” in England. In each county secretaries had to be appointed who,

⁷⁷ Th[omas] Beard, *The Theatre of Gods Judgements* (1597), ‘The preface’ (unpaginated).

⁷⁸ William Turner, *A Compleat History Of the Most Remarkable Providences, Both Of Judgment and Mercy, Which have Hapned in this Present Age* (1697), ‘To the courteous reader’ (unpaginated).

⁷⁹ Kuiper, ‘Het wonderwerk in de historie’.

⁸⁰ For a detailed description of the Poole project, see Burns, *Age of Wonders*, ch. 1 ‘Organizing the prodigious: the Poole project and the *Mirabilis Annus* tracts’.

with the help of four or five correspondents, were supposed to record and collect providential stories. After the network of secretaries had decided on their authenticity at a public meeting, and after some necessary information about time, place and witnesses of the incident were added, the reports had to be sent to Poole in Syon College in London for further analysis and publication. The project gradually declined but was continued in New England by Increase Mather, the later president of Harvard College. His *Essay for the Recording of Illustrious Providences* (1684) was preceded by an eight-step methodology for the successful collection of reliable stories.

The projects of Poole and Mather are reminiscent of the English Royal Society, founded in the same period, which endeavoured to increase the stock of knowledge in a similar inductive way. Interestingly, Francis Bacon, whose philosophy was a great source of inspiration to the Royal Society, in his program for reforming natural history and philosophy included both a preternatural “history of marvailes”, as a part of natural history, and a supernatural “history of providence”, as part of ecclesiastical history.⁸¹ Cleaned from “fables, and popular errors”, the former should collect the heterocrites and irregulars of nature, including “narrations of sorceries, witchecrafted, dreames, diuinations, and the like”. Prodigies and other miracles, which are not natural, should be excluded since they are part of the history of providence. Sometimes, Bacon writes, “it pleaseth God for our better establishment, and the confuting of those which are as without God in the world; to write it in such text and capitall letters, that, as the prophet saith, He that runneth by, may read it [Habakkuk 2:2]”. Hence it makes sense to collect as well these “notable euent and examples of Gods iudgements, chastizements, deliurances and blessings”.⁸² Apart from Bacon’s justification, there was a still more direct connection to the Royal Society. Judging by the preface of his *Essay*, Mather was inspired by a manuscript of stories sent to one of his colleagues by none other than Samuel Hartlib (“as I suppose”), another driving force behind the London society for improving natural knowledge.⁸³

Turner’s *Compleat History*, according to the front page “a work set on foot thirty years ago, by the Reverend Mr. Pool”, probably was the most scientific in its kind and as it were marked the transition to the physico-theological genre discussed below. It opens with ‘A practical introduction to the history of divine providence’ which develops a dogmatic framework for the remainder of the book. Among other things, the book seeks to prove the existence of God from nature. “Come thy ways, unbelieving atheist”, Turner writes, “and turn over this great volume of the divine creation; see what a bible nature herself presents thee with, unclasp’d, and open’d, the letters (for the most part) capital and legible, that he who runs may read, a God in every leaf, in every line, in every creature”. In addition to a part dealing with traditional themes like judgments, prodigies and

⁸¹ Daston & Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature*, pp. 220-231.

⁸² [Francis Bacon], *The Two Booke of Francis Bacon. Of the proficience and aduancement of Learning, diuine and humane* (1605), bk. 2, pp. 8, 9 and 16.

⁸³ The theological, and more specifically Puritan background of the Royal Society is discussed in great detail in Webster, *The Great Instauration*. See ch. 1 for the role of providential history in the Great Instauration project launched by Bacon.

apparitions, the actual collection of providences contains two parts with observations on the “wonders of nature” and “curiosities of art”. Whereas the first discusses all kinds of animals, natural phenomena and weather conditions which together are “enough to amuse and puzzle reason of the most ingenious and gigantic atheist in the world”,⁸⁴ the second describes how various improvements in physics, mechanics, agriculture, navigation, etc. have contributed to the perfection of nature. It was precisely these ‘non-miraculous’ proofs for the existence of God which were central to natural theology.

Natural theology: providence proved

Whereas the impact of popular wonder stories and tales about remarkable providences is uncertain, natural theology without doubt was part of the intellectual mainstream of the period.⁸⁵ Not to be confused with natural religion, natural theology is an umbrella term for all sorts of attempts to prove the existence and essence of God using reason or observation, unaided by evidence from (but nevertheless meant to confirm) revealed theology. Although some reserve the term for the English type of natural theology that emerged in the late seventeenth century, the genre had earlier manifestations in for instance the *theologia naturalis* of the Protestant school philosophy, the moralizing natural history of the Renaissance, and the writings of the Cambridge Platonists.⁸⁶ It roots went even further back in the Christian tradition, all the way to the Church Fathers and classical philosophers, notably Plato and the later Stoics. What the different approaches had in common is that they presented extra-biblical evidence for an almighty and all-wise Creator, either *a priori* through an analysis of ontological and metaphysical concepts or *a posteriori* through the empirical study of nature in the broadest sense of the term. As such natural theology provided a common language for Catholics, Protestants and even deists.

Natural theology in the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries was not primarily meant to supplement Scripture but to offer a defence of religion more general. The new emphasis on the belief that the existence of God could be proved independently of divine revelation had several stimuli. The most important of them may have been the perceived rise of unorthodoxy and unbelief. John Wilkins, one of the founders of the Royal Society, accordingly presented his natural-theological treatise as a “work never more necessary than in this degenerated age, which hath been so miserably over-run with scepticism and infidelity”.⁸⁷ The scepticism that Wilkins refers to was of both a religious kind, originating from the sixteenth-century schism of the Church, and a philosophical kind, resulting from developments in natural philosophy. As regards the latter, especially the new me-

⁸⁴ Turner, *Compleat History*, p. 1 and ‘The preface to the wonders of nature’ (unpaginated).

⁸⁵ Brooke, *Science and Religion*, ch. 6 ‘The fortunes and functions of natural theology’; McGrath, *Darwinism and the Divine*, ch. 3 ‘English natural theology of the Augustan age, 1690-1745’.

⁸⁶ Philipp, ‘Physicotheology in the age of Enlightenment’, esp. pp. 1251-1258; Ogilvie, ‘Natural history, ethics, and physico-theology’; Mandelbrote, ‘Early modern natural theologies’ and ‘The uses of natural theology in seventeenth-century England’; Calloway, *Natural Theology in the Scientific Revolution*.

⁸⁷ [John Wilkins], *Of the Principles and Duties of Natural Religion* (1675), ‘The preface’ (unpaginated).

chanical philosophy was thought to have sceptical if not atheistic potential. As is clear from the titles alone, what natural theologies offered was an *Antidote against* (Henry More) or *Confutation of Atheism* (Richard Bentley) and demonstrations of God's being and attributes *to convince the ungodly and unbelievers* (Bernard Nieuwentyt). In particular they formed an *Answer to Mr. Hobbs, Spinoza, And their Followers* (Samuel Clarke), and certainly also the radical Cartesians, who served as archetypes of philosophers paying lip service to some belief in a God while paving the way for a godless universe.

One the aims of the 'physico-theologies' of the Scientific Revolution was precisely to demonstrate that the new mechanical philosophy, if properly understood, did not conflict with religious orthodoxy but rather supported it.⁸⁸ Instead of casting doubt on the fundamental truths of Christianity, the regularity and complexity of the natural world provided ample evidence of divine intelligence and wisdom. The argument from design, which inferred the existence of a Designer from the order and beauty of the world, helped to legitimatize the enterprise of natural history and philosophy and showed it could be put to theological ends. As witnessed by the many natural-theological books using metaphors like *liber naturæ* or *theatrum* in their titles and introductions (the research on insects by the Dutch microscopist Jan Swammerdam in 1738 was posthumously published as *Bybel der nature*),⁸⁹ nature was literally conceived of as a sphere of divine revelation next to, or supplementary to Scripture. Nature in all its riches bears testimony to God's glory. In some circles, the study of nature for this reason came to be seen as a religious vocation, as it could give insight into the language and structure of God's creation, and eventually into the nature of the Creator himself. While some early publications in the genre combined it with stories about supernatural and preternatural phenomena, the focus shifted to the regular wonders of nature.

Although natural theology was more and also included rationalist approaches, certainly in the eighteenth century physico-theology was its most popular branch. To bridge the gap between the study of nature and Christian faith, the physico-theologians endeavored to combine natural history, natural philosophy and theology.⁹⁰ Meticulously investigating all of nature from the farthest reaches of the universe to the deepest bowels of the earth, using the microscope and telescope, they everywhere searched for traces of intelligent design. Their findings, consisting of endless rehearsals of instances of "contrivance" in the natural world, were compiled in large volumes which together made a cumulative case for the existence of God. One of the first systematic attempts in physico-theology that included a rejection of Aristotelian, Epicurean and Cartesian hypotheses, was offered by the leading naturalist John Ray in *The Wisdom of God Manifested in the Works of the Creation* (1691).⁹¹ Prompted, as so many others, by the words from Psalm 104 - "how manifold are thy works of Lord?" - the book respectively discusses the terres-

⁸⁸ Topham, 'Natural theology and the sciences'.

⁸⁹ On this and other Dutch examples, see Jorink, *Reading the Book of Nature in the Dutch Golden Age*.

⁹⁰ Harrison, 'Physico-theology and the mixed sciences'.

⁹¹ Gillespie, 'Natural history, natural theology, and social order'.

trial bodies, the four elements, the plant and animal kingdoms and the human body, which all testify to the wisdom and power of the Creator. As Ray claims in the preface, God's creation is so vast that even after his account there is still ample opportunity "to run over all the visible works of God in particular, and to trace the footsteps of his wisdom in the composition, order, harmony, and uses of every one of them".⁹²

Several of the Boyle Lectures, established in the same year "for proving the Christian religion against notorious infidels, viz. atheists, deists, pagans, Jews and Mahometans", took on this challenge and helped to popularize the genre. Throughout the eighteenth century, physico-theology was a widely adopted practice that enjoyed a considerable popularity. Illustrative of the latter is that William Derham's *Physico-Theology* (1713), probably one of the most famous Boyle Lectures, had reached its thirteenth edition by 1768 and was translated in five foreign languages. Around the turn of the century, physico-theology received a major boost from emerging Newtonianism.⁹³ Isaac Newton's scientific achievements, and more specifically the *Philosophiae naturalis principia mathematica* (1687) that formulated the laws of motion and the law of universal gravitation, were regarded as a useful weapon against all sorts of enemies of revealed religion. A rich source of illustrations of the argument from design, his works were eagerly cited in physico-theological discourses, something incidentally that Newton did not regret. The English natural philosopher himself on several occasions argued that the solar system hinted at the existence of an intelligent and powerful Being, and even provided Richard Bentley, the first Boyle lecturer, with suggestions as to how to put the findings of the *Principia* to apologetical use.

Though the physico-theological movement was strongest in England, it eventually spread to France, the Netherlands and above all Germany, resulting in literally hundreds of physico-theological publications.⁹⁴ Drawing inspiration from Derham's encyclopedic *Physico-Theology* and *Astro-Theology*, in continental Europe the genre branched out in a wide range of specialized compendia focusing on different aspects of God's creation. To give some typical examples: *Akrido-theology* (on grasshoppers), *Bombyco-theology* (silkworms), *Bronto-theology* (thunder), *Chiono-theology* (snow), *Chorto-theology* (grass), *Hydro-theology* (water), *Ichthyo-theology* (fishes), *Insecto-theology* (insects), *Litho-theology* (rocks), *Lokusta-theology* (locusts), *Melitto-theology* (bees), *Petino-theology* (birds), *Phyto-theology* (plants), *Pyro-theology* (fire), *Rana-theology* (tadpoles), *Seismo-theology* (earthquakes) and *Testaceo-theology* (mussels and snails).⁹⁵ From the marvels of the animal and vegetable kingdom it was only a small step to God's most dignified creature: man. In Johann Peter Süßmilch's *Die Göttliche Ordnung in den*

⁹² John Ray, *The Wisdom of God Manifested in the Works of the Creation* (1691), 'The preface' (unpaginated)

⁹³ Jacob, *The Newtonians and the English Revolution, 1689-1720*, ch. 5 'The Boyle Lectures and the social meaning of Newtonianism'; Gascoigne, 'From Bentley to the Victorians'.

⁹⁴ Bots, *Tussen Descartes en Darwin* discusses several Dutch contributions, among which of course Nieuwentyt's, as well as the "fysiko-theologische import" from England, Germany and France.

⁹⁵ These anglicized titles are derived from Philipp, 'Physicotheology in the age of Enlightenment', pp. 1242-1247.

Veränderungen des menschlichen Geschlechts, aus der Geburt, dem Tode und Fortpflanzung desselben erwiesen (1741), the human body, man's senses and emotions, and even births, deaths and sex ratios were subjected to natural-theological research, to find natural evidence for God and His providence.

As the title of Clarke's natural-theological *Demonstration of the Being and Attributes of God* (1705) makes clear, the natural-theological genre was not exclusively engaged in demonstrating the existence of a supernatural Being or First Cause. It was also highly interested in the provability of some central divine attributes. Next to discussing the existence of an eternal, immutable and independent Being, Clark provides reasonable arguments, both *a priori* and *a posteriori*, for God's omnipotence, omniscience and omnipresence. The physico-theologians, in turn, put much emphasis on the manifestations in nature of divine providence. Their surveys of the creation are packed with visible "arguments", "demonstrations", and "proofs" of God's forethought and notable "instances", "signs" and "effects" of His government. According to the Dutch writer Bernard Nieuwentyt, the order imposed on the inconceivable multitude of atoms and particles is another illustration of "that great article of Christianity, namely, that even the most minute things cannot by their smallness escape the direction and providence of the great Creator".⁹⁶ Seeing that providence is manifest throughout the natural world, also on a larger scale, it cannot be denied by any reasonable being. Hence Derham's practical inference after 400 pages that, as compared to denying God's existence, "it is much the same monstrous infidelity, at least betrays the same atheistic mind, to deny God's providence, care and government of the world, or (which is a spawn of the same Epicurean principles) to deny final causes in God's works of creation".⁹⁷

Indeed, also in physico-theology providence was increasingly viewed as immanent in nature.⁹⁸ Rather than on exceptional signs and wonders, it focused on the regularity of the natural world as an expression of divine government and care. God's goodness was most clear not in miraculous events but in the stability of the laws of nature, the preservation of species, and the admirable contrivance and purposefulness visible everywhere in the creation. Even though one continued to speak of signs of an "especial Providence", "particular foresight" and "continual government of God", the stress mostly was on the lawfulness and adaptive design of nature, serviceable to each of God's creatures. According to some, the Creator had to intervene occasionally in the world machine. This, for example, was the view of Newton and some other virtuosi connected to the Royal Society.⁹⁹ However, these divine interpositions were very rare and could only be called

⁹⁶ Bernard Nieuwentyt, *Het regt gebruik der werelt beschouwingen* (1715), ch. 26, § 23, p. 738: "desen groten artykel van het Christendom in haar ligt stellen, namelyk, Dat ook de alderkleinsten saken het bestier en de voorsienigheit des grooten Makers door haar kleinheit niet ontvlugten" (transl. from first English 1718-edition). For more information on Nieuwentyt, see Vermij, *Secularisering en natuurwetenschap in de zeventiende en achttiende eeuw*.

⁹⁷ W. Derham, *Physico-Theology: or, a Demonstration of the Being and Attributes of God, from his Works of Creation* (1714²), bk. xi, ch. iii, p. 441.

⁹⁸ McGrath, *Darwinism and the Divine*, pp. 56-61.

⁹⁹ Westfall, *Science and Religion in Seventeenth-Century England*, ch. 4 'Divine providence and natural law'.

miraculous from a human perspective. The true miracle visible to everyone was the entire mechanism of nature. Echoes of divine providence and benignity permeated the natural world and were accessible to all intelligent observers. The study of nature, therefore, was nothing else than the contemplation of the Creator.

2.5 Preliminary conclusions

This chapter has sketched the contours of the early-modern debate on providence. The underlying aim was to give a first impression of what it meant to refer to the doctrine in an economic text. What did such references actually presuppose? What do they tell us about the religious orientation of the writer? Should we take them seriously at all? In order to give a start of an answer we have successively traced the origins of the idea of providence in classical philosophy and the Christian tradition, some of the transformations it underwent in the seventeenth and eighteenth century, and its continued importance in some more popular discourses.

In sum, in Europe the idea of providence in the period before Adam Smith still was a central component of man's world view. Overt atheism and other forms of anti-providentialism were rare. The conviction that God does not forsake His creation and is continuously involved in it formed an important framework to make sense of the workings of nature and the course of history. The world was widely believed to be a product of intelligent design, showing the intentions of its Creator. As spheres of divine influence, nature and history were seen as accessible books or theatres of God's presence. A rapidly growing understanding of the secrets of the universe, and a changing conception of God's place in it, did not prevent early-modern man from recognizing a supernatural plan at work in everyday reality. While the space for divine interventions and miracles was constantly reduced, the discourse in terms of teleology, secondary causes and lawfulness kept open the possibility of God interacting with this world. In line with the new natural-philosophical and theological views, the emphasis more than ever before was on the regularity, rationality and beneficence of God's providence. Providence no longer was a mysterious force committed to man's salvation, but to an increasing extent a guarantee for human well-being and progress.

As we have seen, the belief in providence was not necessarily 'Christian', let alone Calvinist or Puritan as is sometimes suggested. It was shared not only by Catholics and Protestants but also by pantheists and moderate deists, neo-Stoics and neo-Platonists, and all possible combinations of these world views. This means that the religious or philosophical orientation of a writer cannot easily be derived from his use of providential language. What it does indicate, though, is that he assumed this reality to be a product of intelligent design, ruled by purposefulness rather than mere chance. Contra ancient and modern Epicureans, most writers agreed that divine foresight and government somehow manifest themselves in this reality. Though moderate and orthodox Christian writers left open the possibility of extraordinary providences in the form of miracles or similar unforeseen events, the period in general witnessed a growing tendency to see providence mainly working indirectly through secondary causes, in a chain reaching back to the creation of the world. Indeed, a reference to or argument from prov-

idence in the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth century above all was an expression of the belief that things were once ordered for the best by a Supreme Being.

As to the question if references to providence should be taken seriously, there is no reason to answer it in the negative. Lip service to the established Christian religion of course existed. But it is not the true beliefs of economic authors that we are interested in. What counts in describing the economic-theological *Zeitgeist* of the period is which ideas were expressed in public and transmitted to a wider readership. Unless there was reasonable doubt about the author's sincerity, also religious window-dressing must have contributed to the people's understanding of the economy. Even if providentialist ideas did not contribute much to the real argumentation and in a sense were redundant, this is not to say that we should ignore them. A frequent occurrence of similar ideas, whether or not decorative, at least suggests that contemporaries attached importance to them. The more so because the doctrine of providence was considered too important to treat it vainly. As said at the beginning of this chapter, erroneous views regarding the providence of God were sufficient ground to accuse someone of atheism. To utter thoughtless fantasies about God's role in the economy therefore was both unwise and dangerous. Besides forming a threat to someone's commercial or academic prospects, it could imply that the economic arguments of the author in question were no longer taken seriously.

2.6 Prelude: divine oeconomy

The central question to the following chapters is how the ideas about providence were reflected in thinking about the economy. What, in other words, according to writers on economics was the role of God in the economic domain? By way of prelude to the discussion of five different perspectives, in this final section some more general observations on the subject will be made. As will be shown, it was not only the natural world that offered a rich repertoire of examples for physico-theologians but also the world of money and trade. Vice versa natural-theological language found its way into the economic literature of the period. This interaction between natural theology and the new political-economic discourse is first evidence for the thesis defended in this book, namely that it was not uncommon to directly associate God and the economy.

To be clear, there was no such thing as 'the economy' before the nineteenth century.¹⁰⁰ Although economies are as old as mankind, the very conception of an economic domain in society, or society as an economy itself is relatively new. The innovative aspect of post-medieval economic thought was precisely that it began to describe the interdependence between production, exchange, distribution and consumption. The term 'economy' that had already existed for more than 2000 years was exclusively used in the Aristotelian sense of household management. Referring to the management (*véμειν*) of the household (*oíκος*), *oikonomía* was above all a practical art, aimed at enriching the family and fulfilling its needs. With the rise of nation states at the turn of the modern age, the term was first applied at a national level. "The word economy", Jean-Jacques

¹⁰⁰ Worth reading in this respect is Mitra-Kahn, *Redefining the Economy*.

Rousseau explained in his economic tract, “originally meant nothing else than the wise & legitimate government of the house, for the common good of the entire family. The meaning of this term was then extended to the government of the great family, which is the state. In order to distinguish between these two meanings, in the latter case one speaks of general or political economy”.¹⁰¹ The term ‘political economy’ initially too had a practical, administrative meaning. Later it also began to denote a branch of knowledge dealing with the economic affairs of government.

Interestingly, there was a second interpretation of the term ‘economy’ around with a theological background.¹⁰² Following the example of Paul the Apostle, the Fathers of the Western and Eastern Church had used the Latin *oeconomia* and Greek *oikonomia* to denote the counsel, plan and government of God. Also the creation and creational order, God’s plan of salvation and the incarnation of Christ, and even the interplay within the Trinity were designated as such. As Origen concluded, God is the best *oikonomikός*, since He ordered and governs everything in the best possible way. In the early-modern age, this theological interpretation remained in vogue, for instance in expressions such as ‘economy of heaven’ and ‘economy of salvation’. From the seventeenth century on, in both theological and non-theological contexts the term was increasingly used in connection with the harmonious disposition of the natural world. In addition to a general ‘economy of nature’, one spoke of an animal economy, an economy of the human body and mind, and a moral economy. These products of divine design were distinguished from the human ordering and administration of complex systems, as in the domestic, rural and civil economies.¹⁰³ Whenever economies transcended the sphere of human influence, they were automatically associated with the providence of God.

It is somewhat unclear how writers from our period viewed the relationship between these two meanings of the term ‘economy’.¹⁰⁴ The fact that God’s ordering of nature and supervision of history were referred to as acts of economy, i.e. frugal and effective management, does not imply that national economies as such were viewed as part of the divine order nor that political economy was associated with divine government. All the same, divine economy and political economy were not disconnected, certainly among advocates of absolutism. Antoine de Montchrétien in his 1615 tract on manufacturing, commerce and navigation that first introduced the term *oeconomie politique*, several times stresses that a sound political administration must mirror God’s order of nature.

¹⁰¹ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discours sur l’économie politique* (1763), p. 5: “Le mot économie ... ne signifie originairement que le sage & légitime gouvernement de la maison, pour le bien commun de toute la famille. Le sens de ce terme a été dans la suite étendu au gouvernement de la grande famille, qui est l’etat. Pour distinguer ces deux acceptations, on l’appelle dans ce dernier cas, économie générale, ou politique”.

¹⁰² Gass, ‘Das patristische Wort *oikonomia*’; Lillge, *Das patristische Wort oikonomia*; Dierse, ‘Ökonomie, II. In der Theologie’; Richer, *Oikonomia*; Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory*.

¹⁰³ See Schabas & De Marchi, *Oeconomies in the Age of Newton* for different uses of the term and references to relevant literature.

¹⁰⁴ Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory*, app. 2 ‘The invisible hand’. Gammon, ‘Nature as adversary’, p. 223 asserts that political economy “took its notion of ‘economy’ not from the market as a pre-existing social institution, but from the belief in a broader divine natural economy”.

“Look”, he writes, “how Nature, which high politics should alone and above all imitate, distributes to each member of our body in proportion and by measurement, the nourishment it needs”.¹⁰⁵ As we will see later on, also the eighteenth-century French Physiocrats were fully convinced that true political economy consists in bringing the economy in alignment with the providential course of nature. By enabling the laws of nature to produce their beneficent effects in the economic realm, they claimed, a *théocratie* is obtained in which it is as if God himself is governing. In the next chapters, we will see more examples of such linkages between divine and human government.

Economy in natural theology

Whether or not divine economy and political economy were and could be seen as related things, there was little doubt that the former influenced the second and that God’s hand could be observed in the economic realm. This, at least, is what natural theologians of the period made their readers believe. Scattered across the numerous physico-theological tracts, sermons and poems there is quite some attention to economic constellations that one way or another prove the existence of God. Strikingly, certainly in light of the suspicion that had always surrounded it, trade and commerce in general were unreservedly related to providence. Wilkins, Bishop of Chester and natural philosopher, for example argued that commerce is part of the admirable contrivance of natural things. “The gathering of the inhabitants of the earth into nations, under distinct policies and governments; those advantages which each of them have of mutual commerce, for supplying the wants of each other, are so many distinct arguments of the same purpose”,¹⁰⁶ namely to prove that everything is the design of a Wise Agent. More than Wilkins entering into the details of God’s creation, later physico-theologians in their writings endeavoured to show how the God-given natural circumstances promoted trade and commerce, especially between different nations.

One of the indications that God, while creating the earth, had the rise of international trade in mind is the existence of water. In an age when long-distance trade required shipping this element that made up the seas and oceans of course was indispensable. To eighteenth-century man it was not self-evident, though, that wood and wooden vessels will float on this liquid. Hence several writers remarked that the composition of water is optimized by the Creator for carrying merchant ships. If water was thinner, François Fénelon, Archbishop of Cambrai and author of a well-known physico-theological discourse argues, there would be no sea life nor commerce by navigation. “If

¹⁰⁵ Antoine de Montchrétien, *Traicté de l’oeconomie politique* (1615), p. 19. “Voyons la Nature, que le grand politique doit seulement & principalement imiter, distribuer à tous les membres de nostre corps par proportion & mesure, l’aliment qui leur fait besoin”. Cf. pp. 9-10: “Ainsi de la creation du monde qui fut paracheué en six iours, le gouubernement dure a tousiours, & Dieu createur de ceste admirable machine, de ce miracle qui contient tous autres miracles, est en ceuvre continuelle à maintenir & conseruer son ordre. Vous le nous representez en ceste grand monarchie, soyés ses imitateurs”.

¹⁰⁶ Wilkins, *Principles and Duties of Natural Religion*, bk. I, ch. vi, p. 79.

water were somewhat more rarefied, it could no longer sustain those prodigious floating buildings, called ships. Heavy bodies would immediately sink under water".¹⁰⁷ Also John Wesley in his survey of the wisdom of God in the creation maintains that water was to lose its use to man if it had a different composition. "And who gave it that just configuration of parts and exact degree of motion, which makes it so fluent, and yet so strong, as to carry away the most enormous burdens?", so is his question to the reader. Without this astonishing work of the Creator the ocean could never have become the "common centre of commerce".¹⁰⁸

Equally remarkable is the fact water accumulates in rivers which eventually flow together in seas and oceans. Thanks to this the waters enable an exchange of goods and knowledge between faraway nations. Let the atheist for once imagine, Nieuwentyt writes, how the seas encompass the whole world and thereby are the "only means by which commerce and traffick can be carried on; and each part of the globe, that has the advantage of lying near them can enjoy, by the help of shipping, all the advantages and conveniencies of the most inland countries".¹⁰⁹ Incidentally, God not only cares for countries bordering on the sea but also for those further inland alongside major rivers. All rivers, Fénelon argues, ultimately end up in the sea "for making it the centre of commerce for all nations". The great oceans, which at first glance seem to have introduced an eternal separation between the nations of the earth, by means of navigation become the "rendezvous of all peoples, who could not go by land from one end of the world to the other, without fatigues, lengths, and great dangers. It is by this trackless road, through the abysses, that the old world reaches out to the new, & that the new supplies the old with so many conveniences & riches".¹¹⁰

Navigation in this age naturally depended on the propelling force of the wind, and this phenomenon too was related to the providence of God. The winds, Ray elucidates in his account of God's wisdom in the creation, help to "fill the sails of ships, and carry them on their voyages to remote countries; which, of what eminent advantage it is to mankind, for the procuring and continuing of trade and mutual commerce between the most distant nations".¹¹¹ Suppose, Wesley adds, that for some reason the winds were to die down completely. Then all society between the nations of the world is likely to

¹⁰⁷ [François Fénelon], *Démonstration de l'existence de Dieu* (1713), ch. xiii, p. 33: "Si l'eau étoit un peu plus rarefiée, elle ne pourroit plus soutenir ces prodigieux édifices flottans, qu'on nomme vaisseaux. Les corps les moins pesans s'enfonceroient d'abord dans l'eau".

¹⁰⁸ John Wesley, *A Survey of the Wisdom of God in the Creation: or a Compendium of Natural Philosophy*, vol. II (1763), prt. V, ch. iv, p. 196.

¹⁰⁹ Nieuwentyt, *Het regt gebruik der werelt beschouwingen*, ch. 20, § 74, p. 438: "het eenigste middel is, waar door de koopmanschap met gemak kan gedreven werden; en elk deel van den aardkloot, dat het geluk heeft van by deselve gelegen te syn, alle de voordeelen en aangenaamheden van de alderafgelegenste landen door de scheepvaart genieten kan".

¹¹⁰ Fénelon, *Démonstration de l'existence de Dieu*, ch. xiii, pp. 36-37: "le rendez-vous de tous les peuples, qui ne pourroient aller par terre d'un bout du monde à l'autre, qu'aves des fatigues, des longueurs, & des dangers incroyables. C'est par ce chemin sans trace, au travers des abîmes, que l'ancien monde donne la main au nouveau, & que le nouveau prête à l'ancien tant de commoditez & de richesses".

¹¹¹ Ray, *The Wisdom of God Manifested in the Works of the Creation*, p. 66.

degenerate into utmost disorder. “Navigation is at a stand, and all our commerce with foreign nations destroyed”.¹¹² While some physico-theologians saw the different directions in which the winds blow as something providential, as this allows sailing in different directions as well, others emphasized the use for navigation of their regularity. According to again Nieuwentyt, the Dutch proverb that someone is ‘as changeable as the wind’ is misleading since the winds are not governed by chance. According to the testimony of seafarers, “the Providence of the great Governour has bound these winds, which seem to us to come from all corners of the world with so much irregularity and uncertainty, by as fixed and determinate laws, as ever any clock or watch made by its artifcer”.¹¹³

International navigation and trade was the most popular economic theme among physico-theologians. Another source of wonder was the institution of money, and the precious metals of which it is composed more specifically. In Ray’s summary, money is an “admirable contrivance for rewarding and encouraging industry, for carrying on trade and commerce certainly, easily, and speedily”.¹¹⁴ As Derham observes in his overview of “instances of divine management with relation to the political state of man”, it is far from obvious that the civilized part of mankind assigns value to precious stones, gold and silver. For besides decoration, gems, pearls and precious metals serve no practical purpose at all. So “somewhat odd, but very providential” they nevertheless are extremely helpful in enabling for the exchange of food, clothing and other necessities and comforts of life. Just as surprising, Ray continues to argue, is the observation that gold and silver have a more or less fixed value. Apparently, this value is not affected by the great amounts that are constantly being excavated from the bowels of the earth. The argument turns out to be taken from the *Enquiry* by the “learned and ingenious Dr. Cockburn”, a book full of proofs for the existence of God as well as the absurdity of atheism. In one of the essays, the Scottish minister elaborates on “God’s secret disposal of money so as to keep up the due value of it, notwithstanding the continued practice of men to make the world abound with it”.¹¹⁵

Many more examples from physico-theological discourses of remarkable and less remarkable instances of divine providence in the economy could be provided here (and will be provided in the following chapters). People for example argued that the availability of wood is highly important for ship building, that the sun and moon and the magnetic force of iron wonderfully contribute to navigation, and that man’s tongue and speech are essential for the commercial practice. The upshot will be clear now: far from

¹¹² Wesley, *Survey of the Wisdom of God in the Creation*, vol. I (Bristol, 1763), prt. III, ch. ii, p. 285.

¹¹³ Nieuwentyt, *Regt gebruik der werelt beschouwingen*, ch. 19, § 23, p. 368: “des Regeerders Voor-sienigheit dese by ons soo losse winden, die uit alle hoeken des werelds sonder eenige ordre schynen voort te komen, op andere plaatsen, daarsulksten besten van de menschen vereischt werd, aan soo vaste wetten gebonden heeft, als oit eenigh uurwerk door konst van syn meester gedaan is”.

¹¹⁴ This remark can be found in the “very much enlarg’d throughout” third edition: Ray, *The Wisdom of God Manifested in the Works of the Creation* (1701), prt. I, p. 107.

¹¹⁵ John Cockburn, *An Enquiry into the Nature, Necessity, and Evidence of Christian Faith* (1699), prt. II, essay iv, p. 87. Cockburn’s account of God’s “surprising Providence” with respect to money is repeated in another physico-theological treatise: Cotton Mather, *The Christian Philosopher: A Collection of the Best Discoveries in Nature with Religious Improvements* (1721), p. 120.

being excluded from the natural-theological discourse because of their profane nature, examples from the economic sphere were eagerly collected as proofs for the existence of a benevolent God. For one thing, this reveals something about the early-modern conception of providence. There seems to have been no reluctance to associate God with the economy. Economic advantages are as much part of the divine plan as matters concerning the life to come. For another thing, it sheds a particular light on man's conception of economic affairs. These were not seen as something meaningless or trivial, but rather as an aspect of human life in which the hand of God could be discerned, provided of course that one was not blinded by atheism. That is, to the careful observer the economy was one of the pages of the book of nature.

Natural theology in economics

Both preliminary conclusions, which will be the subject of research in the remainder of this book, are underlined by the fact that natural-theological language and images from the outset were part of the mercantilist discourse. Certainly not all writers were theologically minded - not even a large number of them, but it was not uncommon, especially in England where this tradition was the strongest, to praise God's creation in an economic treatise.

For example, Gerard Malynes, the first in a row of England's better-known economic pamphleteers, somewhere writes that without navigation traffic and commerce would be very limited. For this reason, "God the Author and Creator of all things, hath made of the waters and earth on[e] perfect globe, for their more mutuall seruice to mans vse". Like the air, the seas which extend across the whole earth are free and open to all navigators, "God hauing so disposed of the foure eliments, two to swim aboue mans head; and two to lie vnder his feet, the earth and the water".¹¹⁶ The *Consuetudo, Vel Lex Mercatoria*, in which these and several other observations of the "finger of God" at work in the economy can be found, was far from obscure. As one of the leading mercantile handbooks, this 500-page work in the course of the seventeenth century saw six reprints and three editions. Malynes's words were echoed by Thomas Johnson in the opening lines of his discourse on trade. The terrestrial globe being split into continents and islands, the merchant writes, the places of human habitation are again "joined together by commerce ...; and though the earth and sea be of themselves, as differing elements as any of the rest, yet the Divine Providence by a speciall foresight hath so indented as it were, and embosomd them one in the other, that they make but one perfect globe, to render them thereby more apt for the mutuall commerce and negotiation of mankind".¹¹⁷

Also the above ideas about the importance of the waters and the winds for international trade were voiced in economic texts well before the emergence of the English physico-theological genre. Their function was not to make plausible the existence of God,

¹¹⁶ Gerard Malynes, *Consuetudo, Vel Lex Mercatoria, or The Ancient Law-Merchant* (1622), p. 182.

¹¹⁷ [Thomas Johnson], *A Discourse Consisting of Motives for The Enlargement and Freedome of Trade* (1645), p. 2.

however, but to give justification to the practice of foreign trade. In the political-economic *Delle cause della grandezza delle citta* (1588) by the Florentine diplomat Giovanni Botero, an author who arguably influenced later mercantilist writers, the suitability of water to carry merchant ships is presented as a divine arrangement. “It seemes in very truth”, it can be read in a chapter on transportation, “that God created the water, not only for a necessarie element to the perfection of nature, but more than so, for a most readie meanes to conduct and bring goods from one countrie to another”. The Creator, we are told, wanted to establish a natural community between people of different nations. To enable this, “he produced the water, which of nature is such a substance, that through the grossenes thereof, it is apt to beare great burdens: and through the liquidness, holpen with the windes, or the oares, fit to carry them to what place they list. So that by such a good meane, the west is ioyned with the east, and the south with the north”.¹¹⁸

Also Edward Misselden, Malynes’s opponent in the debate on England’s economic crisis of the 1620s, argued that none other than God invited countries to trade with each other, an idea that will be discussed in much more detail in the next chapter. This is something “the very windes and seas proclaime, in giuing passage to all nations: the windes blowing sometimes towards one country, sometimes toward another; that so by this diuine iustice, euery one might be supplyed in things necessary for life and maintenance”.¹¹⁹ This old observation, as the author approvingly acknowledges, is derived from the *Naturales quæstiones* by the Stoic philosopher Seneca. Another fine example of natural theology in an economic context that combines several of the above ideas can be found in an apology for the East-India trade. According to the anonymous author, “God has so disposed this our habitable globe, that those parts which cannot hold society and commerce by land, may by water; and those this end, has ordained the sea to ebb and flow, and rivers to succeed in running streams; and tides in the nearer parts of the sea, to run backward and forward; and the winds to blow from all the varying points of the compass, as if the winds and waters invited all nations to entertain trade and commerce with each other”.¹²⁰

It will be clear that the observations of divine wisdom and planning in economic texts served a different aim than those in physico-theological treatises. As suggested by the example from the apology for the East-India trade, references to providential orderings were hardly ever disinterested and were often included to make an author’s case

¹¹⁸ Giovanni Botero, *Delle cause della grandezza delle citta* (1588), p. 15: “e in vero pare, che Dio habbia creato l’acqua non solamente come elemento necessario alla perfecttione della nature: ma, di piu, come mezzo opportunissimo alla condotta delle robbe d’vn paese in vn altro. ... produsse l’acqua di natura, e sostantia talle, che per la grossezza e atta a sostenere grandissime some; e per la liquidezza, aiutata da venti, o da remi, a condurle ouumque si vuole. Si che per mezzo tale si congiunge il Leuante col Ponente, e’l mezzo tale di col Settentrione” (transl. from first English 1606-edition).

¹¹⁹ Edward Misselden, *Free Trade. Or, The Meanes to Make Trade Florish* (1622), p. 25. Note that these words were plagiarized in the opening lines of *Britania expirans or, a brief Memorial of Commerce* (1699) and John Blanch’s *The Interest of Great Britain consider’d* (1707).

¹²⁰ Anonymous, *An Apology for the English Nation* (1695), p. 2.

stronger. The same is true for most arguments from design that will be discussed in the next chapters. Most economic books and pamphlets were intended to influence economic policy, and to this end natural-theological reasoning proved useful. There of course were exceptions. Take, for example, the remark by Thomas Mortimer in one of his London and Westminster lectures. “Having thus marked the origin of commercial ideas”, he reports, “let us, for a moment, suspend our enquiries, to make one important, awful remark, which seems to break in upon the mind like a ray of celestial intelligence and thus inform it: Here, O man! Without poring over volumes of theology, thou hast an evident demonstration of the existence of a first intelligent cause, the supreme Creator and Disposer of all things, the one, only universal Deity”.¹²¹ According to the writer on finance and trade, barter and navigation were introduced by the Deity by inspiring people to develop different skills and to explore other spots of the earth.

Equally unsuspicious are the various references to the role of God in the world of numbers. As again Malynes observes, “God by his diuine prouidence hath made all things subiect to number, weight, and measure”.¹²² All substances after all can be counted, weighed and measured. In the merchant’s diagnosis, this at first glance trivial observation is “most necessary” in everyday economic affairs. Countability and measurability allow for buying and selling, establishing contracts and agreements and distinguishing *meum* and *teum*. The oft-repeated phrase ‘number, weight and measure’ gains in importance once we realize that William Petty, a key figure in the rise of modern economics, used it to describe the core of his method of political arithmetic.¹²³ By analysing questions in these three terms, they could be handled mathematically. That Petty saw an analogy between his mathematical operations applied to the politico-economic sphere and God’s ordering of the natural world is likely - one of the papers that he submitted to the Royal Society used the motto *Pondere, Mensura, & Numero Deus omnia fecit* on its title page. Petty must have been aware that the same phrase, used during the Middle Ages to describe the unity of God’s creation, originated in the eleventh chapter of the book *Wisdom of Solomon* where it is said that God “hast ordered all things in measure and number and weight”.

Except perhaps for the ancient idea of water as one of the four elements, all above examples of intelligent design in the economy were continuously reiterated in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century economic texts. Admittedly, apart from occasional occurrences in Dutch and French writings, it was mainly the British authors who urged their readers to contemplate with serious attention the “divine fabrick of this inferior

¹²¹ Thomas Mortimer, *The Elements of Commerce, Politics and Finances* (1772), pp. 3-4.

¹²² Malynes, *Consuetudo, Vel Lex Mercatoria*, p. 19. Cf. p. 57: “all substantiall things, either dry or liquid, are by Diuine prouidence subiect and gouerned by number, weight, and measure”. Other writings in which this observation is made include *The Golden Fleece* (1656) by ‘W.S.’, Gabriel Platten, *Practical Husbandry Improved* (1656), Roger Coke, *A Discourse of Trade* (1670) and Thomas Tryon, *Some Memoirs of the Life of Mr. Tho. Tryon. Late of London, Merchant* (1705).

¹²³ Letwin, *The Origins of Scientific Economics*, pp. 129-131.

orb".¹²⁴ This does not alter the fact that most economic writings of the period shared with natural theology an (implicit) premise of a created reality. Few commentators doubted that the world was a product of an intelligent Being, and this had to have consequences for economic phenomena and developments alike. Things on this earth were designed and therefore potentially had a higher meaning. Active supernatural interventions in the economy were seldom reported, but proofs of general providence so much the more. The man-made nature of the economy apparently did not exclude it from the reach of divine influence. God's providence extended across the whole of creation, and therefore included man and his activities alike.

¹²⁴ Anonymous, *Dutch Policy: Or, The only Means of Growing High and Mighty, Both by Sea and Land* (1744), p. 1.

3

International trade: God's universal economy

3.1 Introduction

The mercantilist era, as the early capitalist age is sometimes denoted, witnessed a spectacular growth in international trade, both in volume and in scope.¹ Traditional trading areas, which were flourishing well before 1500, like the Mediterranean (for example in grain, metals, spices and wine), central Europe (foodstuffs, metals and minerals), the Baltic (cattle, grain, herring and timber) and the Atlantic coastline (grain, wine, wool and salt) further expanded. The discovery in the 1490s of the Americas and new ocean routes to India and the Spice Islands initiated a new transoceanic trade in luxury goods. From the sixteenth century on, a rapidly increasing number of chartered trading companies supplied Europe with enormous amounts of precious metals, spices, textiles, tea, tobacco, sugar and slaves, mostly in exchange for bullion. Whereas in the Middle Ages trade was largely confined to cities and towns and the surrounding countryside, at the end of the eighteenth-century national economies had become part of a global economy which connected basically all regions of the earth. The rationale behind this development was one of the topics of the economic thought of this period. Contrary to what one would expect, the question why there is such a thing as foreign trade was not an easy one. Scarcity and a lack of specific commodities of course were part of the answer, but could not explain why some countries preferred to import goods that could just as well be produced at home.

After Adam Smith, the classical economists began to develop an answer in terms of 'comparative advantage'.² Due to differences in climate, soil and national characteristics, it was argued, countries tend to specialize in and export those products in which they have a comparative advantage and import others in which they have a similar disadvantage. Whether or not a country has such an advantage is not determined by contrasting real costs of production to those of other countries (as in the case of a theory of absolute advantages), but by comparing unit costs in relation to both other local products and the products of competing nations. The key question for a nation is if it is advantageous to specialize in the production of a limited range of goods so as to exchange the surplus for relatively cheap foreign products. By doing so a greater amount of all

¹ General surveys are provided in Parry, 'Transport and trade routes' and Glamann, 'European trade 1500-1750'.

² Maneschi, *Comparative Advantage in International Trade* and 'Comparative advantage'.

possible goods, both domestic and foreign, can be obtained. According to the classical economists, the reason for foreign trade is indeed that countries use it as an indirect method of producing goods for home consumption. The concept of comparative advantage shows that even for self-sufficient and independent countries it can be beneficial to participate in the world economy.

To pre-classical economic thought, such an analytical explanation was still largely unknown. Obviously, writers on economics were well aware that international trade existed by virtue of its economic benefits. Especially the mercantilists viewed foreign trade as a source of gain and wealth. The idea of trade as zero-sum game in which “the profit of one man is the damage of another”, as Michel de Montaigne entitled one of his essays,³ gradually gave way to the recognition that countries can benefit from exchange simultaneously. Nevertheless, less emphasis was placed on strategic considerations like international specialization. As a rule, international trade was understood as an exchange of surpluses, a view nowadays known as the ‘vent for surplus’ theory. Common wisdom held that countries traded those products of which domestic supply exceeded domestic demand. Trade at whatever level, Dudley North observes at the end of the seventeenth century, “is nothing else but a commutation of superfluities; for instance: I give of mine, what I can spare, for somewhat of yours, which I want, and you can spare”.⁴ Nearly half a century later, the French ‘neo-mercantilist’ Jean-François Melon, from a model of three competing and differently endowed islands, similarly concluded that “commerce is the exchange of the superfluous for the necessary”.⁵ Certainly in a diversified world economy, international trade rests on mutual needs and benefits. It allows countries to export redundant products and to import useful products of which there is either a shortage or complete absence at home.

The conception of foreign trade as sheer necessity, which remained in vogue well into the eighteenth century, had everything to do with the belief that no country can be self-sufficient. Even though autarky had been an ideal since antiquity, economic thinkers were strongly convinced that countries, regions and single places cannot produce all necessities themselves and therefore for the satisfaction of their basic needs are dependent upon others. “[T]here is no territory under the dominion of one commonwealth, (except it be of very vast extent)”, Thomas Hobbes resolutely writes, “that produceth all things needfull for the maintenance, and motion of the whole body”. At the same time there are only a “few that produce not something more than necessary; the superfluous commodities to be had within, become no more superfluous, but supply these wants at home, by importation of that which may be had abroad”.⁶ For this fortu-

³ Michel de Montaigne, *Essais de messire Michel Seigneur de Montaigne* (1580), ch. 21 ‘Le profit de l’vn est dommage de l’autre’.

⁴ [Dudley North], *Discourses upon Trade* (1691), p. 2.

⁵ [Jean-François Melon], *Essai politique sur le commerce* (1736), pp. 8-9: “Le commerce est l’échange du superflu pour le nécessaire”. For the background of Melon’s *Essai*, see Hont, *Jealousy of Trade*, pp. 30-36.

⁶ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan Or the Matter, Forme and Power of A Common wealth Ecclesiasticall and Civil* (1651), prt. II, ch. 24, p. 127.

nate state of affairs, namely that each country brings forth much of one necessity and little or none of the other, in the period a variety of reasons were provided. For example, due to their location and geography countries are subject to different climatic conditions, have different natural resources, are fit for the cultivation of only a limited range of plants and crops. What is more, countries are populated by people with different talents, temperaments and habits, resulting in different productions.

Yet an increasing familiarity with the ‘natural’ obstacles to self-sufficiency did not prevent early-modern man from ascribing a higher meaning to this situation. The observation that not all necessary and useful things are found everywhere together was almost universally related to divine providence. God Himself was thought to have introduced this form of inequality when creating the world. The Creator’s material gifts were not distributed evenly but literally scattered over the surface of the earth. The consequences of this divine act were clear from the many early-modern descriptions of natural resources peculiar to the European counties and other parts of the world. The most eloquent one may be the following by Daniel Defoe:

Gold is fetch’d from the torrid zone, and the scorch’d deserts of Africk and America; silver from the mountains of Potosi, and the remotest parts of Mexico and Peru; silks from Persia, Italy, and China; coffee and tea from Turkey, and the remotest parts of Asia; spices, saltpitre, calicoes and druggs from the Indies; sugars, ginger, indico, and cocoa, from the islands of America; tobacco from Virginea; furrs, dying woods, and several particular druggs, from other parts of the continent of America, particularly the cochineel, and the cortex peruviana, things excellent in their kind, and never know till the discovery of America; ... Thus the rest of Europe have their exclusive blessing in trade, by which they are made needful to one another; as Swedeland for its copper and iron; Poland for its corn; the coasts of the Baltick for hemp, pitch, tar, and flax; Norway for firr, Germany for linen, France for wine, Spain for oyl and fruit, Ireland for flesh, Britain for wool, tin and lead, and the like.⁷

Needless to say, the distribution of gifts as evidenced by the great variety of products and resources was not devoid of reason. God’s higher aim in this was believed to be to make the nations of the world mutually dependent. The lack of necessary products in a certain country after all forces it to obtain them elsewhere, preferably through the peaceful means of trade.

Perhaps the best summary of this idea could be read in the best-seller *Parfait négociant* (1675), a mercantile handbook by the French mercantilist Jacques Savary. The opening words of the chapter ‘On the necessity, & utility of commerce’ are as follows: “From the manner in which the Providence of God has disposed the goods on the earth, one well sees that he wanted to establish unity and charity among all men, for it imposed

⁷ [Daniel Defoe], *A Review of the State of the English Nation*, vol. I [i.e. IX], no. 55 (Thursday, February 5. 1713), p. 110.

on them a kind of necessity to be always in need of others. He did not want everything that is necessary in life to be found in one single place, he scattered his gifts, so that men would trade together, & that the mutual necessity which they have to help one another could sustain the friendship between them: it is this continual exchange of all the conveniences of life that constitutes commerce".⁸ What Savary reveals here is the divine logic behind international trade. Ultimately, it is the uneven distribution of products and resources that explains why there is such a thing as foreign trade and why it is beneficial. International trade should not be regarded with contempt, since it was sanctioned and prepared for by God.

In the secondary literature, the idea summarized by Savary is known as the 'universal economy'-doctrine.⁹ Derived from the German *Universalökonomie* and *Weltwirtschaft*, the term suggests that there exists a worldwide economy that includes all nations. In its most elaborate form, the doctrine typically has the following elements: i) Nature or Providence distributed its material gifts unevenly among the countries of the world, ii) to prevent them from becoming self-sufficient and to make them mutually dependent for the satisfaction of their wants, iii) in order to encourage international trade and commerce, iv) and to promote universal community and friendship. Sometimes the universal economy-idea is referred to as the 'international' or 'territorial division of labour'.¹⁰ From the fact that countries are unevenly endowed it is then concluded that all have their share in the production, processing and distribution of the common gifts of God, seemingly randomly allotted to their soil. There is a striking parallel here with the human division of labour, which was believed to be ultimately based on an unequal division of talents and dispositions among human beings. As we will see in the next chapter, also this fundamental form of mutuality within human society was seen as providential arrangement too.

The universal economy-doctrine that portrays international trade as an instrument in the hands of God was immensely popular in the period under consideration. Employed in virtually all currents of economic thought, in all kinds of publications and

⁸ Jacques Savary, *Le parfait negociant ou instruction generale pour ce qui regarde le commerce* (1675), bk. I, ch. 1 'De la nécessité, & utilité du commerce', p. 1: "De la maniere que la Providence de Dieu a disposé les choses sur la terre, on voit bien qu'il a voulu établir l'union et la charité entre tous les hommes, puis qu'il leur a imposé une espece de nécessité d'avoir toûjours besoin les uns des autres. Il n'a pas voulu que tout ce qui est nécessaire à la vie se trouvât en un même lieu, il a dispersé ses dons, afin que les hommes eussent commerce ensemble, & que la nécessité mutuelle qu'ils ont de s'entre aider pût entretenir l'amitié entre eux: c'est cet échange continual de toutes les commoditez de la vie qui fait le commerce".

⁹ Discussions, to which I am indebted, can be found in Harms, *Volkswirtschaft und Weltwirtschaft*, ch. 1 'Die Weltwirtschaft in der wirtschaftswissenschaftlichen Literatur'; Oberfohren, *Die Idee der Universalökonomie in der französischen wirtschaftswissenschaftlichen Literatur bis auf Turgot*; Jessen, 'Weltwirtschaft', pp. 981-982 'Weltwirtschaft und Universalökonomie'; Rüstow, *Das Versagen des Wirtschaftsliberalismus als religionsgeschichtliches Problem*, app. 4 'Außenhandel gottgewollt'; Viner, *The Role of Providence in the Social Order*, pp. 32-54; and Maneschi, *Comparative Advantage in International Trade*, ch. 3.1 'The providentialist beginnings of trade theory'.

¹⁰ The latter term was coined by Robert Torrens in his anti-Physiocratic tract *The Economists Refuted; or, An Inquiry into the Nature and Extent of the Advantages derived from Trade* (1808), p. 14.

by authors with very different religious orientations, it was without doubt the most widespread example of divine involvement in the economy. Before reviewing its role in the early-modern period, I first trace the history of the doctrine back to its earliest origins (§ 3.2). This will be done in considerable detail since it helps us to understand the persisting popularity of the idea of a divine origin of international trade in later centuries. Subsequently I discuss the revival of the doctrine in Renaissance political, legal and economic thought (§ 3.3), the way in which it was employed in seventeenth and eighteenth-century economic thought (§ 3.4), and the emerging free trade discourse more particularly (§ 3.5). Finally, attention will be paid to some theological aspects and problems of the doctrine, as addressed by some seventeenth- and eighteenth-century economic thinkers (§ 3.6). The final section concludes our discussion.

3.2 A sound and right philosophy: pagan and Christian origins

The idea of a divine interest in international trade was by no means an early-modern invention. As a matter of fact, we are dealing here with one of the oldest and longest-lived economic doctrines ever. Hence, it is all the more surprising that almost no economic writer of the period revealed the source of the idea, let alone mentioned its earliest origin. Quite exceptional therefore is Charles Davenant's remark that he owed the idea to Gilbert Burnet. This bishop and historian, who extensively travelled and reported about it in *Dr. Burnet's Travels, or Letters containing An Account Of what Seemed most Remarkable in Switzerland, Italy, France, and Germany, &c.* (1687), "did urge a thing of which the philosophy seem'd very sound and right, and upon which we have since reflected often; he said, that nature had adapted different countries for different manufactures".¹¹ However, with Burnet we are still far removed from the fountainhead of the doctrine. Its true origin was recovered by natural-law philosophers like Hugo Grotius and Samuel Pufendorf. The former, in one of his reflections on the freedom of trade and navigation, observes that the views of other classical writers agreed with "that of Libanius, that God has not confin'd and limited his blessings to any one part or region of the earth, but diffus'd 'em thro' all nations in such a manner as may oblige men by reciprocal wants to correspond with each other, and by that means cultivate a society together, and to this end has he discover'd the art of trading, that whatsoever is the produce of any nations may be equally enjoy'd by all".¹²

Libanius or Libanios of Antioch, a rhetorician and sophist who lived in the fourth century, uttered these words in his 344 imperial oration to Constantius and Constans. After having commented upon their special qualities and glorious deeds, Libanius went on to conclude that, probably thanks to the two Christian emperors, trade had been

¹¹ [Charles Davenant], *An Essay upon the Probable Methods Of making a People Gainers in the Ballance of Trade* (1699), p. 99.

¹² Hugo Grotius, *De iure belli ac pacis* (1631), bk. II, ch. ii, § 13, p. 111: "Quicum convenit Libanii illud: Deus non omnia omnibus terrae partibus concessit, sed per regiones dona sua distribuit, quo homines alii aliorum indigentes ope societatem colerent. Itaque mercaturam excitavit, ut quae usquam nata sunt iis communiter frui omnes possent" (transl. from English 1715-edition).

restored to its former glory. The full passage, which in the secondary literature has never been reproduced, reads as follows:

I think indeed that the very purpose of the creator of the world [*oikouμένην συστησαμένουν*] is now above all being maintained. For when he established the earth, poured forth the sea and extended the rivers, and displayed the position of the islands surrounded by sea, he included [*δημιουργηθέν*] everything in this creationseeds and cattle and in short all that human nature was going to need. However he did not assign everything to every part, but divided the gifts throughout the countries [*χώρους εἰς κοινωνίαν*], bringing mankind into partnership through mutual need; and so he reveals commerce [*έμπορίας*], so that he may make common to all the enjoyment of what is produced among a few. This humanitarian scheme [*φιλάνθρωπον βούλευμα*], then, which might bring deliverance, had previously been destroyed and ruined, and the plan of social intercourse [*έπιμεξίας*] had been equally prevented by murders, and its architect taken prisoner and thrown down a precipice. The state of the earth was as if it had been split in two. But now what was hitherto separated came together and has been joined, and what so far had been torn apart has been restored to its proper condition. There is one continent, one sea, the islands common to all, the harbours opened up and gates thrown wide. Merchant ships everywhere convey products from all parts and crowd the anchorages. A mutual community [*πανηγύρις δέ κοινή*] has extended through practically all the land under the sun, with some travelling for exploration and others for other reasons, some who cross oceans and others who traverse the continent.¹³

It goes without saying that Savary's summary of the universal economy-doctrine has strong similarities to these words of Libanius. Since no earlier formulations are known, the Greek rhetorician can be regarded as its inventor. Be that as it may, it is likely that Libanius as the greatest orator of his time built on older motives. Actually all elements of the doctrine as listed in the introduction of this chapter can be traced back to earlier writers.

Four building blocks

Firstly, Libanius seems to build on the observation that places or regions are in the happy possession of different natural resources. A similar line of thought, but without reference to the Creator, can be found 300 years before in Seneca. As the Stoic philosopher writes in a letter to procurator Lucilius, commodities like corn, vine, ivory and iron are "appr-

¹³ Libanius, *Orationes*, LIX 'Basilikos eis Konstantion kai Konstanta', 169, in Lieu & Montserrat, *From Constantine to Julian*, p. 204 (transl. M.H. Dodgeon). The original Greek text, phrases of which I inserted in the quotation, is based on *Libanii opera*, vol. IV, *Orationes LI-LXIV*, pp. 294-295.

tioned to separate countries in order that human beings may be constrained to traffic among themselves, each seeking something from his neighbour in his turn".¹⁴ Seneca himself points to an older source when illustrating this truth with a passage from Virgil's *Georgica* (29 BC), the famous poem dealing with agriculture, tree breeding, husbandry and beekeeping. The relevant passage, from which only a few lines are quoted by Seneca, reads as follows: "and ere our iron cleaves an unknown plain, be it our care to learn the winds and the wavering moods of the sky, the wonted tillage and nature of the grounds, what each clime yields and what each disowns. Here corn, there grapes spring more luxuriantly; elsewhere young trees shoot up, and grasses unbidden. See you not, how Tmolus sends us saffron fragrance, India her ivory, the soft Sabaeans their frankincense; but the naked Chalybes give us iron, Pontus the strong-smelling beaver's oil, and Epirus the Olympian victories of her mares? From the first, Nature laid these laws and eternal covenants on certain lands".¹⁵

Virgil's message, that the farmer should be aware that the soil does not bring forth the same fruits everywhere, was a commonplace in Greek and Roman agricultural treatises from Xenophon to Pliny. It can be found in Cato's *De agri cultura* and the two versions of *De re rustica* by Varro and Columella. "The same earth", as the other great Roman poet Ovid put it in *Ars amatoria*, "bears not everything; this soil suits vines, that olives; in that, wheat thrives".¹⁶ Virgil explicitly held that Nature and her eternal laws are responsible for this limitation. He also believed that this natural state would eventually cease to exist. Dreaming of (a return of) the mythical golden age, associated with high and natural soil fertility,¹⁷ in one of his other poems he imagines a moment when the seas will no longer be sailed, sea trade will be abandoned, and it will be true that *omnis fert omnia tellus*. The idea that one day all the land will produce everything, even without the need of tillage, later was converted into a negative slogan. According to one of the interlocutors in an eighteenth-century dialogue, "the basis of all commerce is the *non omnis fert omnia tellus*".¹⁸

A second element in Libanius's oration that was frequently voiced before is the observation that no place or region can be self-sufficient. As early as the fifth century BC, Herodotus in his *Histories* recorded a conservation between king Croesus and Solon of

¹⁴ Seneca, *Epistulae morales ad Lucilium*, epistle LXXXVII ("Seneca Lucilio suo salutem"), § 21, p. 335: "in regiones discripta sunt, ut necessarium mortalibus esset inter ipsos commercium, si invicem alius aliquid ab alio peteret".

¹⁵ Virgil, *Georgics*, bk. I, vrs. 50-61 (p. 103): "ac prius ignotum ferro quam scindimus aequor, / ventos et varium caeli praediscre morem / cura sit ac patrios cultusque habitusque locorum, / et quid quaeque ferat regio et quid quaeque recuset. / hic segetes, illic veniunt felicius uvae, / arborei fetus alibi atque iniussa uirescunt / gramina. nonne vides, croceos ut Tmolus odores, / India mittit ebur, molles sua tura Sabaei, / at Chalybes nudi ferrum virosaque Pontus / castorea, Eliadum palmas Epiros equarum? / continuo has leges aeternaque foedera certis / imposuit natura locis".

¹⁶ Ovid, *The Art of Love and Other Poems*, bk. I, vrs. 757-758 (p. 65): "Nec tellus eadem parit omnia; vitibus illa / Convenit, haec oleis; hac bene farra virent".

¹⁷ Glacken, *Traces on the Rhodian Shore*, pp. 130-134.

¹⁸ [Ferdinando Galiani], *Dialogues sur le commerce des bleus* (1770), p. 172: "la base de tout commerce est le *non omnis fert omnia tellus*".

Athens on the subject of human happiness, in which the latter remarks: “no one (who is but man) can have all these good things together, just as no land [χώρα] is altogether self-sufficing [καταρκέω] in what it produces: one thing it has, another it lacks, and the best land is that which has most; so too no single person is sufficient for himself: one thing he has, another he lacks”.¹⁹ The remark was an appropriate one, seeing that Croesus, whose wealth has remained proverbial until today, mainly derived it from foreign trade between Greece and the east. Even though self-sufficiency was deemed impossible, it was nevertheless the ideal of classical antiquity.²⁰ Material *αὐτάρκεια* was pursued since it enabled for political independence of the community or city-state. Plato and Aristotle, to name two authorities, portrayed the *πόλις* as a place where individuals group together in order to satisfy their needs through exchange. Aristotle moreover considered the city-state higher in the natural order of things than the small village, the household and the individual because of their decreasing degree of economic independence.

At the same time both philosophers claimed that full self-sufficiency without reliance on foreign trade is well-nigh impossible. In their political writings, Plato and Aristotle tell similar stories of economic development, featuring citizens that could initially survive through barter but eventually, due to population growth and expanding needs, came to depend partly on imported products. “To tell the truth”, one of the interlocutors in Plato’s *Republic* says, “it is practically impossible to establish the city in a region where it will not need imports”. To obtain them from abroad, we are told, the ideal city requires merchants and sailors to establish an overseas trade. Even more important for the merchants not to return empty-handed, is that the citizens’ “home production must not merely suffice for themselves but in quality meet the needs of those of whom they have need”.²¹ In a similar vein, Aristotle in his *Politics* relates how people initially tried to supplement their own produce with products obtained through barter. Yet in the end they “had come to supply themselves more from abroad by importing things in which they were deficient and exporting those of which they had a surplus”.²² The fact that neither Plato nor Aristotle speaks ill of long-distance trade has later frequently been seized to justify international trade.

A third idea possibly borrowed by Libanius from earlier writers is the age-old association between trade, community and friendship. As was acknowledged long before Enlightenment philosophers began to discourse about it, people not only engage in material exchange for reasons of self-interest but also because of an innate, natural sociability. As suggested by the notion of *oikείωσις*, a key concept in Stoic political philosophy, altruism and sympathy are inherent in human nature.²³ More than all other social animals, including ants and bees, humans exhibit a disposition to identify themselves with others and their interests. Likewise, interregional and international trade could be seen as

¹⁹ Herodotus, *Books I and II*, bk. I, § 32, p. 41.

²⁰ Wheeler, ‘Self-sufficiency and the Greek city’.

²¹ Plato, *The Republic*, bk. II, ch. 11, 370e-371a (pp. 153-155).

²² Aristotle, *Politics*, bk. I, ch. 3, 1257a (p. 43).

²³ Schofield, ‘Social and political thought’, pp. 760-768 on ‘Justice, *oikeiōsis* and the cosmic city’.

manifestations of reciprocity. Early-modern writers loved to quote the magic words from Florus's *Epitomae*, "suppress commerce and you break the bond that ties mankind together". In reality, the historian in this history of the Romans referred to the Cilicians who disrupted overseas traffic and threatened world peace by making the seas unsafe. Other classical writers from the first two centuries AD like Seneca, the Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria and the Neo-Platonist Plutarch dealt with the idea of commercial sociability in more detail. Their writings deserve to be quoted at some length here, since they figured prominently in seventeenth and eighteenth-century texts on international trade.

Seneca, first of all, saw the winds as a gift of Providence as they allow maritime traffic between geographically separated countries and peoples. The fact that the winds blow in different directions is not an incentive to send out war fleets but to establish relationships oversea. God "gave us winds so that we might get to know distant lands. For man would have been an untaught animal and without experience of affairs if he had been circumscribed by the limits of the land where he was born. He gave us winds in order that the advantages of each region might become known to all". Philo, in turn, praises the art of government which helps the seas to be "safely navigated by merchant ships laden with cargoes to effect the exchange of goods which the countries in desire for fellowship render to each other, receiving those which they lack and sending in return those of which they carry a surplus". Plutarch, finally, praises the sea for its usefulness for commerce. "This element", he writes with reference to the divine workman, "when our life was savage and unsociable, linked it together and made it complete, redressing defects by mutual assistance and exchange and so bringing about co-operation and friendship". As without the sun it is always night, without the sea "man would be the most savage and destitute of all creatures. But as it is, the sea brought the Greeks the vine from India, from Greece transmitted the use of grain across the sea, from Phoenicia imported letters as a memorial against forgetfulness, thus preventing the greater part of mankind from being wineless, grainless, and unlettered".²⁴

A final element that occurs in Libanius's oration, and more or less includes the previous one, is ancient cosmopolitanism.²⁵ From about the fifth century BC, in Greek philosophy the idea gained currency that in the divine order of nature all people are equal. However different in other respects, Hellenes and barbarians inhabit the same world and are subject to the same cosmic laws. By nature, human beings are no solitary individuals but as it were citizens of a global city. Both Socrates and Diogenes the Cynic are reported to have answered the question where they came from with "I am a citizen of the world [κοσμοπολίτες]". It was in Stoic philosophy that cosmopolitanism was provided

²⁴ Seneca, *Naturales quaestiones*, bk. V, ch. xviii, § 14, pp. 121-122: "Dedit ventos ad ulteriora noscenda. Fuisset enim imperitum animal et sine magna experientia rerum homo, si circumscriberetur natalis soli fine. Dedit ventos, ut commode cuiusque regionis fierent communia"; Philo, *The Embassy to Gaius*, ch. vii, § 47; Plutarch, 'Aquane an ignis utilitor', 957a-b, in *Plutarch's Moralia*, pp. 298-299.

²⁵ Horstmann, 'Kosmopolit, Kosmopolitismus', col. 1155-1158; Brown, 'Hellenistic cosmopolitanism'.

with a theoretical foundation. Assuming that moral and physical laws originate in the same world soul or reason, Zeno and Chrysippus, and later Stoics like Seneca and Marcus Aurelius, regarded the *kosmopolis* as more than a metaphor. They believed the universe to be designed as the common home of gods and men, the only beings participating in reason and natural law. This natural givenness, which in human beings expresses itself as a desire for community, takes the form of a divine commandment. The promotion of the universal brotherhood of men, if not universal peace, must be the aim of all reasonable beings.

Returning to Libanius, it is very well possible that a well-read humanist like Grotius first discovered the idea of universal economy in the work of the Greek rhetorician himself. In any event, it also found acceptance in early Christian and medieval theology and must have reached the early-modern period along this route as well.²⁶ Interestingly, the first traces of the doctrine can be found in the work of three direct pupils of Libanius: Gregory of Nazianzus, Basil the Great and John Chrysostom. Around the same time, also Ambrose and Theodoret of Cyrus hinted at a divine distribution of goods across the earth.²⁷ In each case, the context is formed by the creation of the sea, which is praised for its suitability for navigation and trade. God saw that the sea was good, the Church Fathers argue, because among many other things it unites distant peoples and makes possible the exchange of necessary provisions and useful information. By way of clarification, Chrysostom and Theodoret employ cosmopolitan metaphors. The former speaks of the world as a great house in which everyone sits at a well-stocked table and hands over what is close to him and in turn receives what is beyond his reach. Theodoret, the only one to hold Providence explicitly responsible for dividing his gifts, depicts the sea and its countless bays as the market place of a huge city thanks to which everyone can enjoy abundance.

After a period of relative silence, the doctrine turns up again in the High Middle Ages. A whole range of theologians, belonging to different religious orders, pointed at this form of economic providence.²⁸ Serving as proof of the ingenuity of God's creation

²⁶ Viner, *The Role of Providence in the Social Order*, pp. 37-38. Dietzel, *Weltwirtschaft und Volkswirtschaft*, p. 6 states that “[v]on der Zeit der Kirchenväter (Origines) bis ins Jahrhundert der Aufklärung (D. Hume) hinein ist est zahllose Male, oft mit gewaltigem Pathos, ausgesprochen worden”, but unfortunately does not provide references. Incidentally, Origen did not precede Libanius but merely argued that the “want of necessities caused the products also of other places to be conveyed, by means of the arts of sailing and pilotage, to those who were without them; so that even on that account one might admire the Providence which made the rational being subject to want in a far higher degree than the irrational animals, and yet all with a view to his advantage” (*Contra Celsum*, bk. IV, ch. 76).

²⁷ See Gregory of Nazianzus, *Orations*, orat. 28, § 27; Basil of Caesarea, *Hexæmeron*, hom. IV, § 7; Aurelius Ambrosius, *Hexæmeron*, bk. III, ch. 5, §22; John Chrysostom, *Ad Stelechium de compunctione*; Theodoret of Cyrus, *Περὶ προνοιας*, bk. II, § 19.

²⁸ These include the Byzantine scholar Nikephoros Gregoras (1292-1360), the French Dominican Humbert of Romans (1190-1277), the English theologian John Wycliffe (1320-1384), the German Henry of Langenstein (1325-1397), the English poet John Gower (1330-1408), the Italian Dominican

and providential care, the divine origin of international trade foremost had a theological meaning. Now and then the idea was called upon in a typical, economic context to justify long-distance trade. Quite exceptional, as well as a climax in scholastic thought on foreign trade, is the elaborate discussion by the Franciscan theologian Richard of Middleton. After having established that thanks to God “some parts of the world abound in some things of utility of human use, in which others countries are lacking, and vice versa”, he gives an example of two countries: country A that has an abundance of corn but lacks wine, and country B for which the reverse is true. Now if a merchant buys cheap corn in A and sells it at a higher market price in B, and another merchant buys cheap wine in B and sells it again at a higher price in A, then both merchants make a profit, the shortage in both countries is met, and the buyers in both countries do not face a disadvantage. From which follows Richard of Middleton’s Aristotelian conclusion that “just commercial transactions, in which the buyer gives as much as he receives, are profitable”.²⁹

The other side of trade

Before picking up the theme again in the age of Grotius, it is important to compare the positive view of international trade which reached its peak in antiquity with Libanius with another pre-modern heritage. For one would clearly do the pre-modern period an injustice by concealing that the appreciation of trade has always had two faces.³⁰ On the one hand, the necessity and potential benefits of foreign trade were stressed. As second best to agriculture (and conquest), interregional and international trade were seen as important means to supplement domestic shortages and import foreign specialities. On the other hand, down to the early-modern period there was a widely shared distrust of anything related to small-scale commercial practices. Especially profit-seeking retail trade, i.e. the purchase of goods for the sole purpose of selling them, had a notoriously bad reputation. Many regarded it as unworthy and unnatural since the goods involved do not undergo any change, and therefore the associated profits can only be made at the expense of others. In his immensely influential *On Duties*, Cicero summarized the matter as follows: “Trade, if it is on a small scale, is to be considered vulgar; but if wholesale and on large scale, importing large quantities from all parts of the world and distributing

Antoninus of Florence (1389-1459), the Scottish philosopher John Mair (1470-1550), the German Franciscan monk and later cartographer Sebastian Münster (1489-1552), and the Spanish Jesuit Juan de Mariana (1536-1624).

²⁹ For more information on Middleton (1249-1302), see Beer, *Early British Economics from the XIIth to the Middle of the XVIIIth Century*, pp. 39-44 and Langholm, *Economics in the Medieval Schools*, pp. 327-341. The quotes can be found at pp. 333-334.

³⁰ Baldwin, ‘The medieval theories of just price’, prt. 1 ‘The legacy of antiquity’; Viner, ‘The Wabash Lectures, lecture I - Early attitudes toward trade and the merchant’, in *Essays on the Intellectual History of Economics*, pp. 39-44; and Irwin, *Against the Tide*, ch. 1 ‘Early foreign trade doctrines’.

them to many without misrepresentation, is not to be greatly disparaged. ... But of all the occupations by which gain is secured, none is better than agriculture".³¹

A similar duality occurred in most other great thinkers of the classical age. For example, the same Plato who believed that an affluent city-state cannot do without oversea traders wanted to restrict merchandize as much as possible and proposed that shopkeepers at the market place should be selected from the physically weakest who are useless for other tasks. Associated with fraud and cheating, petty trade was counted among the occupations beneath the dignity of citizens. To Aristotle, the ideal city-state must be connected with the sea and have a harbour, not to make it the market for the world for the sake of profit but to import from abroad what is lacking. What is more, the harbour must be located at a reasonable distance from the city site itself so that citizens will not be infected with the strange customs and mores of foreign traders. Such distrust of maritime sites, or fear of cultural contact more generally, certainly was not a minority viewpoint and was also voiced by Cicero, Strabo and more than a thousand years later by Thomas Aquinas.³² Some writers wanted to banish navigation altogether, for as Horace expressed it, "[a]ll to no avail did God deliberately separate countries by the divisive ocean if, in spite of that, impious boats go skipping over the seas that were meant to remain inviolate".³³ Identical arguments could still be heard in the sixteenth century.

An even stronger suspicion towards trade and merchants existed in the early-Christian tradition.³⁴ It was based not so much on aristocratic prejudices but rather on biblical warnings, like Paul's verdict that "the love of money is the root of all evil" (1 Timothy 6:10). Concerned as they were with man's salvation, the Church Fathers discouraged Christians from becoming merchants. Many agreed with Augustine that trading itself is not reprehensible, while the commercial practice is a hotbed of evil and sin. It is easy to find in the patristic literature dozens of warnings against the moral dangers of trade. Most Fathers agreed that buying and selling are inextricably linked with avarice, falsehood and perjury. It was seen as difficult if not impossible for merchants not to sin. As a rule, agriculture and manual labour were valued more highly than trade. As we have seen, the circle of theologians around Libanius made an exception for wholesale commerce, but here too there were dissenting voices. For example, some patristic writers contended that a sinful desire for luxury was at the basis of overseas trade, whereas others stressed the physical hazards of navigation.

In sum, in the classical and medieval ages (international) trade and commerce were praised for their economic benefits and denounced for their moral drawbacks.

³¹ Cicero, *De officiis*, bk. I, ch. 42, § 151: "Mercatura autem, si tenuis est, sordida putanda est; sin magna et copiosa, multa undique apportans multisque sine vanitate impertiens, non est admodum vituperanda ... Omnia autem rerum, ex quibus aliquid acquiritur, nihil est agri cultura melius".

³² Thomas, *The Environmental Basis of Society*, ch. 7 'The social importance of location and accessibility'.

³³ Horace, *Odes and Epodes*, bk. I, poem 3, lines 21-26 (pp. 30-31): "neququam deus abscidit / prudens Oceano dissociabili / terras, si tamen impiae / non tangenda rates transiliunt vada".

³⁴ Viner, 'The economic doctrines of the Christian Fathers', pp. 34-38; Drexhage, 'Handel II (ethisch)'; Stander, 'Economics in the Church Fathers', pp. 31-33.

There is no need to reconcile these two appreciations here. It is important, though, to stress the existence of this duality and the fact that negative sentiments predominated for centuries. This renders the birth of the doctrine of universal economy and its incorporation into the Christian tradition the more striking. Generally speaking, both ancient authorities like Plato, Aristotle and Cicero and the testimony of Scripture left little room for odes to foreign trade. Expressions of, and even hints at a divine origin of trade in the Old and New Testaments are completely absent. Whereas the universal economy-idea suggests that international trade was intended to be part of the original constitution of the world, Scripture rather gave occasion to see it as a consequence of the Fall. The book of Genesis portrays the paradisiacal Garden of Eden as a place of abundance and self-sufficiency, and speaks about the dispersion of the human race over the earth as a punishment for men's pride. A number of scholastic theologians accordingly regarded trade as a mixed blessing, necessitated by human sin. By contrast, the doctrine discussed in this chapter glorified it and would eventually win the heart of early-modern man.

3.3 God Himself speaks this in nature: the rise of economic universalism

Occasionally turning up in pre-modern times, the belief in a God-ordained international trade reached unprecedented popularity in the second half of the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The numerous references to an unequal division of goods across the earth and the providential plan that was thought to underlie it made it no less than an early-modern commonplace, an idea that seemed to require little explanation and was scarcely criticized.

Among the reasons that might explain its popularity, two profound changes need to be mentioned. The first was the rise of the nation state.³⁵ This complex historical development, associated with the decline of feudalism and the waning power of the Roman Catholic Church, is hard to define. For our purposes, it suffices to note that at the end of the Middle Ages powerful politico-economic units, with well-defined geographical areas and concentrated military forces, like the kingdom of England, France and Spain began to emerge. This process not only called for political economy and a new economic discourse focused on national affairs, but also made conceivable a divine distribution of material resources across individual nations. The second development was the emergence of an international commerce, at increasingly longer distances. Until the late fifteenth century, much trade was confined to cities, towns and the surrounding countryside, and merchant ships only covered short distances, often across rivers or along coasts. Technological advances in shipbuilding and navigation, the discovery of new sailing routes and overseas territories, and new tastes for exotic products opened up new transnational markets and interconnected national economies in a world economy. In this context, the universal economy-doctrine naturally gained in significance.

At the same time, it had to compete with old prejudices concerning trade. In the sixteenth century and beyond, various humanists and theologians loyal to the ancients

³⁵ Perlman & McCann, *The Pillars of Economic Understanding*, pp. 73-78.

still warned against the seductions of the world of commerce. A notorious example was Martin Luther's *Von Kauffshandlung vnd wucher* that contrasted different forms of trickery in commerce with true Christian charity. Buying and selling, the German theologian admits, are necessary activities that were also practiced by the Patriarchs. Trade moreover deals with "Gods gifts, which he bestows out of the earth, and distributes among men. But foreign commerce, which brings from Calcutta, India and such places wares like costly silks, gold-work and spices, which are only meant as luxury and serve no useful purpose, and which drains away the money of land and people, ought not to be permitted".³⁶ Humanist concerns mostly revolved around the tension between wealth and virtuousness. Notwithstanding the eulogies by the new merchant class, such as we find in the texts of *quattrocento* civic humanists (Leonardo Bruni praised Florentine merchants for having travelled as far as Britain, "an island situated in the ocean almost on the edge of the world"³⁷), it was feared that the great profits resulting from mercantile activity undermined the virtuous life. Whereas moderate gains provided an opportunity for the exercise of such virtues as frugality and liberality, an excessive focus on wealth endangered man's public-mindedness and salvation alike.³⁸

Political philosophy

One of the Renaissance discourses in which the idea of a providential endorsement of international trade gained a foothold was French political philosophy. It was in the work of Jean Bodin, a sixteenth-century polymath with a proper humanist education, that the universal economy-doctrine turns up prominently. The author of a methodology for the study of universal history, an exposition of universal public law, and a book on the 'theatre of universal nature', Bodin's oeuvre in general is characterized by cosmopolitan sympathies and a tendency toward the 'universal'. Today the Frenchman is best remembered for his *Les six livres de la republique* (1576), an absolutist theory of political sovereignty that brought him fame well beyond his death. Bodin's contemporaries regarded him as an important contributor to the theory of money as well.³⁹ In his *Response ... au paradoxe de monsieur de Malestroit* (1568), Bodin sought to link the alarming price revolu-

³⁶ Martinus Luther, *Von Kauffshandlung vnd wucher* (1524), p. [2]: "Es sind Gottes gaben, die er aus der erden gibt, vnd vnter die menschen teylet. Aber der auslendische kauffs handel, der aus Kalikut und Indien vnd der gleychen wahr her bringt, als solch kostlich seyden vnd golltwerck vnd wurtze, die nur zur pracht vnd keynem nutz dienen, vnd land vnd leutten das gellt aus seuget, sollt nich zu gelassen werden". As frequently noted, John Calvin, the other major Reformer, was less hostile towards emerging capitalism. Yet he too reminded his readers that trade carried on with distant nations, though willed by God and not to be condemned on its own account, often involves much avarice, deceit and dishonesty. See Irwin, *Against the Tide*, p. 20.

³⁷ Quoted in Skinner, *The Foundation of Modern Political Thought*, vol. 1, *The Renaissance*, p. 74.

³⁸ For Renaissance attitudes towards economic activity, see Baron, 'Franciscan poverty and civic wealth as factors in the rise of humanistic thought'; McGovern, 'The rise of new economic attitudes'; and Jurdjevic, 'Virtue, commerce, and the enduring Florentine Republican moment'.

³⁹ Detailed discussions of Bodin's economic views can be found in Baudrillart, *J. Bodin et son temps* and Cole, *French Mercantilist Doctrines before Colbert*, pp. 47-57.

tion in Spain and France to the influx of bullion from America. Besides developing an early version of the quantity theory of money, it exhibits an unprecedented liberal conception of international trade based on the idea of an unequal division of resources. The text was partially reproduced in book six of the *Republique*, dealing with public finance and money, and in this edition alone had a wide diffusion.

As is clear from its title, the *Response* primarily addressed the paradoxes of Jean Malestroit, an earlier commentator on the issue of price inflation. Judging by the text, it aimed as well at “plusieurs grands personnages” who supposed that France could easily do without foreign supplies and for that reason argued against the exportation of French goods. “God”, Bodin objects, “with admirable foresight has arranged things well: for he so divided his favours that there is no country in the world so fruitful that it does not lack many things. Which God seems to have done to keep all the subjects of his republic in friendship, or at least to prevent them from making war upon each other for very long, being always dependent one upon another”.⁴⁰ Different climates and soils yield different products, and to this rule the kingdom of France can be no exception. Without denying that the country is blessed with an exceptionally fruitful soil, according to Bodin it lacks mines to obtain metals, such as gold and silver and thus needs to import these resources from elsewhere. In reality England, Scotland and other North-European countries already dig into the depths of the earth for these metals and export them in exchange for French salt and wine. Thanks to France’s moderate climate, salt in particular is a “gift [*manne*] which God gives us through especial favour with labour”.

Bodin in his enthusiasm for international trade went even further. Although taken together the quantity of imports in France is only small and can be further reduced by producing some of the products locally, in his eyes the friendly trade between countries should anyway be continued. Even if the kingdom could be entirely self-sufficient, something Bodin deems impossible, foreign trade should not be given up. For the sake of maintaining communication and friendship with foreigners, it is even defensible to lend or give away part of the national production. That France is so richly endowed by the Creator imposes on the nation an obligation to share it with others, out of “charity, by natural obligation”. It was one of the basest and vilest insults to God ever, Bodin reminds his readers, that according to the testimony of Appia the Romans refused the offers of peoples that wanted to submit to their rule voluntarily, as there was nothing to be gained. To be able to rule over poor and ignorant people is a great honour, and to let others share in one’s superfluity of goods and wealth no less than a duty. The exchange of goods is particularly beneficial if the parties involved let each other share in what is bestowed on them in abundance.

⁴⁰ Jean Bodin, *La response de maistre Iean Bodin advocate en la covr au paradoxe de monsieur de Malestroit* (1568), unpaginated: “Dieu par sa prudence admirable y a donné bon ordre: car il a tellement departi ses graces, qu'il n'y a pays au monde si plantureux, qui n'aye faute de beaucoup de choses. Ce que Dieu semble auoir fait, pour entretenir tous les subiects de sa republique en amitié, ou pour le moins empescher qu'ils ne se facent long temps la guerre, ayans tousiours afaire les vns des autres”.

In an earlier writing from 1566, Bodin already distanced himself from the laws of Lycurgus and Plato that allegedly forbade commerce with foreigners because of its corrupting effects. If it were true that the citizens of Sparta or Athens were in danger of moral corruption, he argues, there still was no reason to stop the importation and exportation of goods so as to prevent contact with strangers. Trade is an opportunity par excellence to instruct the other party in honour and virtue. In this respect Moses was a greater leader than Lycurgus and Plato, seeing that he allowed trade with strangers and moreover required the Jews to treat them equally well as their fellows. Again, the French author reinforces his argument by pointing to the God-given necessity of economic exchange, this time with the quotation from Virgil that we discussed earlier on. “Nowadays”, he writes, “by the highest wisdom of immortal God, we have seen it come about that no region is so fecund that it does not urgently need the resources of others. India, says the poet, sends ivory; the soft Sabaeans, their incense; and the naked Chalybes, iron. Then a little later, nature constantly imposed these laws and lasting alliances on certain regions. For what purpose, finally, if not that the people should unite their possessions and ideas in mutual commerce and thus strengthen peace and friendship?”.⁴¹

Bodin’s sympathetic attitude to international trade and foreign traders was in marked contrast with the prevailing economic sentiments in fifteenth and sixteenth-century France.⁴² First of all, the period witnessed a widely held belief that the kingdom could be entirely, or at least largely, self-sufficient. Thanks to the grace of the Most High, as a number of eulogies on the wealth of France had it, the kingdom is the most fertile, abundant and prosperous in the world. Provided that her natural, God-given resources are diligently employed, it could therefore easily do without external help, while the neighbouring countries in turn are dependent upon her abundance. Seeking to underline the potential independence of France, a royal edict from 1557 managed to present the following variation on the universal economy-idea: “God by His holy grace has put in our hands a kingdom composed of different lands and provinces each one of which, in its own setting, is as fertile and as abundantly provided with diverse commodities as any other in Christendom, and what is lacking in one is found in another to such an extent that inhabitants and dwellers in it have no need to seek the aid and assistance of neighbours or of foreigners for the necessities”.⁴³

In line with ancient philosophy, economic autarky was still seen as the ideal. The importation of goods from abroad was associated not only with an outflow of pre-

⁴¹ Jean Bodin, *Methodus, ad facilem historiarum cognitionem* (1566), ch. 9, p. 405: “Iam verò summa quadam immortalis Dei sapientia factum videmus, vt nullius regionis tanta fœcunditas sit, quæ non magnopere alterius egeat ope. India, inquit ille, mittit ebur, molles sua thura Sabæi, At Chalybes nudi ferrum. tum paulò post; Continuò has leges æternaque; foedera certis imposuit natura locis. cur tandem nisi vt res simul rationesque populi contraherent inter se, ac mutuis commerciis pacem & amicitiam firmarent? ”.

⁴² See the subjects ‘self-sufficiency’, ‘restrictions on foreigners’ and ‘wealth of France’ in Cole, *French Mercantilist Doctrines before Colbert*; Rothkrug, *Opposition to Louis XIV*, pp. 10-35; Keohane, *Philosophy and the State in France*, pp. 160-162.

⁴³ Quoted in Cole, *French Mercantilist Doctrines before Colbert*, p. 21.

cious metals but also with an equally undesirable influence of foreign merchants. The second, certainly not marginal sentiment of the age was precisely a distrust or hatred of strangers. Foreign merchants residing in France were considered incapable of serving the public interest, had fewer privileges and were simply excluded from certain commercial practices. One need not search long in sixteenth-century political and economic writings to discover traces of the widespread French xenophobia. The list of evils attributed to foreign merchants was virtually infinite. The story went that these intruders withdrew money from the kingdom, manipulated the rates of exchange, caused unemployment, exported valuable knowledge about the economy and, as an echo of the ancients, infected locals with foreign customs, mores and ideas. Also a fondness for foreign luxury goods, and an unwholesome attempt to import them into France, was reckoned among their achievements. It was this spirit of nationalism that was criticized in the writings of Bodin.

At the beginning of the seventeenth century, the aim of self-sufficiency and anti-foreign bias were emphatically voiced by the first systematic French mercantilists, to wit Barthélemy de Laffemas, his son Isaac and above all Antoyne de Montchrétien, the author of the *Traicté de l'oeconomie politique* (1615).⁴⁴ Their wish was to strengthen the French economy, if possible at the expense of other countries. In this respect, several publications in political philosophy from the second half of the sixteenth century displayed a way more cosmopolitan outlook. Somewhat unhistorically, they have been identified as products of a so-called *Bodinsche Schule*.⁴⁵ That Bodin served as a *Meister* is doubtful, since some of these texts lack explicit or implicit references to his work or dealt with altogether different questions. By way of example of the latter, both Guillaume de la Perrière and François de Rosières pointed to a natural inequality of material resources but mainly did so to encourage a friendly treatment of foreigners, not to attack nationalistic economic policies. More than 10 years before Bodin, the former reasoned that “conference and conuersing vvith strangers and aliens is oftentimes very profitable for the commonweale for the trafficke and merchaundise” because Nature did not give all her benefits to one place.⁴⁶ Nevertheless, the fact remains that from the time of Bodin’s ap-

⁴⁴ Magnusson, *Mercantilism*, pp. 176-187.

⁴⁵ Oberfohren, *Jean Bodin und seine Schule*. According to Oberfohren, the “Schar von Nachfolgern” includes Jean d’Arrérac, François de Rosières, Étienne de la Boétie, Henri Estienne, Claude Expilly, Antoyne de Montchrétien (!) and Émeric Crucé. Cf. Fleck, *Weltwirtschaftlicher Solidarismus*, ch. 2 ‘Der Gedanke der Universalökonomie und ihr Verhältnis zur modernen, politisch bestimmten Weltwirtschaft’.

⁴⁶ Guillaume de la Perrière, *Le miroir politicque* (1555), p. 194 (‘Des forains, estrangiers & pelerins: & comment ils doiuent ester traités en toute bonne Republicque’): “La communication des pelerins forains & estrangiers est bien fouuent vtile à la Republicque pour le train de la marchandise” (transl. from first English 1598-edition). See also François de Rosières, *Six Livres Des Politiques* (1574), bk. IV, ch. xix ‘De l’hospitalité receue és citez de tous temps, pour reciprocquement conferuer les citoyens en pays estranges’.

pearance on there was a growing number of writers who, parallel to protectionist tendencies, gave voice to the new economic universalism.⁴⁷

Natural-law philosophy

As said, another route along which the universal economy-doctrine was introduced to the early-modern period was natural-law philosophy.⁴⁸ Needless to say, this influential discourse with contributions by Grotius and Samuel Pufendorf in the seventeenth century and Christian Wolff and Emmerich de Vattel in the eighteenth was not economic in nature but legal and moral-philosophical. In response to the revival of ethical scepticism and reflecting on the relationship between divine law, natural law and international law, it sought a supra-confessional basis to a legal and moral order.⁴⁹ However, in a commercializing world economic issues could not be ignored. The natural-law philosophers were prompted to reflect on questions of property, money and trade, and by doing so obviously contributed to the economic thought of the period. One of their merits was the collection, summarizing and transmission of the economic views of Greek philosophers, Roman lawyers and scholastic theologians to a new age. The universal economy-doctrine was clearly part of this heritage. We have already seen how Grotius brought the words of Libanius to the attention of his contemporaries, and many jurists were to follow in his footsteps.

In natural-law philosophy, the idea of a divine division of economic resources was used as one of the arguments for freedom of international trade and, inextricably linked to this, freedom of navigation and passage over sea.⁵⁰ To be clear, it is not unrestricted and unregulated free trade that was at stake here, but more generally the right of merchants to cross the seas and to visit foreign ports and markets. In the latter sense, freedom of trade was seen as fundamental right that, according to the natural-law philosophers, is part of a law of nations (*ius gentium*) and ultimately rooted in natural law (*ius naturæ*). Together with the quotations from Virgil, Seneca and other ancient authorities that we discussed earlier on, the testimony of Libanius was taken as historical evidence that freedom of trade and navigation had always been prescribed by the most civilized nations. Free access and economic hospitality were ancient and venerable rights that were far from outdated.⁵¹ Any violation of these rights, for example by denying foreign traders access to a country or by establishing unjust monopolies, was therefore vehemently condemned. Some of the early natural-law philosophers who viewed the right of trade and navigation through the lens of the question of the just war, indeed regarded

⁴⁷ Rothkrug, *Opposition to Louis XIV* also distinguishes so-called Christian-humanist sources of opposition to mercantilism in writers like Guillaume Postel, Tommaso Campanella and Crucé.

⁴⁸ Irwin, *Against the Tide*, pp. 21-25.

⁴⁹ Haakonssen, *Natural Law and Moral Philosophy*, esp. chs. 1 and 2; Tuck, *The Rights of War and Peace*; Hochstrasser, *Natural Law Theories in the Early Enlightenment*.

⁵⁰ On the latter, see Bederman, 'The sea'.

⁵¹ Pagden, 'Stoicism, cosmopolitanism, and the legacy of European imperialism'.

physical obstruction of international trade and commerce as a sufficient condition for military intervention.

Of course, the debate on freedom of international trade and the just war did not come out of the blue.⁵² Clearly, it was the product of the Age of Discovery, which had greatly expanded man's geographical and intellectual horizons. Especially the voyages of Columbus to America in the 1490s awakened an awareness of living in an expanding world. At the same time, it created unforeseen confusion as to the status of the newly discovered peoples and territories. The seizure of regions that had not yet been claimed by other Christian princes, theologically legitimized by successive Papal Bulls, gave rise to urgent theological, moral and legal dilemmas, often with far-reaching economic consequences. The first writers to deal with them systematically belonged to the so-called School of Salamanca or 'Second Scholastic', a group of Spanish theologians who sought to adapt the theology of Thomas Aquinas to the modern age.⁵³ Considering the relationship between the law of nations common to all human beings and the broader category of natural law, and their meaning for such issues as private property, slavery and exchange, the case of the 'Indians' proved difficult. Could a right of discovery (*ius inventionis*) actually be used to derive a right of occupation (*ius occupationis*)? Was the Pope, as 'Vicar of Christ', entitled to donate lands of the barbarians to worldly rulers or to grant a nation a monopoly to travel and trade there? Is any violation of the right to preach (*ius praedicationis*) a sufficient ground for a just war? etc.

We need not sum up all the ideas of the Spanish neo-scholastics here. Of great importance to the later debate on the freedom of trade, though, were the views of Francisco de Vitoria, the founder of the school and one of Grotius's sources of inspiration. In his *Relectio de Indis recenter inventis* (1539), better known as *De Indis*, the Dominican theologian emphatically ascribes a right of property to the original inhabitants of the New World, a right that in principle could not be claimed by the Pope. Having said that, he maintains that the Spanish have a right to travel through these newly discovered countries, to stay there and to negotiate with locals. According to Vitoria, the rights to travel and sojourn (*ius peregrinandi*) and of trade (*ius negotiandi*) stem from the natural society and fellowship (*naturalis societatis et communicationis*) between human beings, and equally apply to other European nations. As part of the law of nations, i.e. "what natural reason has established among all nations", these primitive and inalienable liberties were not undone by the division of the world into distinct nations. They were neither "taken away by the division of property, for it was never the intention of peoples

⁵² Green & Dickason, *The Law of Nations and the New World* (see pp. 39ff on the views of the 'fathers' of international law). See also Cavallar, *The Rights of Strangers*; Pagden, 'The Christian tradition'; Baker, 'Right of entry or right of refusal?', esp. pp. 1423-1437.

⁵³ Hamilton, *Political Thought in Sixteenth-Century Spain*, chs. 5 'The *jus gentium* or law of nations', 6 'Colonization and the New World', and 7 'War and the law of war'. Clear introductions to the economic views of the school are provided in Grice-Hutchinson's *The School of Salamanca and Early Economic Thought in Spain 1177-1740*, ch. 3 'The School of Salamanca'.

to destroy by that division the reciprocity and common use which prevailed among men, and indeed in the days of Noah it would have been inhumane to do so”.⁵⁴

When it comes to the appropriation of natural resources like gold in the earth, pearls in a river or fishes in the sea of a recently discovered territory, Vitoria goes on to argue, this is only legitimate if they have not been claimed yet by local inhabitants. In the case of a voluntary exchange of goods, there is only one simple requirement. “The Spaniards”, he writes, “may lawfully carry on trade among the native Indians, so long as they do no harm to their country, as, for instance, by importing thither wares which the natives lack and by exporting thence either gold or silver or other wares of which the natives have abundance”.⁵⁵ A major reason why this form of international trade may not be frustrated is that it agrees with the natural sociability between men. For, as Ovid has it, man to his fellow is not a wolf but a man. In Justinian’s *Digesta* it can accordingly be read that nature has established a bond of relationship between all men. Since the right to travel, sojourn and trade is based on the law of nature and nations, any violation of it can be understood as an act of violence that provokes a just war. Excluding Spaniards from provinces, cities and markets or banishing ships from harbours and waters, which by natural law are common to all, therefore may be answered with weapons.

At the beginning of the seventeenth century, Vitoria’s reflections were elaborated on by among others Francisco Suarez, Grotius and Alberico Gentili. Though operating in a new climate of opinion, they agreed that freedom of international trade is prescribed by a primitive right of nations. The Jesuit Suarez, associated with the School of Salamanca too, for example argued that while nations are free to strive for autarky independently, it has anyway “been established by the *ius gentium* that commercial intercourse shall be free”. It would therefore be a “violation of that system of law if such intercourse were prohibited without reasonable cause”.⁵⁶ Grotius and Gentili, both Protestant jurists, explicitly dealt with the right of hospitality (*ius hospitale*) and trade in the context of the question of just war. According to Gentili, Regius Professor of Civil Law at Oxford, the restraining of travellers or exclusion of merchants from ports and markets is a violation of a “privilege of nature” and thus a natural reason for declaring war. To forbid importation or exportation of certain commodities is lawful, to forbid commercial intercourse altogether is not.⁵⁷ Grotius’s first attempt in international law, the *Mare liberum* (1609), which caused a polemic over the freedom of the seas, originally was part of an unpublished tract that defended the hijacking of a Portuguese ship in the Straits of Malacca by the Dutch as a legitimate act of war.⁵⁸ Reportedly, the Portuguese tried to monopolize the East-India trade and by doing so excluded the Dutch. This act of obstruction

⁵⁴ Franciscus de Victoria, *De indis et De iure belli relectiones*, p. 151.

⁵⁵ Victoria, *De indis et De iure belli relectiones*, p. 152.

⁵⁶ Francisco Suarez, *Tractatus de legibus, ac deo legislatore* (1613), bk. I, ch. 19, § 7, p. 112: “iure autem gentium introductum est, vt commercia sint libera, violareturque ius gentium si absque causa rationali prohiberentur”.

⁵⁷ Alberico Gentili, *De iure belli* (1612), bk. I, ch. 19 ‘De naturalibus caussis belli inferendi’.

⁵⁸ Van Ittersum, *Profit and Principle*.

is unacceptable, since by the law of nations navigation and trade between all countries is free.

In a typically humanist style, in Grotius and Gentili the right of navigation and trade is demonstrated with the help of a great many quotes and motives from ancient writers, including the universal economy-doctrine. They both resort to Virgil's observation of different types of soils, Seneca's theory of the winds and the unequal division of goods, and Florus's characterization of commerce as the bond of human society. To this, Grotius adds relevant passages from Euripides, Philo, Pliny, Plutarch and, from the second edition of the *De iure belli ac pacis* from 1631 on, Libanius. Insisting on the existence of a natural world community, Gentili in the 1612 edition of his *De iure belli* presented two more original discoveries: a statement, attributed to Hermes Trismegistus, that "in harbours, navigation, communication and accommodation is the strongest bond of human interdependence" and a formulation of the universal economy-idea by the fourteenth-century Byzantine scholar Nikephoros Gregoras. The first time that Grotius refers to a God-given division of resources, right at the beginning of *Mare liberum*, an explicit reference to Libanius is lacking. But also here the argument for freedom of navigation and trade is purely theological: "God himself speaketh this in nature, seeing he will not have all those things, whereof the life of man standeth in need, to be sufficiently ministered by nature in all places and also vouchsafeth some nations to excel others in arts. To what end are these things but that he would maintain human friendship by their mutual wants and plenty, lest everyone thinking themselves sufficient for themselves for this only thing should be made insociable?".⁵⁹

As said, Grotius's reintroduction and careful documentation of the universal economy-doctrine marked the beginning of a new tradition. It does not add much to enumerate all its occurrences in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century writings on the law of nature and nations here. Generally speaking, the doctrine was not so much used to justify the phenomenon of international trade as such as to criticize all kinds of trade barriers contrary to the divine plan. For example, the German natural-law philosopher Pufendorf from Libanius's words concluded that "it cannot be less than inhumanity to deny any son of the earth the use of those good things, which our common mother affords for our support; provided our peculiar right and propriety be not injured by such a favour. ... But this assertion will admit of many restrictions".⁶⁰ The latter proviso is illustrative of the increasing tendency to allow for exceptions to the initially rather liberal right of free trade. Several grounds that justify duties or bans on imports and exports

⁵⁹ [Hugo Grotius], *Mare liberum* (1609), pp. 1-2: "Deus hoc ipse per naturam loquitur, cum ea cuncta quibus vita indiget, omnibus locis suppeditari a natura non vult: artibus etiam alijs alias gentes dat excellere. Quo ista? nisi quod voluit mutua egestate & copia humanas foveri amicitias, ne singuli se putantes sibi ipsis sufficere, hoc ipso redderentur insociabiles?". On Grotius's 'economic theology', see Thumfart, 'Freihandel als Religion'.

⁶⁰ Samuel Pufendorf, *De jure naturae et gentium* (1672), bk. III, ch. iii, § 11, p. 301: "inhumanum valde esse, terrigenam velle invidere alteri usum eorum bonorum, quæ communis omnium parens profudit, ubi per id nostrum jus, quod ad ista peculiariter quæsivimus, non redditur deterius. ... Quanquam isthæc assertio multas admittat restrictiones" (transl. from first English 1703-edition).

could already be found in Grotius and Gentili, and during the centuries that followed the list with exceptions was only to augment.⁶¹ This does not alter the fact that natural-law philosophy played an important role in promoting the idea of a divine origin of international trade, and linked to that, global freedom of trade.

Mercantilism

Along with political and legal thought, the universal economy-doctrine also entered the emerging mercantilist discourse. As a matter of fact, English writers on economics already employed it in the early sixteenth century and thus were the first to adopt it.⁶² To my knowledge, the first to include the idea in a typically mercantilist text was the London grocer Clement Armstrong. Sometime between 1519 and 1535, he writes in a discourse on the English wool staple: “So as all speciall gift of riche comodites, that Godd first gaff into the erth in every reame to oon reame, that another hath not, to the entent, that every reame shuld be able to liff of Goddes gift, oon to be help to another to be an occasion oon to live by another”. In Armstrong’s eyes, God’s special gift to England consists of “fynes of goode wolle in the erthe”, the trade of which may in no case be taken away from the country. The emerging Spanish wool trade may seem a serious competitor, but its wool will always remain inferior in quality. The reason is that Spain “can have no staple by Goddes own ordinaunce”. England, in turn, should not try to deprive Spain of its God-given olives, almonds and oranges. A clear proof of this divine order was that an attempt to plant one of these Spanish trees in English soil stayed unsuccessful. Though during spring the rising sun caused the branches and leaves to grow, in the summer it eventually turned from north to south to deliver fruits in Spain.⁶³

A more complete formulation, now with mention of love and society, can be found in a dialogue attributed to William Smith, dealing just like Bodin’s treatise with the price revolution. If England in a certain year has an abundance of corn, he writes around 1549, merchants either at home or abroad have a “libertie to sell [it] at theire plesure” to obtain other commodities. In case of scarcity, they should likewise be allowed to buy corn oversea. “Surely”, Smith continues, “common reason would that one region should healpe a nother whan it lacketh. And therefore god hath ordained that no countrie should haue all commodities; but that, that one lacketh this yeare, a nother hath plenty therof the same yeare, to the entent that one maie know they haue need of a nothers healpe, and therby loue and societie to grow emonst all the more”. God thus not only ensured that no

⁶¹ Irwin, *Against the Tide*, pp. 24-25; Castellar, *Rights of Strangers*, pp. 206 (Pufendorf), 215ff (Wolff) and 314 (Vattel).

⁶² On the background of early English mercantilism, see De Roover, *Gresham on Foreign Exchange* and McNally, *Political Economy and the Rise of Capitalism*, pp. 24-29.

⁶³ [Clement Armstrong], *A treatise concerning the Staple and the Commodities of this Realme*, p. 25. In a later treatise, *How to reforme the Realme in settyngh them to worke and to restore Tillage* (written between 1535 and 1536), Armstrong stresses that England cannot flourish without imports “needful for the common weale of the realme, which Godd hath ordenyd in other contreys and not in Englond” (p. 77).

country can be self-sufficient, but also replenishes the deficit of the one with the surplus of the other. Without denying the bounty of the Creator, the author thinks it impossible as English to “liue all of oure selues”. For certain goods demand exceeds supply, others are altogether unavailable. Even though some goods are unnecessary and can be missed, “yet farre from anie civilitie shoulde it be”.⁶⁴ Finally, Smith is well aware of the interdependence of exports and imports. England’s choice not to export implies that it needs to live without products from abroad as well.

The last sixteenth-century text that should be mentioned here comes from another London grocer, William Cholmely. While impressed by the “goodly and ryche commodities wherwith the Almightye Maker of all thinges hathe so abundantly blessed this littell corner of the earth”, Cholmeley believes that England is lacking something, namely the skills to transform its abundance of wool into high quality clothes. When he considered how the “unsearchable purpose of God hath, by the lacke of necessarie commodities, dryven all the nations of the earth to seke one upon another, and therby to be knyt together in amitye and love”, the author initially came to the conclusion that a leading role for England in the clothing trade was not obstructed by God. Later on, we are told, he became convinced that God had not blessed the island with wool in vain, and the main reason for the inferiority of English cloth is the self-interest and laziness of the craftsmen in question. “For as God hath enryched us with woulle, leade, lether, and tynne, so hath he enryched other contreyes with other commodities which we may in nowyse lacke. And yet he hath not denied to any of those nations the power of reasone, wherby they maye be able to make those theyr commodities so perfect by workmanship, that they need none of oure helpe in the doying therof”.⁶⁵ Instead of exporting raw wool, England does well to improve her craftsmanship so as to be able to sell more expensive finished cloth.

This discussion of political, legal and economic thought at the beginning of our period shows that, unlike pre-modern interpretations, the universal economy-doctrine was increasingly used in a functional way. As a visible manifestation of God’s providence, patristic and medieval theology used to view it as a page in the great Book of Nature. The impossibility of economic self-sufficiency implied that from the beginning God wanted to establish ties of friendship among all human beings. If it had a functional meaning at all, then at most to provide international trade and commerce with a justification. In the early-modern period, in contrast, lay writers began to employ the idea in their arguments to influence economic policy. Rhetorically still embedded in a whole body of ancient statements about the necessity and usefulness of trade - but incidentally also as isolated idea, the belief in a divine hand in the unequal division of material recourses proved useful in various debates. Whereas in political and legal writings the doctrine mainly served to highlight the importance of international hospitality, early economic writers began to use it in their discussions of the desirability of imports and exports. Thinking

⁶⁴ W[illiam] S[mith], *A Discourse of the Common Weal of this Realm of England*, pp. 60-62.

⁶⁵ William Cholmeley, *The Request and Suite of a True-Hearted Englishman* (1553), pp. 1-2.

about the right balance between them was at the heart of mercantilism, and as such of pre-classical economic thought in general.

3.4 Dazzles of the devil: new economic interpretations

Appeals to the divine origin of international trade were certainly not confined to the emerging mercantilist discourse. In fact, the idea remained in vogue and even increased in popularity in the subsequent centuries. Instead of presenting an endless list of examples here, it suffices to mention some better-known political economists who employed it in their work. Its seventeenth-century advocates include mercantilists like Gerard Malynges, Edward Misselden, and John Pollexfen in England, Jean Éon (Mathias de Saint-Jean) and Savary in France and Dirck Graswinckel, cousin and pupil of Grotius, in the Low Countries. Examples from the eighteenth century are cameralists like Paul Jacob Marperger, Johann Heinrich Gottlob von Justi and Joseph von Sonnenfels, François Quesnay and other Physiocrats, and Enlightenment philosopher-economists like David Hume, Isaac de Pinto and Étienne Bonnot de Condillac. Although the times and debates in which they expressed the idea were clearly different, the reason for these and numerous lesser-known writers to point to a divine dispersion of resources and products by and large was the same. As with Bodin, Grotius, and their followers, it could serve as incentive to a more friendly intercourse with foreigners, as argument against unreasonable prohibitions and barriers in trade, and above all as explanation of the necessity and utility of international trade. A new motive, which will be discussed below, was that of overall free trade.

Intuitively, the universal economy-doctrine was foreign to the early-modern period. After all, the cosmopolitan idea of a divinely sanctioned international economy is hard to reconcile with the nationalism and exclusivism that characterized much of its economic thought. In what has been called an age of jealousy of trade,⁶⁶ pamphleteers delighted in enumerating the blessings exclusively bestowed on their country. England, it was stressed, is in the happy possession of fish, metals and the “golden fleeces” of wool, France of grain, wine and the “divine manna” of salt, and the German-speaking countries of wood and beer. In this connection, great patriotic words were not shunned. In an effort to persuade his countrymen to imitate the Dutch fishing trade, mariner Tobias Gentleman for example opened his pamphlet as follows: “Noble Brittaines, ... it hath pleased the Almighty God to make vs a happy nation, by blessing and enriching this noble kingdome with sweete dew of his heauenly word, truely and plentifully preached amongst vs; and also in cytuating our country in a most wholesom clymate, & stored with many rich & pleasant treasures for our benefite, which also yeeldeth in abundance all things necessary, so that wee doe not onely excel other nations in strength & courage, but also all other kingdomes far remote are by our English comodities reliued & cherished”. God, he

⁶⁶ Hont, *Jealousy of Trade*.

adds, reserved the country “as some precious gemme vnto himself” by environing it with water and therewith excellent opportunities for a flourishing fishing trade.⁶⁷

The mercantilist discourse in particular is not the place where one would expect theological explanations of international trade. For rather than with solidarity and cooperation, mercantilism is associated with economic warfare. Mercantilist doctrines, policies and practices were aimed at enriching and enhancing the power of the nation state, which was conceived of as being in a competitive struggle with other nations. Although the idea of a divine dispersion of material gifts fitted this outlook well, especially the aspect of community and friendship must have been odd to the proto-mercantilist. It might therefore be no coincidence that precisely this element of the doctrine was often omitted, or understood as mutual assistance. The initial uneasiness is clear from a formulation of the doctrine by the prominent English mercantilist Malyne, which by the way was copied word for word from Bodin and applied in a different context: “God hath so bestowed and deuided his graces and blessing, that there is no countrey in all the world so fruitfull, but hath neede of diuers things: whereby he holdeth all the subiects of his commonwealth in friendship, or”, as he immediately adds, “at least doth hinder them to make long warres one with another”.⁶⁸

Another indication that the doctrine was not in full agreement with the economic spirit of the times is evident from the practice of some to reinterpret it. The idea of a divine distribution of resources appeared to lend itself to a wide variety of interpretations, not seldom coinciding fortuitously with the self-interest of the writer in question.⁶⁹ Arguably the most innocent application, dating back all the way to Xenophon,⁷⁰ was to call compatriots to give priority to the employment of those gifts assigned to their own country. The abundance of certain resources at home, and the absence of them in competing countries could be seen as an indication that the blessing of the Supreme Being was to be expected in the associated trades and industries. The neglect of such a privilege, on the other hand, might cause God to withdraw His special gifts. Two nice examples of this line of thought can be found in the *Chronicon Rusticum-Commerciale* (1747), a collection of seventeenth and eighteenth-century memoirs of the wool trade. The assumption shared by most contributors is that England “is by God peculiarized” in the blessing of wool.

⁶⁷ Tobias Gentleman, *Englands VVay To VVin Wealth, and to employ Ships and Marriners* (1614), pp. 1-2.

⁶⁸ ‘Gerrard de Malyne Merchant’, *Englands view, in the unmasking of two paradoxes* (1603), pp. 42-43 (cf. 44: “For God himselfe did so direct and dispose the nature of the ground, that all should not be for corne, or all wine; seeing the one hath need of a fat, and the other of a stonie ground”).

⁶⁹ Viner, *Studies in the Theory of International Trade*, pp. 100-101: “This doctrine [of the universal economy] was taken over to some extent by the lay writers on commercial matters, but they managed ingeniously to adapt the intent of Providence to their own particular views”.

⁷⁰ In his *Poroi*, Xenophon argued that the city state of Athens can best focus on the exportation of silver. Not for nothing “there is silver in the soil, the gift, beyond doubt, of divine providence [θείᾳ μοίρᾳ]: at any rate, many as are the states near to her by land and sea, into none of them does even a thin vein of silver ore extend”. See Jansen, *After Empire*, pp. 247-252.

An anonymous tradesman opens his pamphlet with the observation that “God hath given to every country some particular commodity, that is not to be had any where else; so that none may boast, but that every country must be beholden unto another for something that they have not”. Undoubtedly, for England this is wool “because God hath not only given us wool in abundance that makes cloth, but also another necessary material, viz. fuller’s earth; without which this commodity is not to be made, and (as they say) is not be found any where else, but in this land, which is a clear demonstration, that it is the use of our wool that is the special talent, which God hath put into our hand to improve”.⁷¹ Due to a lack of industriousness, however, the wool trade has temporally been taken away from the country. What follows is various advices on how England’s ancient wool trade can be restored to its former glory. Another author asserts that “Divine Providence, that appoints to every nation and country a particular portion, seems to allot that to England, which was the first acceptable sacrifice to his omnipotence, that of the flock . . . Now to decline this [woolen manufacture], and set up another manufacture, looks like an extravagant mechanick, who by his improvidence had lost his own art, and thinks to retrieve this misfortune by taking up that of another’s man”.⁷² In order to justify his proposal, he adds that trading privileges were very common in the early days of trade.

When it came to restrictions, some writers on economics advocated import prohibitions on the grounds that the country possessed these resources itself. To buy something abroad that is simply available at home, besides being an unnecessary enrichment of foreign countries, was seen as no less than an affront to God and Nature. One of the better-known writers to argue along these lines was the cameralist Philipp von Hörnigk. Striving for full autarky of Austria, he claimed that the country should do without foreign products, and French manufactures in particular. In his aptly titled book *Oesterreich über alles* (1684), Von Hörnigk answers the objection “[o]ur native manufactures will not be as good as the foreign ones” as follows: “Such is in many cases a dazzle of the devil who is hostile to the prosperity of the native land. . . If you ask why wines are prohibited which are better than the domestic ones, and even cheaper? the answer will be: therefore, because the domestic gifts of God should be utilized and prudently consumed, not despised, thrown away, or ruined”.⁷³ The importation of goods that, under the providence of God, can be obtained from domestic production should in other words be prohibited. Only in this way can the further impoverishment of Austria, which was just recovering from a war against France, be stopped.

⁷¹ ‘A country tradesman’, *The ancient Trades decayed, repaired again* (1678), in John Smith, *Chronicon Rusticum-Commerciale; or Memoirs of Wool, &c.* (1747), bk. 1, ch. 62, pp. 319-320.

⁷² [Anonymous], *The Linen and Woolen Manufactory discoursed* (1691), in Smith, *Chronicon Rusticum-Commerciale*, bk. I, ch. 75, p. 384.

⁷³ ‘Einen Liebhaber der Kayserl. Erbland Wolfart’ [Philipp Wilhelm von Hörnigk], *Oesterreich über alles wann es nur will* (1684), ch. 24, p. 176: “Unsere Erbländische Manufacturen werden so gut nicht seyn, als die Ausländische. Solches is in vielen Dingen eine Verblendung des Teufels welcher dem Aufkommen der Erbland feind ist. . . Fragt man, warum Wein verbotten werden, so doch besser als die Inländische, so gar auch wohlfeiler? so wird geantwortet: Darumb, auf daß die inländische Gottes-Gab angebracht, räthlich consumirt, nich verachtet, verschüttet, oder verdorben, . . . werde”.

On similar grounds the exportation of certain resources was being criticized. From the fact that a country possessed certain resources in remarkable quantity or quality, it could be concluded that they should be produced and manufactured there as well. Instead of exporting superfluous resources right away, with the risk that they would be offered again at domestic markets by foreign merchants, the country would owe it to the Creator to process them into finished products first. A good illustration of this idea can be found in an early text by Defoe, the author of *Robinson Crusoe* and a prolific writer on political economy. The king, he writes in an evaluation of Henry VII's economic views, "justly inferr'd that Heaven having been so bountifull to England as to giv them the wooll, as it were, in a peculiar grant, exclusiv of the whole world, it was a meer rebellion against His providence and particularly ungratefull to His bounty that the English nation should reject the offer, giv away the blessing, and by an uncountable neglect send their wooll abroad to be manufactured, and even buy their own clothing of the Flemings with ready money".⁷⁴

An idea, finally, that was peculiar to French authors is that despite an unequal division of resources France can be fully self-sufficient. Geographically speaking, the country was said to be so vast and varied that it produced all necessities itself. In discussing Bodin, we already came across a royal edict that expressed this idea. Another illustration is offered in the opening words from a memoir on the trade with England by Jean Baptiste Colbert, the later Minister of Finance and spiritual father of French mercantilism. "Although the abundance that God gave to most provinces of this kingdom seems to be enough for it to be self-sufficient", it says, "Providence placed France in such a situation that its own fertility would be useless and even often burdensome and inconvenient without the benefit of commerce, which carries from one province to the other and to foreign territories what one and the other might be in need of, to attract to oneself all the utility".⁷⁵ Fearing economic competition with neighbouring countries, Colbert saw self-sufficiency as France's ultimate economic objective and apparently believed this could be achieved through extensive regulation, even so that surpluses could be exported at the expense of others.

Some higher thoughts

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the universal economy-doctrine as such underwent little to no change. Like Libanius hundreds of years before, it was still believed that God had once scattered His gifts across the world so as to invite countries to practice international trade. Occasionally, geographical and climatological factors used

⁷⁴ Daniel Defoe, *Of Royall Educacion*, p. 40.

⁷⁵ 'Mémoire touchant le commerce avec l'Angleterre' (1651), p. 405: "Bien que l'abondance dont il a plu à Dieu de douter la plupart des provinces de ce royaume semble le pouvoir mettre en estat de se pouvoir suffire à lui-même, néanmoins la Providence a posé la France en telle situation que sa propre fertilité lui seroit inutile et souvent à charge et incommoder sans le bénéfice du commerce, qui porte d'une province à l'autre et chez les étrangers ce dont les uns et les autres peuvent avoir besoin pour en attirer à soi toute l'utilité".

by the Creator to effectuate His plan were discussed in somewhat more detail.⁷⁶ Some writers, particularly theologians, went a step further and tried to disentangle the logic behind God's distribution. One of their observations was that a region's natural products usually match the local needs. Raw materials to make thin and light clothes (such as silk) are available in hotter climates, while thick and heavy materials (such as wool) are produced in the cold northern regions. Equally remarkable is the fact that fertile regions lack mines while the infertile ones have been compensated with great mineral wealth. For example, the Indies are infertile in plants and fruits but full of gold-bearing sands and silver mines.⁷⁷ Finally, as a rule complementary products (such as porcelain from China and coffee from Arabia) do not occur in the same region but are found at great distance from each other, not seldom at the other side of the world. What other reason for this could there be than God wanting to bring together people from the most distant nations?

Repeated time and time again in nearly identical terms, the idea of a divine origin of international trade became somewhat of a cliché. Few writers elaborated on it, let alone tried to fit it into a larger theological scheme. A clear exception of someone who reflected on the foundations of the doctrine was Defoe, the English writer whom we have met several times now (see appendix A for a more extensive discussion).⁷⁸ Next to being one of the founders of the English novel, Defoe is known as a pioneer of 'economic journalism', and this is exactly the way in which he approaches the subject. The frequent enumerations in his work of typical natural resources and products for different countries are meant to demonstrate that, as he puts it, "there is a kind of divinity in the original of trade".⁷⁹ Yet on closer observation this unequal division is only one out of many indications that global trade is part of a comprehensive divine plan. In his *General History of Trade* (1713), Defoe discusses in detail how God prepared Nature as a whole for long-distance trade, for example by enabling the seas to carry ships and furnishing coasts with natural harbours. International trade and commerce are tools in the hands of the Creator to establish contact between different peoples, but they serve an even higher purpose as well: without the help of navigation and trade, the gospel could only be spread into the darkest corners of the earth in a supernatural and miraculous way.⁸⁰

To some, peace and friendship alone indeed could not be the only motivation for God to arrange the world for commerce. As early as the first half of the seventeenth

⁷⁶ Some sixteenth and seventeenth-century theories of climate are discussed in Harrison, 'Religion' and the Religions in the English Enlightenment, pp. 112-120.

⁷⁷ For this observation, see Joseph (José) de Acosta, *Historia natural y moral delas Indias* (1590), bk. IV, ch. 3.

⁷⁸ Defoe's views of international trade are discussed in Aravamudan, 'Defoe, commerce, and empire'.

⁷⁹ [Daniel Defoe], *A Review of the State of the English Nation*, vol. I [i.e. IX], no. 54 (Saturday, February 3. 1713), p. 107.

⁸⁰ The preaching of the gospel to the heathen (based on Scripture texts like Matthew 28:19: "Go ye therefore, and teach to all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost") also provided an important justification for colonization. See Johnson, *American Economic Thought in the Seventeenth Century*, pp. 39-40, 69-71 and Harrison, 'Fill the earth and subdue it'.

century, several French authors came up with additional reasons. Remarkably detailed are the two speeches by Claude Expilly against a 30 per cent tax imposed by the Spanish crown on products of French origin.⁸¹ In his plea for more commercial freedom, the French lawyer and consultant respectively guides his audience to the origin, rise and benefits of international trade, while constantly drawing upon ancient commonplaces. Not unexpectedly, the “causes of commerce” are traced back to the unequal division of gifts by Nature, helped by the different climates. Consequently all regions of the globe are interdependent, for as Horace said, “*alterius sic / altera poscit opem [res et conjurat amice]*” (thus one thing demands the aid of the other and both unite in friendly assistance). That no plot of land brings forth everything and therefore trade is indispensable and beneficial alike is illustrated with quotations from Virgil, Ovid, Herodotus and Seneca. Even stronger than Bodin, with whose work he was familiar, Expilly stresses the favourable side effects of an international exchange of goods. Foreign trade, he argues, acquaints the people with the virtues, arts and civilities of strangers, allows for the spread of the Christian gospel to the farthest corners of the earth, and exercises men in sociability. The latter observation, that *commerce rend les peuples sociables*, was to become a central idea in Enlightenment thought.

Another writer in the Bodinian tradition expressing ideas like these was Jean Éon. In his voluminous *Le commerce honorable* (1646), written in defence of the Breton merchant company, the Carmelite monk insists that we owe the worldwide inequality in material resources and human qualities to divine providence. After all, together with navigation and trade they cannot but lead to universal “unity, friendship and society”. According to Éon, a world-embracing community produces three secondary benefits: “[t]he first, is the gentleness & politeness of manners: the second, the communication of arts & sciences: & the third, the transport of variant kinds of goods, to serve out of the necessity of every country the ones that are given to us”.⁸² A fourth one, to which he devotes a separate chapter, is that trade can be used to preach the gospel among the heathens. “Commerce and navigation”, as the title of the chapter reads, is “very commendable for being one of the most advantageous means for the propagation of the Christian & Catholic faith”. Éon recounts how, according to the testimony of the apostles and more recent historians, Christianity expanded along trading routes. Nevertheless, international trade also provides an opportunity to spread heresy, for example when the English and Dutch cross the oceans. For a Catholic nation like France, this is all the more reason to intensify its long-distance trade.

⁸¹ See the sixth and seventh plea in [Claude Expilly], *Plaidoyez De M^e Claude Expilly, conseiller du royaume, et son avocat général au Parlement de Grenoble* (1608).

⁸² ‘Un habitant de la ville de Nantes’ [Jean Éon, Mathias de Saint-Jean], *Le commerce honorable ou considérations politiques* (1646), part II, ch. 1 ‘Premier motif tire de la dignité et de la fin naturelle de la navigation & du commerce’, p. 133: “Le premier, est la douceur & politesse des mœurs: le second, la communication des arts & sciences: & le troisième, le transport de diverses sortes de marchandises, pour servir aux nécessitez de châque païs comme nous alons montrer”.

3.5 The great designe of God Almighty: towards freedom of trade

Throughout the early-modern period, mercantilism remained the prevailing economic paradigm. However, from the end of the seventeenth century on, the first anti-mercantilist critique was uttered in print, particularly in England and France. The rise of liberal economics, as it is sometimes called, involved an attack on different aspects of mercantilism, yet it was especially the balance-of-trade doctrine that had to suffer.⁸³ Against the system of government-regulated foreign trade through import and export barriers and tariffs, increasing attention was paid to the advantages of free trade. In the first instance, it were mainly merchants and businessmen who contributed to the development of free trade ideas because they were personally harmed by the protectionist measures.⁸⁴ From the 1690s onwards, the movement was supported by political economists from different backgrounds, including later on the French Physiocrats. Initially isolated remarks and slogans about the harmfulness of government intervention became part of more systematic theories of international trade. These theories, as we will see, were not seldom substantiated by the universal economy-doctrine. On the whole, mercantilist thought proved persistent and disintegrated only slowly. Since even the fiercest advocates of free trade combined this ideal with typically mercantilist measures in other debates, it may be better to speak of 'liberal mercantilists' instead of free-traders.

Naturally, the call for more freedom in trade was not a new phenomenon.⁸⁵ As we have seen, during the late sixteenth and seventeenth century similar ideals were voiced, foremost in the context of political philosophy and natural-law philosophy. In this respect, it is important to distinguish between either '*a free trade*', '*freedom to trade*', or '*freedom of trade*' and real '*free trade*'. In the vocabulary of the period, the first was a basic right of merchants or companies to participate in (international) trade at all, as was the wish of many. Its advocates agitated against specific state-regulated or sponsored companies and monopolies, which reportedly discouraged competition and caused scarcity and dearth. Particularly the evil practice of monopoly was regarded with great disapproval. According to two seventeenth-century commentators, monopolies would "contradict the great designe of God Almighty" and "violate an institution of God in the con-

⁸³ On this development and the writers in question, see Beer, *Early British Economics*, ch. 11 'Transition to liberal economics'; Cole, *French Mercantilism 1683-1700*, ch. 5 'Attacks on mercantilism'; Gomes, *Foreign Trade and the National Economy*, ch. 3 'The decline of mercantilist trade doctrines'; Murray Rothbard, *Economic Thought Before Adam Smith*, vol. I, ch. 9 'The liberal reaction against mercantilism in France'; Irwin, *Against the Tide*, ch. 3 'The emergence of free trade thought'.

⁸⁴ Packard, 'International rivalry and free trade origins, 1660-78', Cole, *French Mercantilism*, ch. 5 'Attacks on mercantilism'; Clark, *Compass of Society*, pp. 48-54 ('VIII. Merchants speak: liberty and luxury and the Council of Commerce').

⁸⁵ De Roover, 'Monopoly theory prior to Adam Smith'; Appleby, *Economic Thought and Ideology in Seventeenth-Century England*, ch. 5 'Contending views of the role of the state'; Wagener, 'Free seas, free trade, free people'; Magnusson, *Mercantilism*, pp. 101-103.

servation of humane society".⁸⁶ Freedom of trade thus was not the opposite of protectionism in international trade as such but of specific restraints and restrictions. Free trade in the modern sense of the term, meaning an unregulated international trade without import and export barriers, came in vogue only later and knew far less supporters.

Freedom of trade in the narrower sense was defended in various economic, political and legal texts. As to the latter, natural-law philosophers upheld the right to trade in a never-ending stream of publications, frequently by resorting to a divine distribution of resources over the earth. For example, as late as 1759, the Dutch jurist Albertus Ploos van Amstel published a treatise on the right of commerce during war, in which the origin of commerce is ascribed to the "divine prudence" of the "Most Wise", the proofs for which come from Ovid, Virgil, Seneca, Chrysostom, Pliny and, in the Dutch translation of the work, Libanius.⁸⁷ In arguing for less restriction or greater freedom in trade, some writers on economics built on the popularity of the law of nature and nations. In a pamphlet with the telling title *A Discourse Consisting of Motives for The Enlargement and Freedome Of Trade*, Thomas Johnson used its language to denounce the monopoly of the Merchant Adventurers to trade "Englands golden fleeche". As the merchant argues, "it is repugnant to the Law of Nature, in regard that wooll, and the draping and merchandizing thereof, being the cape commodity wherewith Nature, the handmaid of God Almighty, hath furnished this island, and wherein she hath given every freeborn inhabitant equall interest ... Surely she never intended that a thin handful of men ... should appropriate to themselves the disposing and venting of the two thirds of this generall grand commodity".⁸⁸

At the very end of the seventeenth century came pleas for an overall freedom of international trade. Still often in response to specific trade barriers that opposed their self-interest but nevertheless in the form of universal statements, liberal mercantilists to an increasing extend argued for *laissez faire* in international economic transactions. The mercantilist preoccupation with a favourable balance of trade was gradually undermined by the rediscovery and further development of the quantity theory of money, the theory of the world distribution of money, and the price-specie-flow mechanism.⁸⁹ Leaving the details aside here, these monetary theories all pointed to the self-regulatory and self-correcting nature of the international economy, which thrives best when unaffected by government intervention. Parallel to this, a new conception of international trade emerged that much more than before emphasized its benefits in addition to its neces-

⁸⁶ The first quote, taken from Rashid, 'Christianity and the growth of liberal economics', p. 223, comes from a letter of Edmund Bohun to John Cary, the second from Roger Coke, *England's Improvements* (1675), 'The apology to the reader' (unpaginated).

⁸⁷ Albertus Ploos van Amstel, *De jure commercii, quod gentibus in bello mediis competit* (1759), ch. 1, § ii, pp. 4-5.

⁸⁸ [Thomas Johnson], *A Discourse Consisting of Motives for The Enlargement and Freedome Of Trade* (1645), p. 5. See pp. 1-2 for an exposition of God's hand in commerce, "that great link of humane society, that golden chaine which unites all nations".

⁸⁹ On the emergence of these theories, see Angell, *The Theory of International Prices*, chs. 2 'English thought before the nineteenth century' and 8 'French mercantilism and the anti-mercantilist reaction, to 1776' and Vickers, *Studies in the Theory of Money 1690-1776*.

sity.⁹⁰ Foreign trade was no longer seen as a zero-sum game, in which countries gain by obtaining a long-term favourable balance of trade, but as a form of barter that allows for mutual gains. Countries, it was thought, will only trade if this yields them a direct or indirect advantage, and will only be able to continue trading if they are willing to both export and import commodities.

One step further, first taken in the 1690s, was the recognition of the possibility of an international division of labour. Instead of striving for autarky, countries should focus on industries in which they have a natural advantage and import those products that cannot be produced locally at all or only at higher costs than elsewhere. Strikingly, this so-called 'eighteenth-century rule'⁹¹ of absolute advantages in international trade was again justified in terms of the universal economy-doctrine. This held true for well-known liberal mercantilists such as Davenant, Henry Martyn, Isaac Gervaise, Jacob Vanderlint, Matthew Decker and Josiah Tucker in England, and Charles Paul Hurault de l'Hôpital, seigneur de Belesbat, Ernst Ludwig Carl and Anne-Robert-Jacques Turgot in France.⁹² Nicholas Barbon and North were exceptions, although the former too acknowledged that there are "different climates of the heavens, some very hot; some very cold, others temperate" which "produce different animals, vegetables, & minerals".⁹³ The fact that God had created the world with different national endowments explained why it is beneficial for countries to separate tasks and to exchange the fruits thereof. At least until the end of the eighteenth century, the conviction that international exchange can be beneficial for all parties involved was evidently related to a belief in an underlying divine plan.

Yet the interpretation of the universal economy-doctrine slightly changed. The old observation that no country brings forth everything now was presented as an opportunity for each country to specialize in the production and trade of its 'particular providences' rather than a natural limitation making international trade necessary. Such a specialization enables them to offer one or more products at competitive prices at the world market in order to use the revenues to import products that cannot be produced at home or only at relatively high costs. The ultimate effect of this exchange of 'artificial' superfluities is that more, cheaper and better-quality products of all sorts will be available than if countries aimed at self-sufficiency. Foreign trade thus becomes a strategic way to obtain goods at lower costs from elsewhere. Imports are no longer a threat to the national economy, as in the mercantilist mindset, but a way to obtain relatively expensive products at low costs through exports. Martyn, the presumed author of the most ad-

⁹⁰ Wiles, 'Mercantilism and the idea of progress' and 'The development of mercantilist economic thought', pp. 156-159.

⁹¹ Viner, *Studies in the Theory of International Trade*, p. 440.

⁹² In addition to the literature mentioned in footnote 83, see on the English writers Ashley, 'The Tory origin of free trade policy'; Raffel, *Englische Freihändler vor Adam Smith*, and on Belesbat: Schatz & Caillemot, 'Le mercantilisme libéral à la fin du XVIIe siècle'.

⁹³ [Nicholas Barbon], *A Discourse of Trade* (1690), p. 3. Without paying attention to different national endowments, North, *Discourses upon Trade*, p. 14 in a typical cosmopolitan way does state that a "nation in the world, as to trade, is in all respects like a city in a kingdom, or family in a city".

vanced work on international trade from this period, accordingly presented foreign trade as an indirect method of production.⁹⁴

To Martyn, a supporter of the East India trade, opposition to the importation of cheap Indian cotton and linen in order to protect the English textile industry (the issue with which he was concerned) was no less than an affront to the Supreme Being. If “Providence wou’d provide us cloaths without our labour, our folly wou’d be the same, to be carding, spinning, weaving, fulling and dressing, to have neither better nor more cloaths than might be had without this labour”. Keeping labourers busy in the local textile industry while similar products can be produced elsewhere with less labour and at a much lower price is simply a waste of manpower that can be used in a more profitable way. After all, production is not meant to keep people in employment but to meet the needs of consumption. It seems, the author writes further on in the book, “that God has bestowed his blessings upon men that have neither hearts nor skill to use them. For, why are we surrounded with the sea? Surely that our wants at home might be supply’d by our navigation into other countries, the least and easiest labour. By this we taste the spices of Arabia, yet we never feel the scorching sun which brings them forth; we shine in silks which our hands have never wrought; we drink of vineyards which we never planted; the treasures of those mines are ours, in which we have never digg’d; we only plough the deep, and reap the harvest of every country in the world”.⁹⁵

As suggested by Martyn, the belief that countries, in order to profit from the expanding international trade, should specialize in those industries that build on God-given natural advantages also had its downside. Namely that the maintenance of unnatural industries is uneconomical and a thwarting of the divine plan. For this reason, Davenant in the same discussion dismissed the complaint that imported goods damaged the local English silk and linen industry.⁹⁶ Involved in the East India Company himself, and therefore not free from bias, Davenant argues that countries should concentrate on those industries that were given to them in God’s creation, since only there long-term blessings were to be expected. “Wisdom is most commonly in the wrong”, he echoes Clement Armstrong more than a century before, “when it pretends to direct nature. The various products of different soils and countries is an indication, that Providence intended they should be helpful to each other, and mutually supply the necessities of one another. ... So it can never be wise, to endeavour the introduction into a country, either the growth of any commodity, or any manufacture, for which, nor the soil, nor the general bent of the people is proper”. While English silk and linen are “forc’d fruits ... tasteless, and unwholesome”, the wool industry is a peculiar gift to England that can still be encouraged and improved.⁹⁷ Only trades grounded in natural advantages could stand the new international competition.

⁹⁴ The broader debate to which Martyn contributed is discussed in Hont, *Jealousy of Trade*, pp. 60-62 and 246-258.

⁹⁵ [Henry Martyn], *Considerations Upon the East-India Trade* (1701), pp. 52 and 58-59.

⁹⁶ See, again, Hont, *Jealousy of Trade*, pp. 201-222.

⁹⁷ ‘By the author of The Essay upon Wayes and Means’ [Charles Davenant], *An Essay on the East-India Trade* (1696), p. 34.

The image evoked in the writings of the liberal mercantilists is that of a true world economy - not as a domain of economic warfare, but rather of nations who jointly benefit from everyone's natural advantages. Some of them in an anti-mercantilist way stressed that *all* nations are enabled by God to participate in the world economy. "All nations of the world", the London timber merchant Vanderlint writes in one of his tracts, "should be regarded as one body of tradesmen, exercising their various occupations for the mutual benefit and advantage of each other". After all, "all nations have some commodities peculiar to them, which therefore are undoubtedly designed to be the foundation of commerce between the several nations".⁹⁸ Several years before, Gervaise in a pamphlet with the universalistic title *System or Theory of the Trade of the World* developed a complete theory with a similar message. Thanks to differences in location and situation, he tells his readers, "[e]very nation naturally possesses a mixture of these three sorts of manufactures": in the first the production exactly meets the demand of the entire population, the second results in a surplus of goods that can be exported, and in the third the supply falls short and the help from the rest of the world is needed.⁹⁹

The Enlightenment contribution

In the course of the century the case for free trade was adopted by the Enlightenment philosophers and philosopher-economists. In addition to the existing set of arguments against mercantilism, typical Enlightenment motives such as freedom and progress were brought into play. The ideal that probably impinged most on the fanatical spirit of economic nationalism was modern, eighteenth-century cosmopolitanism.¹⁰⁰ Unencumbered by national loyalties and prejudices, philosophers like Voltaire, Hume and Benjamin Franklin among many others began to advocate an attitude of cultural open-mindedness and impartiality. Contact with other cultures and different climates of opinion was no longer associated with moral hazard, as in de classical era, but rather with refinement of manners, arts and knowledge. On the level of international relations, cosmopolitanism translated into a commitment to peace, cooperation and friendship. Concerned about the incessant warfare in Europa and far beyond, the cosmopolitans insisted on the necessity and reality of a universal human community. In this regard, high expectations existed of the irenic possibilities of international trade. If left sufficiently free, economic competition could become the alternative par excellence for the costly armed conflicts between the European powers. An expanding trade would make people interdependent and forge a mutual interest in peace.

⁹⁸ Jacob Vanderlint, *Money answers all Things* (1734), pp. 42 and 97. It is true that the author in both contexts does not mention divine providence. However, the various references in the book to the "Author of the world", "Author of Nature" and "all-wise and infinitely gracious Creator" betray his theistic or deistic perspective.

⁹⁹ Isaac Gervaise, *The System or Theory of the Trade of the World* (1720), p. 21.

¹⁰⁰ See Schlereth, *The Cosmopolitan Ideal in Enlightenment Thought*, esp. ch. 5 'An economic and political theory of world order'; Fink, 'Cosmopolitanism'; Jacob, *Strangers Nowhere in the World*, esp. ch. 3 'Markets not so free'.

Characteristic of the century's cosmopolitan outlook is a report by Joseph Addison, recorded in *The Spectator*, on his visit to the Royal Exchange in London. The heart of this "great lover of mankind", so we are told, overflowed with pleasure at the sight of so many traders from different nationalities and languages grouping together, thus making the London "metropolis a kind of *emporium* for the whole earth". It is they who bring prosperity all over the earth, by importing in their country anything that is wanting and exporting to other places whatever is superfluous. "Nature", Addison continues, "seems to have taken a particular care to disseminate her blessings among the different regions of the world, with an eye to this mutual intercourse and traffick. ... Almost every degree produces something peculiar to it. The food often grows in one country, and the sauce in another. The fruits of Portugal are corrected by the products of Barbadoes: The infusion of a China plant sweetned with the pith of an Indian cane: The Philippick islands give a flavour to our European bowls. The single dress of a woman of quality is often the product of an hundred climates. The muff and the fan come together from the different ends of the earth. The scarf is sent from the torrid zone, and the tippet from beneath the pole. The brocade petticoat rises out of the mines of Peru, and the diamond necklace out of the bowels of Indostan". Compared to this, without the benefits and advantages that it derives from commerce, England is only a barren piece of land.¹⁰¹

Addison was not alone in calling merchants the most useful members of a commonwealth. The merchant class actually served as a model for the cosmopolitan in general, seeing that it connects the most distant nations and "knit[s] mankind together in a mutual intercourse of good offices".¹⁰² Beyond being peace-conducive, its activities were thought to have civilizing effects. Eighteenth-century philosophers in this connection spoke of the *douceur* of commerce.¹⁰³ Far from undermining the old political and religious order, commercial pursuits were associated with relatively harmless passions like the love of gain, which could be stimulated to counter more destructive ones. Thanks to a growing number of relationships and interests, commerce moreover promoted a civilized life. According to such philosophers as Montesquieu, Hume and William Robertson, it removes mutual prejudices, gives rise to politeness and learning, and softens and polishes the manners of men. Howsoever typical for the age of Enlightenment, this idea drew upon an age-old discourse of sociability that was revived during the Renaissance with Bodin and subsequent French writers. Also Savary, whom we have quoted in our introduction, right after having established its divine origin remarks that "it is commerce too that makes for all the gentleness of life: since it is through this way that there is abundance of all things".¹⁰⁴

Traditionally, the *doux commerce*-idea was mentioned in one and the same breath with the doctrine discussed in this chapter. While some eighteenth-century writ-

¹⁰¹ [Joseph Addison], *The Spectator*, vol. I (1712), no. 69, Saturday, May 19 [1711], pp. 391-396.

¹⁰² Addison, *The Spectator*, vol. I, p. 395.

¹⁰³ Hirschman, *The Passions and the Interests*, pp. 56-66; Rosenblatt, *Rousseau and Geneva*, pp. 52-99; and Dickey, 'Doux-commerce and humanitarian values'.

¹⁰⁴ Savary, *Parfait negociant*, bk. I, ch. 1, p. 1: "c'est ce commerce aussi qui fait toute la douceur de la vie: puisque par son moyen il y a par tout abondance de toutes choses".

ers continued to combine them, the civilizing nature of commerce can also be encountered as a separate idea. From the 1750s, economic developments in France and Scotland were increasingly explained in terms of a four stages theory that envisaged society as developing through four successive stages based on different modes of subsistence.¹⁰⁵ It identified commercial society as the final and most civilized stage after agricultural, pastoral and hunting-gathering stages, and hence offered a dynamic new framework for analysing commercial expansion. Unlike the static universal economy-doctrine, it portrayed the intensification of international trade as the inevitable consequence of (God-ordained) progress. However, the doctrine as such did not become discredited. It was used, for example, in Diderot's and d'Alembert's *Encyclopédie*, the Enlightenment project par excellence. Right at the beginning of the lemma 'commerce' it can be read that "infinite Providence, whose work is nature, wanted, by the variety that it spreads, to put men into dependence on each other: the supreme Being has formed links, in order to bring the peoples to preserve peace between them & to love each other, & in order to gather to himself the tribute of their praise; manifesting among them his love & his greatness by the knowledge of the marvels with which he has filled the universe".¹⁰⁶

Interestingly, the same idea occurred twice in the essays of David Hume, whose theological views of course were highly unorthodox and deistic. The Scotsman is a good example of an Enlightenment philosopher who linked *doux commerce* motives, including the Stoic idea of sociability, to the universal economy-doctrine (incidentally without offering a full four stages-theory of history).¹⁰⁷ Whether or not he truly believed in a "being who presides over the universe", as he himself wrote, Hume had a providential conception of nature that included hints of a higher plan.¹⁰⁸ He was convinced that the earth's plurality of economic resources belongs to the world community of nations and that free international trade is the best method of developing it. The myriad of protectionist measures and the tendency to accumulate money, he writes in an influential discourse on the balance of trade, only have the "general ill effect" that nations "deprive neighbouring nations of that free communication and exchange, which the author of the world has intended, by giving them soils, climates, and geniuses so different from each

¹⁰⁵ The standard account is Meek, *Social Science & the Ignoble Savage*. See also Hont, 'The language of sociability and commerce'.

¹⁰⁶ 'Commerce', in Diderot & D'Alembert, *Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers*, vol. III (1753), p. 690: "La Providence infinie, dont la nature est l'ouvrage, a voulu, par la variété qu'elle y répand, mettre les hommes dans la dépendance les uns des autres: l'Être suprême en a formé les liens, afin de porter les peuples à conserver la paix entr'eux & à s'aimer, & afin de réunir le tribut de leurs louanges, en leur manifestant son amour & sa grandeur par la connaissance des merveilles dont il a rempli l'univers". The lemma was authored by the 'neomercantilist' François Véron Duverger de Forbonnais. The idea of a divine origin of commerce is repeated in many of his works.

¹⁰⁷ Boyd, 'Manners and morals'.

¹⁰⁸ According to Schabas in *The Natural Origins of Economics*, ch. 4 'Hume's political economy', Hume sustained a "deeply rooted belief" in a (providential) order of nature.

other".¹⁰⁹ The idea is repeated in his famous 1758-discourse 'Of the jealousy of trade', albeit in a different context and without reference to personified Nature.

The Physiocrats

Speaking about the Enlightenment contribution, the Physiocrats cannot be passed over in silence.¹¹⁰ Despite Hume's dislike of these economists (the Scotsman visited their leader François Quesnay in 1763 and in a private letter called them the most chimerical and arrogant set of men existing then in France), they were at least as cosmopolitan.¹¹¹ In their manifold writings, we repeatedly find the universe compared to a great single state, nations to neighbours, and individuals to brothers. "All the peoples are the members of an immense corps that we call the human race".¹¹² Providence, one of Quesnay's followers contends, never had the intention to make the nations strangers to each other. The main reason for establishing natural borders and dividing the land over different societies was that it is beyond the human power of government to take care of and protect all inhabitants of the world. In other words, only well-defined territories allow for the execution of "social laws".¹¹³ The consequence of this is that also the Creator's material goods, the consumption and benefits of which belong to the whole human race, ended up within the borders of different nations. Through the "imperious chain of needs" effected by this division, the Eternal Being purposefully wanted to establish a *republique commerçante universelle*, as Quesnay worded it. International trade precisely is "the art of procuring one's necessity by means of one's superfluity; it is a fraternal convention to the advantage of all contracting parties ... [which] establishes a kind of community of goods between nations that permit it & favour it (that is to say, leave it free)".¹¹⁴

As against the undiminished spirit of conquest, the Physiocrats indeed preached a complete freedom of trade, unfettered by restrictions or privileges.¹¹⁵ The basic right to sell, buy and spend, both internally and externally, derived immediately from their theory of property that involves a right of trade. Yet in their frontal attack on the doctrines of mercantilism, the Physiocrats contributed little or nothing to the theory of international

¹⁰⁹ David Hume, *Political Discourses* (1752), disc. V 'Of the balance of trade', p. 97.

¹¹⁰ Oberfohren, *Die Idee der Universalökonomie in der französischen wirtschaftswissenschaftlichen Literatur bis auf Turgot*, ch. 4 'Die Idee der Universalökonomie in der Physiokratie'.

¹¹¹ Weulersse, *Le mouvement Physiocratique en France (de 1756 à 1770)*, vol. 2, bk. 4, ch. 3, pp. 100ff.

¹¹² Pierre Samuel Du Pont de Nemours, *De l'exportation et de l'importation [sic] des grains* (1764), p. 34n: "Tous les peuples sont les membres d'un corps immense qu'on appelle le genre humain".

¹¹³ [Guillaume François Le Trosne], *Lettres à un ami, sur les avantages de la liberté du commerce des grains et le danger des prohibitions* (1768), pp. 56-57.

¹¹⁴ Du Pont de Nemours, *De l'exportation et de l'importation des grains*, pp. 28-30: "Le commerce est l'art de se procurer son nécessaire par le moyen de son superflu; c'est une convention fraternelle à l'avantage de tous les contractans Il établit une sorte de communauté de biens entre les nations qui le permettent & le favorisent (c'est à dire qui le laissent libre)".

¹¹⁵ Permezel, *Les idées des Physiocrates en matière de commerce international*; Savatier, *La théorie du commerce chez les Physiocrates*; Bloomfield, 'The foreign-trade doctrines of the Physiocrats'.

trade. Preceded by writers like Boisguilbert, Cantillon and Hume, most arguments were built around the quantity theory of money and the price-specie flow mechanism. Actually foreign trade for the *économistes* was only of secondary importance. The priority of their program of reform for the French economy was the divine institution of agriculture, which as sole productive sector was considered the exclusive source of wealth. Trade and commerce in contrast were only 'sterile' activities that did not allow for any real profit. Freedom of foreign trade, no more than domestic trade an exchange of equal values, was mainly advocated to promote the nation's agricultural interests. A border-crossing market in agricultural products, and especially grain, was thought to stabilize agricultural prices, draw away investment from the unproductive manufacturing sector, and moreover provided a way to dispose of undesirable surpluses. It is in this self-interested light that the Physiocratic call for the elimination of all barriers in trade should be seen.

Be that as it may, Quesnay and his disciples believed it in all nations' interest to leave international exchange free. The more trade prohibitions we introduce to impoverish foreigners, Mirabeau tells his readers, "the more we destroy ourselves, the further we get from the views of Providence, who wanted to establish the general prosperity of nations on a loyal & reciprocal commerce between nations".¹¹⁶ International economic interests, if properly understood, cannot be opposed because Nature has blessed distinct territories with differing goods. So as long each country focuses on its *produits privilégiés*, varying with soils, climates and temperatures, which it can produce more cheaply than others, an enduring and mutual beneficial intercourse is secured. For example, agricultural nations like France could specialize in grain to use superfluous exports to buy manufactured or luxury goods from a commercial nation that cannot produce enough food by itself. As Guérineau de Saint-Péray summarized it, "the Supreme Being, out of a sublime & always beneficent wisdom ... has privately favoured each climate with a particular production, & made that it could not naturally produce what has been refused to it, an arrangement that necessitates a continuous communication between all the nations, to exchange among each other the privileged products; each gives what she collects too much for her consumption, to obtain what is superfluous in others. These are the origin & advancement of commerce".¹¹⁷

¹¹⁶ [Victor Riqueti Mirabeau], *Philosophie rurale, ou économie générale et politique de l'agriculture* (1763), p. 52: "plus on se détruit soi-même, plus on s'éloigne des vues de la providence, qui voulut établir la prospérité générale des nations par le commerce loyal & réciproque des nations".

¹¹⁷ [Jean-Nicolas-Marcellin Guérineau de Saint-Péray], *Mémoire sur les effets de l'impôt indirect* (1768), p. 50: "l'Etre suprême, par des vues d'une sagesse sublime & toujours bienfaisante ... [c]haque climat étant favorisé privativement d'une production particulière, & ne pouvant naturaliser celles qui lui ont été refusées, cet arrangement nécessite une communication continue entre toutes les Nations, pour échanger entr'elles leurs denrées privilégiées; chacune cède ce qu'elle en recueille de trop pour sa consommation, pour obtenir l'excédent de celle des autres. Telles sont l'origine & la marche du commerce".

3.6 The book of nature: theological reflections

However prevalent the universal economy-doctrine was, one theological problem was categorically ignored, namely, that the idea was inherited from pagan philosophers and poets and nowhere in Scripture found any support. Apparently, the absence of a scriptural basis did not pose a problem for the ‘Christian’ writers of the period. Even the most orthodox among them freely employed the doctrine, and theological critiques were not openly uttered. Exponents usually made no effort to support it with Biblical texts, simply because they were not easy to find. Rather than seeing the impossibility of self-sufficiency as a consequence of human sin, they traced back the origin of trade and commerce beyond the Fall of man to God’s act of creation. Those who did try to document it with scriptural evidence were rather creative in interpreting divine revelation.

For example, the story of the tower of Babel proved useful to account for the material inequality between peoples. Instead of seeing the confusion of tongues as punishment for man’s pride and sin, it could be explained as a divine measure to populate the entire globe. Some writers went as far as to claim that on this occasion God not only scattered mankind over the earth but also divided the mainland into separate continents and islands. An intermediate position was taken by Graswinckel, a Dutch jurist with a remarkably liberal view of foreign trade.¹¹⁸ “Indeed, nature itself, or rather God, the Lord”, he writes, “wanted nations to be separated from each other, and outside any community. To this end the variety of languages was introduced. ... Add to this that the countries are separated from each other, through mountains, deserts, or without connection to the sea. ... From which may be concluded, that each country should manage with the fruits that occur there, and not have hope for that which is found in other countries”.¹¹⁹ Far from pleading for economic self-containment, Graswinckel’s concern is that foodstuffs are being exported before all domestic demand is met. The “basic rule” that domestic products primarily belong to local people may be deviated from only in case of abundance in one country and deficiency in another. Only then, the author argues with a phrase from St. Paul, “your abundance may be a supply for their want” (2 Corinthians 8:14).

Others suggested a more direct connection between the divine confusion of tongues and the rise of international trade. Far from being a curse, the difference in languages formed an encouragement to further specialization and craftsmanship and thus created a greater need for communication and exchange. Reluctantly admitting that God’s primary aim was to scatter peoples over the earth, several writers on economics

¹¹⁸ Van Tijn, ‘Dutch economic thought in the seventeenth century’, pp. 10-13.

¹¹⁹ Dirck Graswinckel, *Placcaten, Ordonnantien ende Reglementen, Op’t Stuck van de Lijf-tocht* (1651), bk. II, ch. 4, pp. 96-97: “Jae de nature selfs, of om beter te sprecken, Godt de Heere heeft ghewilt dat de natien d’een van d’ander verscheyden zijn, ende buyten ghemeenschap. Tot dien eynde is de verscheydenheit van taelen in-ghevoert. ... Voecht hier by dat de landen van melkanderen verscheyden zijn, met bergen, woesteynen, ofte daer geen connexie en is, met de zee. ... Daer uyt dan wel af te nemen is, dat elck landt sich behelpen moet met de vruchten die daer vallen, ende geen hoope hebben, op t’geen in andere landen te vinden is”.

were convinced that the Creator had in mind a universal commerce too. According to clothier John Blanch, in a writing on the chronology of commerce, a “more speedy dispersing of people to remote parts of the world ... was doubtless the chief end of the wise Creator of the universe, by the confusion of language at the tower of Babel, with a farther aim likewise that there should be a mutual commerce between nations; which is seemingly pointed out by his wise distribution of some particular favour, or blessing, to each nations, or people; for the promoting of commerce”.¹²⁰ Spices belong to the East-Indians, silver and cochineal to the West-Indians, and wool, tin and lead to the island of Great Britain.

All in all, the silence of Scripture on the divine origin of international trade was not that problematic. It seems that most early-modern writers regarded the universal economy-doctrine as a matter of natural rather than revealed theology. Though serving a different purpose than Scripture, also the Book of Nature served as medium of divine revelation and could accordingly be consulted for learning God’s intentions. That the unequal division of material resources was not based on chance is clear from the fact that the idea soon made its appearance in the physico-theological literature of the early-eighteenth century, serving as one of the arguments for the existence of God. The remarkable proof of the wisdom of Providence, that no single country produces everything that is necessary to human life, is mentioned among others by Fénelon, Nieuwentyt and the French priest and physico-theologian Noël Antoine Pluche. The most extensive discussions of the doctrine could be read in Christoph Christian Sturm’s *Betrachtungen über die Werke Gottes im Reiche der Natur und der Vorsehung* (1772-1776), a widely read natural theological work in diary form.

According to the German theologian-poet, the wisdom and goodness of the Creator are evident, among countless other things, from the favourable and indispensable conditions for trade and commerce. If climates and temperatures were everywhere alike, there would be no international exchange of goods. “If every country had the same products on its soil, and the same advantages, how then could the community between countries be maintained, [and] what would happen to the commercial practice ... ?”. Moreover, without seas and ships there would be no possibility to transport riches and treasures to faraway countries. God did not design that one part of the globe should be independent of the other, “but rather wanted that a community between the nations and peoples of the earth would be maintained. Therefore he now and then expanded great seas, so that people could entertain community with each other”. Nature, according to the English translation of Sturm’s work, is a “wise economist” (*sorgfältige Haushälterin*) who spread her wealth over the world. “By means of commerce, she connects different nations; and the hands through which her gifts pass, make them more valuable by the

¹²⁰ [John Blanch], *Great Brittan Arraigned As of Felo de se, And Found Guilty. In a Brief Chronology of Commerce From its Original* (1721), p. 14.

continual circulation: She combines and mixes her gifts, as the physician does his medicinal ingredients".¹²¹

Sturm's reflections make clear that inequality with respect to material resources was not seen as the only indication that the Creator envisioned a worldwide exchange. The universal economy-doctrine was often part of a set of natural-theological observations that all hinted at the same divine plan, several examples of which we have already seen in the previous chapter. The fact that the world is a globe, the abundance of rivers and seas, and the winds blowing in different directions all were seen as indications that God's blessings in international trade were to be expected. Also the existence of so-called natural harbours, sheltered parts of bodies of water deep enough to provide anchorage for ships, could not be accidental. These harbours, as a Dutch author put it, "have their origin in the creation, and by nature, being carved in the earth by the hand of God".¹²² All the evidence for a divine hand in global trade was summarized by a captain and seaman called Lewis Pain in a deduction on navigation and commerce. "Whoever attentively considers the form of our terraqueous globe, the magnitude of the wat'ry element, the manner in which it is dispers'd, the situation of the shores, and the disposal of the firm land into continents and islands", he writes, "cannot but admire the wisdom of Providence thus ordering all things for the advantage of mankind; and providing that the want of one country may be supplied thro' the abundance of another; the blessings of each climate diffusing themselves throughout all".¹²³

Something still missing in this interplay between countries, harbours and waters are the merchant ships themselves. After all that has been said, it will not come as a surprise that these too were linked to the care of God. In the seventeenth and eighteenth century, it was generally accepted that the arts of shipbuilding and navigation were taught by God to Noah in person to let him survive the Flood. In a text ascribed to John Locke, it is said of navigation that there are "those that will not allow it to be call'd the

¹²¹ Christoph Christian Sturm, *Betrachtungen über die Werke Gottes im Reiche der Natur und der Vorsehung auf alle Tage des Jahres* (1785), vol. I, p. 91 ('Der 3te Februar. Unvollkommenheit unsrer Erde bey gleichem Grade der Wärme und Kälte'): "Wenn jedes Land auf dem Erdboden einerley Produkte, und ein und eben dieselbe Vortheile hätte, wie könnte wohl die Gemeinschaft der Länder unterhalten werden, wo würde die Handelschaft bleiben ... ?"; p. 190 ('Der 12te März. Nutzbarkeit der Meere'): "sondern er wollte vielmehr, daß eine Gemeinschaft unter den Nationen und Völkern des Erdbodens erhalten werden sollte. Daher hat er hin und wieder grosse Meere ausgebreitet, damit die Menschen mit denjenigen eine Gemeinschaft unterhalten könnten"; vol. 2, p. 279 ('Der 7te October. Unerschöpflicher Vorrath in der Natur'): "Sie nimmt und giebt, und feßt durch Menschen die Länder in solche Verbindungen, daß ihre Gaben ein Anlehn werden, welches durch die ganze Erde wuchert. Sie verfeßt ihre Wohlthaten, wie der Arzt die Ingredienzien seiner Heilmittel, mit andern". For other interesting remarks on trade and commerce, see the pieces of April 21, June 5, November 6 and December 15.

¹²² 'Een bysonder lief-hebber der vryheyt sijns vaderlands', *Den Vryen handel ter zee, voor de Geueerde Provincien* (1666), ch. vii, p. 29: "hebben haren oorspronck door de scheppinge, en van nature, in de aerde als een sekeren klief ghemaecte zijnde door de handt Godes".

¹²³ Lewis Pain, *A Short View of Spanish America*, in Pullen, *The Original Plan, Progress, and Present State of the South-Sea-Company* (1732), p. 47. The same text is included in Pullen's *Memoires of the Maritime Affairs of Great-Britain* (1732).

invention of man, but rather the execution of the direction given by Almighty God, since the first vessel we read of in the world, was the Ark Noah built by the immediate command and appointment of the Almighty".¹²⁴ Where Locke himself stood on this remains unclear, yet in a whole series of histories of navigation and trade, including the well-known *Histoire du commerce, et de la navigation des anciens* (1716) by Pierre-Daniel Huet, the invention of shipbuilding and navigation is earnestly ascribed to Noah. The theological literature from the period could not but endorse this view. The Dutch Calvinist minister Godefridus Udemans went as far as to call Noah the inventor of commerce (which besides being useful is an excellent means to spread God's Church) since, as Scripture teaches, commerce is as old as navigation itself. Whereas pagan writers like Pliny who lacked the light of Scripture credit it to Dionysius, the book of Genesis is crystal clear that this art was invented by Noah.¹²⁵

3.7 Concluding remarks

In the early-modern period, the idea of a divine origin of international trade and commerce without doubt was the most popular application of the doctrine of providence to the economic sphere. As truism inherited from classical antiquity, it was appealed to by a great variety of writers and in very different contexts. It was used not only by writers on economics but also by political philosophers, jurists and theologians. The age was in need of new justifications of the ever-expanding world trade and to this aim the universal economy-doctrine proved highly serviceable. It provided a theological explanation of why it is necessary as well as beneficial as a nation to engage in foreign trade. And what, in an age of widespread providentialism, could be a better reason motivation than that God himself had designed the world for an international exchange of goods? As we have seen, the observation that in the beginning countries were unequally endowed by the Creator could equally well be deployed to argue for hospitality, freedom of trade, and international division of labour. That Scripture nowhere hints at this constellation and is rather negative about commercial practices did not prevent writers of the seventeenth and eighteenth century from reiterating it time and time again, be it seldom with a convincing substantiation.

Strikingly, in the ages before Adam Smith the universal economy-doctrine was hardly ever criticized by theologians or secular writers. The most critical remark I know of, from a sermon, which actually is not a criticism at all, is that "the old observation, that one land beareth not all things, becomes in a manner confuted, since a country of trade abounds with all things, and the four parts of the world are brought together and united by commerce". Obviously, the point here is not that there is no such thing as an unequal division of resources but rather that in the long run international trade seems to elimi-

¹²⁴ 'An introductory discourse, containing *The whole History of Navigation from its Original to this time*', in *A Collection of Voyages and Travels*, vol. I (1704), p. ix.

¹²⁵ Godefridus Udemans, *Geestelick Compas* (1637), ch. 1, pp. 6ff and 'T Geestelyck Roer van't Coopmans Schip (1640), bk. I, ch. 1 'Van den oorspronck der koopmanschap, ende van de nuttigheyt der selver'.

nate its effects.¹²⁶ Now and then, natural-theological ideas related to the doctrine were questioned. For example, one author doubted the old truth that the seas were created to promote international commerce, seeing that this end would have been answered better by a network of navigable rivers. Likewise, Voltaire in an essay on final causes, later reproduced in his *Dictionnaire philosophique*, ridiculed the idea that the oceans were made for navigation. “There were no vessels at all times & on all the seas”, he dryly remarks, “thus we cannot say that the ocean has been made for vessels”.¹²⁷ Much further than this, however, criticism did not go.

That the providential interpretation of international trade met with so much approval of course is not to say that it was the only explanation available. Although it is undeniable that many economic writers and especially those discoursing on the history and origin of trade mentioned it, the doctrine as such was no integral or fixed part of the emerging economic discourse. In fact, some commentators simply traced back the exchange between nations to differences in their natural circumstances, without referring to any divine plan, while others derived it from the Stoic idea of natural sociability between different peoples. To Adam Smith, all kinds of trade, including its international manifestation, are driven by a hope of gain and ultimately emanate from a human “propensity to truck, barter, and exchange one thing for another”.¹²⁸ Nevertheless the providential explanation was typical for an age in which natural conditions were never purely natural. Like everything else, one was inclined to see international trade as part of a comprehensive divine plan in nature and history. Large-scale developments such as the emergence of a truly universal commerce could not be accidental and must have been foreseen and allowed for by the Supreme Being.

¹²⁶ John Thomas, *Liberality in Promoting the Trade and Interest of the Publick display'd. A Sermon* (1733), pp. 15-16.

¹²⁷ Voltaire, *Les singularités de la nature* (1769), p. 25: “Il n'y a pas eu des vaisseaux en tout temps & sur toutes les mers; ainsi l'on ne peut pas dire que l'océan ait été fait pour les vaisseaux”.

¹²⁸ Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (1776), vol. I, p. 16. See Schumacher, ‘Adam Smith’s theory of absolute advantage and the use of doxography in the history of economics’. It is worth noting that as early as 1601 John Wheeler, *A Treatise of Commerce* (1601), pp. 2-3 wrote that “there is nothing in the world so ordinarie, and natural vnto men, as to contract, truck, merchandise, and traffique one with another, so that is is almost vnpossible for three persons to converse together two houres, but they wil fall into talke of one bargaine or another, chopping, changing, or some other kinde of contract”.

4

Division of labour: the divine ordering of society

4.1 Introduction

The division of labour, or the separation and distribution of tasks among different persons, is a central concept in economics. On hearing the term, most economists will immediately think of Adam Smith, and unsurprisingly so.¹ For the most-cited and most-reproduced text sections in the history of economic thought come from the first three chapters of his *Wealth of Nations*, which are precisely devoted to this topic. Although the ground-breaking nature of Smith's book is sometimes exaggerated, the association of the division of labour with the Scotsman is fully justified. As compared to his predecessors, the alleged father of modern economics covers the matter in much detail and by opening the book with the division of labour elevates it to one of the core principles of his political economy. "It is the great multiplication of the productions of all the different arts, in consequence of the division of labour", Smith establishes, "which occasions, in a well-governed society, that universal opulence which extends itself to the lowest ranks of the people".² Simultaneously contributing to an increase in skill and dexterity, the saving of time, and the invention of machinery, it results in an increase in the productive powers of labour. As such, the division of labour is one of the foundations of the wealth of nations.

It is often overlooked that in his book Smith discusses different types of division of labour.³ The best-known example from the opening chapter is undoubtedly that of the pin-making factory. By specializing in one or a few of the eighteen distinct tasks of this craft, the productivity of a group of ten workers increases from about 200 to 48,000 pins a day. This is an instance of the 'manufacturing' or 'technical division of labour', i.e. specialization within an occupation or industry. Another kind, to which Smith pays as much attention, is the 'social division of labour'. It represents the more general separation of professions and employments within human society. By specializing in distinct occupations and by exchanging the fruits of their labour, Smith argues, people can enjoy more goods and services than when they tried to perform all required tasks individually. In the third place, he discusses the 'international' or 'territorial division of labour', the tendency of countries to specialize in specific industries. Smith refrains from mentioning a fourth

¹ Groenewegen, 'Adam Smith and the division of labour'.

² Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (1776), vol. I, p. 13.

³ I have derived the distinction between these four types from Groenewegen, 'Division of labor'.

kind, the ‘sexual division of labour’, the distribution of tasks between man and woman within the household based on their natural abilities.

While modern textbooks sometimes suggest otherwise, Smith was by no means the first to theorize about the division of labour, let alone its inventor. In the seventeenth and eighteenth century alone, several political economists, especially in Britain, remarked on its advantages.⁴ For example, William Petty, Henry Martyn and Bernard Mandeville did so with respect to specialization in shipbuilding, cloth making and watch making. Their conclusion is that where manufacturing processes are divided into smaller tasks, the final products will usually be more plentiful, cheaper and of better quality. Mandeville, who incidentally also noted the social division of labour, for the first time in the English language explicitly spoke of tasks being “divided and subdivided into a great variety of different labours”.⁵ Also in Smith’s milieu the phenomenon received ample attention. Historically-minded as they were, the philosophers of the Scottish Enlightenment attached much importance to this basic element of human society. Smith’s teacher Francis Hutcheson discussed the social division of labour to demonstrate the indispensability of a social life. For in contrast to the individual who is barely able to obtain the necessities of life on his own, a society in which labour is divided produces sufficient goods for everyone. Adam Ferguson devoted an entire chapter of his *magnum opus* to the “subdivision” or “separation of arts and professions”. In it man’s “instinct” for specialization is compared with the parts of an engine and the cooperation of beavers, ants and bees.⁶

As already demonstrated by Karl Marx, thinking about the division of labour has a history dating back to classical antiquity.⁷ This is true not only of the international division of labour discussed in the previous chapter, but also of the social, manufacturing, and sexual ones. The social division of labour was first treated in detail by Plato.⁸ In the *Republic*, he has Socrates recount a tale of a city-state that emerges because people

⁴ Rashid, ‘Adam Smith and the division of labour’. The list of pre-Smithian authors who commented upon the division of labour can easily be extended. In addition to the names discussed in the remainder of this chapter, these include Thomas Mun (1664), John Locke (1690), Dudley North (1691), Simon Clement (1695), Pierre Boisguilbert (1707: “professions ... disjointes our séparées”), Henry Maxwell (1721), Patrick Lindsay (1733), Samuel Madden (1738), David Hume (1740: “partition of employments”; 1752) Robert Campbell (1747), Denis Diderot (1751), Anne-Robert-Jacques Turgot (1751; 1766), Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1755), Josiah Tucker (1755: “labour ... branched out into separate and distinct parts”, 1756, 1774; “manufacture ... divided and subdivided into separate and distinct branches”), Johann Heinrich Gottlob von Justi (1758), Adam Dickson (1764: “manufacture ... divided”), James Harris (1765), François Quesnay (1765: “distribution d’emploi”) and Cesare Beccaria (1804 [1769]: “diversità delle occupazioni”).

⁵ [Bernard Mandeville], *The Fable of the Bees. Part II* (1729), p. 149.

⁶ Francis Hutcheson, *A System of Moral Philosophy* (1755), vol. I, pp. 288ff; Adam Ferguson, *An Essay on the History of Civil Society* (1767), prt. IV, sect. 1 ‘On the separation of arts and professions’.

⁷ Marx, *Das Kapital*, vol. I, pp. 380-390. See also Trever, *History of Greek Economic Thought*, pp. 34ff, 70ff and 96.

⁸ Note that it has been claimed that Smith’s account of the division of labour may have been inspired directly by Plato’s. See Foley, ‘The division of labor in Plato and Smith’; McNulty, ‘A note on the division of labor in Plato and Smith’; and Foley, ‘Smith and the Greeks’.

cannot satisfy their manifold wants individually and so have an interest in cooperation. The citizens are not alike but “naturally fitted” to certain tasks and crafts. By concentrating on the profession “according to his nature”, a man supplies his community with more goods and goods of a better quality. The ‘manufacturing’ division of labour was for the first time treated by Plato’s contemporary Xenophon in explaining why the dishes at the table of the Persian king are so superior in flavour. Rather than performing random tasks, the workers in the kitchen are dedicated to one specific operation. “It follows, therefore”, Xenophon’s thesis reads, “that he who devotes himself to a very highly specialized line of work is bound to do it in the best possible manner”. A discussion of the sexual division of labour, finally, can be found in the *Oeconomica*, a text once attributed to Aristotle. Man and woman, the author claims, in the household cannot do without each other and for a happy existence strive for cooperation. In order to promote this fundamental community, “Divine Providence has fashioned [προωκονόμηται ὑπὸ τοῦ θείου] the nature of man and woman for their partnership. For they are distinguished from each other by the possession of faculties not adapted in every case to the same tasks”.⁹

Put forward by such influential writers as Plato, Xenophon and (pseudo-)Aristotle, the different types of division of labour became fixed elements of Western thought.¹⁰ With the exception of the manufacturing division, they were discussed time and time again by Greek-Roman thinkers, the early Christian Fathers and medieval theologians, including those of the Islamic world.¹¹ Interestingly, from the outset the sexual and social division of labour were being associated with the care of God or the gods for mankind. Bodily and mental inequality was regarded as something positive, as it would deprive man of feelings of complacency and pride and lead him towards society and cooperation. The existence of different responsibilities and occupations was ascribed to differing talents and dispositions, which were thought to be distributed unevenly among men through natural influences. Some of this can already be seen in Plato who presupposed innate talents and for that reason rejected labour mobility, and of course in Aristotle who traced back the physiological and psychological differences between man and woman to a deliberate act of Nature (*φύσις*) and the Deity (*θεῖος*).

Since the manufacturing division of labour never seems to have been related to the order of nature, the remainder of this chapter focuses on its *social* manifestation in society. In its providential interpretation, the social division of labour bears a striking resemblance to the international one. They seem to be, and were actually recognized as

⁹ Plato, *The Republic*, vol. I, bk. II, ch. xi, pp. 149–153; Xenophon, *Cyropaedia*, vol. II, bk. VIII, ch. ii, § 5, p. 333; Aristotle, *Oeconomica*, bk. I, ch. 3, 1343b, in *Metaphysics, Oeconomica and Magna Moralia*, p. 333. Note that this section from Pseudo-Aristotle (possibly Theophrastus) heavily depends on Xenophon, *Oeconomicus*, ch. vii, § 17ff.

¹⁰ For surveys, see Hoffmann, ‘Zur Geschichte der Stellung der Arbeitsteilung im volkswirtschaftlichen Lehrsystem’; Groenewegen, ‘Division of labor’; Sun, *Readings in the Economics of the Division of Labor*, ch. 1 ‘The economics of division of labor from Xenophon to Hayek (1945): A review of selected literature’; and idem, *The Division of Labor in Economics*, prt. 1 ‘Pre-Smith analyses’.

¹¹ Hosseini, ‘Seeking the roots of Adam Smith’s division of labor in medieval Persia’.

instances of the same divine plan of introducing inequality to enforce interdependence and cooperation. As we have seen, as early as the sixth century BC the ancient writer Herodotus established that no man “can have all these good things together, just as no land is altogether self-sufficing in what it produces: one thing it has, another it lacks, and the best land is that which has most; so too no single person is sufficient for himself: one thing he has, another he lacks”. Since the social and international division of labour differ only in scale and were developed by similar arguments, this chapter omits some of the historical background. The next section (§ 4.2) provides some theological context that explains why the variations in professions were seen as providential. The subsequent section (§ 4.3) discusses early-modern interpretations of the division of labour. Instead of tracing the development of the idea, it focuses on the question if it still evoked higher thoughts and, if so, how it was used in economic reasoning. The final section (§ 4.4) takes up again the views of Adam Smith.

4.2 From Prometheus to Providence: theological background

A distribution of gifts by the gods was a recurring idea in both Greek and Roman thought. In his commentary on the proverb *non omnia possumus omnes* - we cannot all do everything, the humanist writer Desiderius Erasmus collected various instances from classical texts. According to Erasmus, while the aphorism itself comes from Virgil, it may have been based on two passages from Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Similar thoughts can be found in Euripides, Theogenis, Livy and Pindar. In each case it is God, the gods or nature who are held responsible for human inequality with respect to talents.¹² Erasmus leaves unmentioned the influential myth of Prometheus, the Titan god of forethought (cf. foresight, or providence),¹³ with which the classics mentioned before were definitely familiar. In Plato's version of the story, as contained in the dialogue *Protagoras*, it was Prometheus who supplied humans with their peculiar qualities. Initially entrusting the charge of assigning appropriate powers and abilities to the different mortal races to his brother Epimetheus ('Afterthinker'), all possible features were bestowed on the nonreasonable animals, leaving man completely unequipped. In order to compensate for man's lack of physical strength, means of defence and protective skins, Prometheus stole fire and wisdom in the practical arts from other gods and gave them to the human race. Their ability to stay alive and to develop some culture, however, could not prevent humans from being attacked by wild beasts because of their physical superiority. To save the human race from extinction, Zeus himself decided to endow them with the art of politics required to establish and maintain safe cities. In contrast to the practical arts which were distributed unequally, this art consisting of a sense of justice and shame was transferred to all.

¹² *Collected Works of Erasmus*, vol. 33, *Adages II i 1 to II vi 100*, p. 186.

¹³ Prometheus's kinship with Providence was noted by Francis Bacon. “Prometheus”, he claims in his retelling of the myth, “doth cleerely and elegantly signifie Prouidence: For in the vniuersality of nature, the fabricque and constitution of man onely was by the ancients pict out and chosen, and attributed vnto Prouidence, as a peculiar worke” (*The Wisedome Of The Ancients*, 1619, p. 124).

Precisely because of the age-old association between the differences in talents, the division of labour and the divine, the Christian adoption of the idea was to be expected. The more so since, in contrast to the ideas discussed in other chapters of this book, hints at a providential distribution of talents can also be found in Scripture. Some of the letters of the New Testament compare the Christian congregation with the human body of which the members have distinct tasks that contribute to the whole. For example, the letter to the Romans (12: 4-6) remarks: “For as we have many members in one body, and all members have not the same office: So we, being many, are one body in Christ, and every one members one of another. Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us”. Using the same bodily metaphor, the first letter to the Corinthians (1 Corinthians 12) speaks of “diversities of gifts” and “differences of administrations”, distributed among the people by the Spirit of God. Although these and other passages clearly refer to spiritual rather than practical gifts of Christians, throughout the centuries they were nevertheless associated with the social division of labour.

Already in the patristic literature we find the Paulinian metaphor combined with the economic views of the classical philosophers, and notably Plato.¹⁴ The division of labour, thought to be produced by a combination of scarcity and different natural inclinations, was seen as one of the foundations of social life. That, as Plato had argued, nobody could be economically self-sufficient is clear from the parallel between social life and bodily life. As much as in the human body, in a well-ordered society all members cooperate for the common good. In one of the first Christian monographs on divine providence, translated into French in 1578 and English in 1602, Theodoret of Cyrus writes that it is foolish to ask why the Creator has not given the same faculty to all members of the body. To make them beneficial for the body as a whole, God deliberately entrusted the eyes with the task of discerning shapes and colours, the nose with distinguishing odours, the ears with receiving sounds, and the tongue with recognizing tastes. Likewise there must be differences between the citizens of one and the same society. If everyone were endowed by the providence of God with exactly the same capacities, mankind would face annihilation since no one can master every human craft. Fortunately, Theodoret reasons, the specialization of occupations allows society to develop skills necessary to enjoy all the necessities of life.¹⁵

Of obvious importance for the Christianization of the idea of a God-willed social division of labour was the fact that Thomas Aquinas, one of the most influential thinkers of the Middle Ages, mentioned it at various places in his works.¹⁶ In the first text, from the *Summa contra gentiles*, the question at issue is if voluntary poverty is consistent with the good of human society. Although there is a tendency in man to procure all necessities of life himself, Aquinas argues, he is not able to exercise all corresponding professions and therefore depends on others. As with the bees, it is necessary for different tasks to be

¹⁴ Karayiannis & Drakopoulou Dodd, ‘The Greek Christian Fathers’, pp. 172-175. For more illustrations, see Phan, *Social Thought*, pp. 46-47, 120-122, and 139-140.

¹⁵ Theodoret of Cyrus, *On Divine Providence*, pp. 78-81.

¹⁶ Schreiber, *Die volkswirtschaftlichen Anschauungen der Scholastik seit Thomas v. Aquin*, pp. 19-21.

done by different people. Now the “division of various tasks among different persons is done by divine providence, inasmuch as some people are more inclined to one kind of work than another”.¹⁷ In addition to farmers, husbandmen and builders which produce corporeal goods, society cannot do without people taking care of spiritual goods. To assist someone in spiritual things after all is a greater thing than supporting one another in temporal affairs. This is why voluntary poverty, which allows some men to devote their time to the spiritual, deserves our approval.

Also in the second example, coming from the even more influential *Summa theologiae*, the contemplative life is acclaimed. The question addressed here is whether matrimony is natural and comes under a precept of God. The latter, according to Aquinas, is not the case since marriage is a great obstacle to contemplative life, to which some people should devote themselves for the perfection of the human community. In human nature there is a “general inclination to various offices and acts ... according to the difference of temperament of various individuals. And it is owing to this difference, as well as to Divine providence which governs all, that one person chooses one office such as husbandry, and another person another”. So the fact that nature inclines us to that which is necessary for the community does not imply that everyone should practice those handful of occupations which are normally regarded as the most useful. In reality the “inclination of nature is satisfied by the accomplishment of those various offices by various individuals”.¹⁸ This means that some can spend their life in contemplation.

It is only in the final example that Aquinas refers to the Paulinian metaphor of the body with its different members. The question from the *Quaestiones quodlibetales*, which in the *Summa theologiae* is discussed in similar terms,¹⁹ is whether manual labour is an obligation for Christians. As Aquinas sees it, the biblical precept to ‘work with your own hands’ only pertains to the human species which as it were forms a single man. Just as the parts of the human body have different responsibilities, it suffices when some people in society perform manual labour while others make their living in a different way, whether by using their hands, feet or tongue. The “diversity of men in different functions”, Aquinas maintains, “arises in the first place from divine providence, which has so distributed the states of men, that nothing necessary for life will ever be found wanting. But this also comes about from natural influences by which different men have different inclinations for this function of that manner of life”.²⁰ Here, as in the previous

¹⁷ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra gentiles*, bk. III, prt. ii, ch. 134: “Haec autem distributio diversorum officiorum in diversas personas fit divina providentia, secundum quod quidam inclinantur magis ad hoc officium quam ad alia”.

¹⁸ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, prt. III Supp., q. 41, art. 2: “natura humana communiter ad diversa official et actus inclinat ... unum magis inclinat ad unum illorum officiorum, alium ad aliud. Et ex hac diversitate, simul cum divina providential, quae omnia moderator, contingit quod unus eligat unum officium, ut agriculturam, alius aliud” and “sed inclinatione naturae satisfit cum per diversos diversa compleuntur de praedictis”.

¹⁹ Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, prt. II.II, q. 187, art. 3.

²⁰ Thomas Aquinas, *Quaestiones quodlibetales*, part. VII, q. 7, art. 1: “Haec autem diversificatio hominum in diversis officiis contingit primo ex divina providentia, quae ita hominum status distribuit, ut nihil unquam deesse inveniatur de necessariis ad vitam; secundo etiam ex causis naturali-

examples, the division of labour is a joint effort by nature and divine providence. Whereas the differentiation of men into occupations and stations is a consequence of the divine order of society, the actual division of labour follows *ex causis naturalibus*.

A cosmos of callings

Another stimulus for thinking about the division of labour, which implied a clear break with the ideas of Aquinas, was provided in the Protestant idea of different secular callings.²¹ Questioning the ideal of monastic asceticism and the duality of nature and grace, theologians like Martin Luther and John Calvin began to argue that peculiar vocations were far from limited to the sphere of the Church. To labour in a calling, a charge laid upon us by God, was a duty to everyone, nobody excluded. Since faith without works is worthless, not withdrawal from the world but labour in the affairs of practical life is highly pleasing to God. Luther is said to have been the first to translate 'work' or 'occupation' in an ordinary sense as *Beruf*, thereby stressing the fundamentally religious value of men's daily activity.²² Even though the nature of labour had changed due to the Fall, the fulfilment of worldly obligations was seen by Reformed theologians as a duty of utmost importance to all Christians. Luther, Calvin and their followers indeed stressed the existence among men of a variety of callings. Whereas some people are destined for religious service, others are called to do for example political, agricultural and commercial labour. This state of affairs is fully in line with God's rational order of society. The division of labour is part of the wise ordering of Providence. "[W]e know", Calvin writes, "that men were created for the express purpose of being employed in labour of various kinds, and that no sacrifice is more pleasing to God than when every man applies himself diligently to his own calling, and endeavours to live in such a manner as to contribute to the general advantage".²³ So in the end differences with respect to occupation and social station contribute to the welfare of the community and individual alike.

Despite the similarity of their social theories, Luther's thoughts on the 'cosmos of callings' were more traditional than those of Calvin.²⁴ In Luther's eyes, labour was not so much a blessing as a form of punishment and discipline, instituted by God as *remedium peccati*. He viewed the division of labour in the same dual light. On the one hand it allows for exercising brotherly love, on the other it is an enforcement to work for others.

bus, ex quibus contingit quod in diversis hominibus sunt diversae inclinationes ad diversa officia, vel ad diversos modos vivendi".

²¹ Weber, 'Die protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus', pp. 63-70 ('Luthers Berufskonzeption') and 171-178. According to Weber, it was the "Einschärfung der asketischen Bedeutung des festen Berufs [die] das moderne Fachmenschentum ethisch verklärt". For a concise summary, see Biéler, *La pensée économique et sociale de Calvin*, pp. 483 and 489.

²² This Weberian finding has been criticized by Brentano, *Die Anfänge des modernen Kapitalismus*, pp. 136ff and Robertson, *Aspects of the Rise of Economic Individualism*, ch. 1 'The Puritan doctrine of the "calling"'.

²³ Quoted in Hart, 'The teaching of Luther and Calvin about ordinary work: 2. John Calvin (1509-1564)'.

²⁴ Troeltsch, *Die Soziallehren der christlichen Kirchen und Gruppen*, pp. 571-584 and 653-655.

For that reason people's occupation and social station are not a matter of free choice but accorded to them as a result of the divine will. One's specific calling, in other words, is a condition in which he or she is born. People should be content with their place and station in life without wishing to change it, since this would introduce unnecessary competition and destroy human interdependence. In his *Tischreden*, Luther is reported to have said that "[i]f all people were equal, nobody could climb up, nobody would serve another, and there would be no peace. The peacock complained because he had not the nightingale's voice. Therefore God has instituted the greatest equality with inequality God has finely illustrated human society in the members of the body, [that] one must assist the other, none can do without the other".²⁵ Basically it was Luther's strong belief in special providence which made him inclined to accept the existing state of affairs, also with respect to labour relationships.²⁶

Believing that every detail of human life is directed by God's providence, also Calvin insisted on the divine freedom to call us in different ways. Unlike Luther, however, he expressly left open the possibility for men of choosing a profession for themselves. As long as the labour that it involves is profitable, honest and serviceable to the community, every mode of life can be seen as a station assigned to us by God. The appreciation of work in Calvin's theology was different too.²⁷ More than his German predecessor, he raised daily work to the level of a religious duty. Beyond the aim of providing the community with material goods, according to Calvin labour has been instituted to promote the glory of God. Though affected by the curse of sin, human labour is an instrument in the hands of Providence to establish a (holy) community among humans. The purpose of different callings is precisely that everyone is spurred to serve his neighbours in the widest possible sense. As such the variety of worldly vocations is similar to other gifts of the Holy Spirit. Those who use to advantage what God gave them, Calvin somewhere remarks, are said to trade. The "industry with which each person prosecutes the task laid on him, and his very vocation ... are reckoned as merchandise, since their purpose and use is mutual communication among people".²⁸

Irrespective of the precise role played by Protestant theology in disseminating it, in the early-modern period the idea of a variety of worldly callings won great popularity. Calvinist and Puritan clergymen ahead, closely followed by churchmen of other denominations (Catholics included), stressed the spiritual importance of dutiful work in a

²⁵ Martin Luther, *Colloquia Oder Tischreden Doctor Martini Lutheri* (1569), p. 419: "Wenn alle Menschen gleich weren, so könnte niemands auffkommen, niemands würde dem andern dienen, kein Friede würde seyn. Der Pfaw klagte, dass er nit hette der Nachtigal stimm. Darumb hat Gott mit der vngleichheit die grösste gleicheit gemacht ... Darumb hat Gott sehr fein vnnd wol die Menschliche Gesellschaft vnter eindander and den Gliedern gezeigt, eins muß dem andern die hand reichen und helffen, kein kan des andern emperen".

²⁶ Hart, 'The teaching of Luther and Calvin about ordinary work: 1. Martin Luther (1483-1546)'.

²⁷ Biéler, *La pensée économique et sociale de Calvin*, ch. 5, § 1 'Le travail et le repos'.

²⁸ Quoted in Biéler, *La pensée économique et sociale de Calvin*, p. 411.

secular vocation assigned one way or another by the Providence of God.²⁹ Some of them, by explaining the advantages of the specialization of occupation, explicitly linked the idea of calling to the social division of labour. From the many illustrations that could be provided here,³⁰ the book *The Trades-man's Calling* (1684) by Richard Steele stands out. In over 200 pages, the author (who earlier published *The Husbandmans Calling*) discusses the nature and kinds of callings, the choice of a calling, the entrance into a calling, the management of a calling, and the completion of a calling.

In addition to a shared spiritual calling whereby we are all summoned to venerate and obey God, the Puritan minister explains in the first chapter, there are personal temporal callings as well. Usually God does not call men immediately, as in the case of Paul the Apostle, but by means of instruments like parents, guardians or magistrates. Besides there is an “inward call of God, which consists in abilities of body, and mind, and inclinations”. The “inclination and aptitude to this or that employment, which the God of Nature hath put into men's minds”, Steele claims, “is a plain indication and proof, that every man should settle himself to be some way useful in the world”.³¹ The wisdom of God in all this is evident from the fact that the different callings are suited to the various necessities of life. Whereas some employments are concerned with man's soul (schoolmasters, divines, etc.), others focus on his body (physicians, apothecaries), his subsistence (husbandmen, traders), his delight and convenience (musicians, artists), his defence (soldiers, military personnel) and public peace more generally (princes, magistrates).

Luther, Calvin and later writers like Steele all supported their arguments with Bible texts, mostly taken from the letters of the New Testament. First of all, the metaphor of the human body, used to illustrate the distribution of spiritual gifts among Christians, was translated to the “body politick”. Similar to the functional ordering of parts and organs in the natural body, also people for their own good and that of the public are qualified for and inclined to different employments. Three verses from the first letter to the Corinthians, which appear to be related to socio-economic conditions only indirectly, were constantly reiterated to discourage labour mobility. Did not Paul the Apostle say, “let every man abide in the same calling, wherein he was called” (7:20, cf. 7:24)? Moreover, “as God hath distributed to every man; as the Lord hath called everyone, so let him walk” (7:17). Other evidence for a providential division of labour came from the Old Tes-

²⁹ For examples, see Robertson, *Aspects of the Rise of Economic Individualism*, ch. 1; Tawney, *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism*, pp. 239-246; Hyma, *Christianity, Capitalism and Communism*, pp. 253-254; and Hart, ‘The teachings of the Puritans about ordinary work’.

³⁰ Weber himself, ‘Die protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus’, p. 172, gives the example of the Puritan theologian Richard Baxter. See *A Christian Directory: Or, A Summ of Practical Theologie* (1673), p. 449 (§ 15) on six advantages of specialization.

³¹ Richard Steele, *The Trades-man's Calling. Being A Discourse concerning the Nature, Necessity, Choice, &c. of a Calling* (1684), pp. 3-4 and 14. It is interesting to compare these ideas with Francis Hutcheson's thoughts on how to listen to the “voice of God” in choosing a business or profession: *A System of Moral Philosophy*, vol. II, pp. 113-116. The summary in *A Short Introduction to Moral Philosophy* (1747), p. 99 reads: “In the choice of our occupation or profession for life, our chief regard should be to our natural genius”.

tament. Close as they lived to the Creator's original intentions, the patriarchs did not all practice the same profession but focused on different tasks. As one seventeenth-century minister reminded his audience, Adam and Cain were called to be husbandmen, Abel to be a shepherd, Jubal a musician, and Tubal-Cain a metalworker.

4.3 A sort of oeconomy in Providence: economic interpretations

Although it was less current than the idea of a divine distribution of natural resources, the social division of labour in the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was frequently hailed as a divine blessing. And understandably so, for the number of different trades and professions in society was rapidly increasing. According to the French political economist Pierre Boisguilbert, the number of different professions had grown from about three of four in the "infancy of innocence of the world" to more than 200 in the "civilized and opulent" states of his days, that is the end of the seventeenth century. A more reliable proof for an increased specialization may be provided by comparing the so-called *Ständebuch* of 1568, which presented about 100 woodcut illustrations of the different professions practiced "on earth", with the eighteenth-century *Encyclopédie* that described and illustrated over 250 different trades. As Robert Campbell showed in his *London Tradesman* (1749), in cities like London and Westminster alone parents could apprentice their children to more than 300 types of employments, of course only after having studied those for which they are "qualified by nature" through different geniuses, dispositions and talents.³² In the eighteenth-century, the existence of different occupations indeed was still explained in terms of different talents and abilities, personally assigned by the Creator to bring about specialization and cooperation.

As Montchrétien observed a century and a half earlier, the implication of this view is that all classes in society are just as important. While sticking to the obsolete, medieval idea of three estates, to wit clergy, nobility and the 'popular' one, he rejected any hierarchy between them. The commoners, consisting of labourers, artisans and merchants, may seem negligible but in fact, as "three channels of common utility", are essential to the prosperity of the political body. They correspond to the three kinds of soul, vegetative, sensitive and intellectual, and can be compared to three fingers of the same hand, ready to be controlled to increase the well-being of the whole. The so-called 'mechanical' arts practiced by these people, which in antiquity were regarded with contempt for the manual labour that they entail, involve as much prudence as the liberal arts associated with leisurely activities. What is more, the fables of the classical poets themselves

³² [Pierre Le Pesant de Boisguilbert], *Dissertation de la nature des richesses, de l'argent & des tributs* (1704), in *Le détail de la France* (1707), vol. II, p. 240; Hans Sachs, *Eygentliche Beschreibung Aller Stände auff Erden, Hoher und Nidriger, Geistlicher und Weltlicher, Aller Künsten, Handwerken und Händeln* (1568); R. Campbell, *The London Tradesman. Being a Compendious View of All the Trades, Professions, Arts, both Liberal and Mechanic, now practised in the Cities of London and Westminster* (1747). The first chapter of this book forms an 'Advise to parents in what manner to discover and improve the natural genius of their children'. The illustrations from the *Ständebuch* and *Encyclopédie* are inspired by Kellenbenz, 'The organization of industrial production', pp. 475-476.

tell us that Prometheus divided the celestial fire, and consequently “all the arts are so many plots & fragments of the divine wisdom, which God communicates to us through the medium of reason”.³³ As imitator and embodiment of the providential order, the king therefore does well not to neglect the members of the third estate but to make use of the mechanical arts.

The two great lights of classical philosophy, Montchrétien continues, were right that the assemblage and union of people in city states was based on mutual needs. Attributing everything to Nature, however, Plato and Aristotle overlooked the supernatural cause of the inclinations people have for different ways of life. Contrary to what they believed, it is the “conduct of Divine Providence, which produces in our different professions of life as many miracles as diversified variables”. Also mistaken are the views of the lawyers and doctors, who related the diversity of our mores and conditions to the influence of the celestial bodies and different combinations of humours and temperatures, respectively. Even the *grand orateur Romain*, undoubtedly Cicero,³⁴ was confused in advising that in deciding upon our calling in life, we should take into account both Nature, or our natural abilities, and Fortune. All these great writers saw as through a dark cloud, Montchrétien argues, and therefore failed to see a connection between our specific “vocation” and the order of Providence. “For us who are educated at the best school, where we learn of the master & governor of all things, ... we take it for certain that it is by no means by fortune that we arrive at our profession; but that by a superior providence, everyone receives his task in this public work of life, to which we are without exception born & destined”.³⁵

Whether or not the classics disregarded the hand of God, their views remained influential. In the early-modern period the social division of labour based on natural differences was still seen as the foundation of human society.³⁶ As the influential Calvinist political philosopher Johannes Althusius (whose ideas were transmitted to the mercantilists)³⁷ expressed it, combining Christian, Platonic and Aristotelian insights, only society enables us to love our neighbour as ourselves. This is why “God distributed his gifts unevenly among men. He did not give all things to one person, but some to one and some to others, so that you have need for my gifts, and I for yours. And so was born, as it were, the need for communicating necessary and useful things, which communication

³³ Antoine de Montchrétien, *Traicté de l'oeconomie politique* (1615), p. 12: “tous les arts sont autant de parcelles & fragmens de ceste sagesse diuine, que Dieu nous communique par le moyen de la raison”.

³⁴ See Cicero, *De officiis*, bk. I, chs. 32-33.

³⁵ Montchrétien, *Traicté de l'oeconomie politique*, p. 13: “par le conduit de la Prouidence diuine, produisant en nos differentes professions de vie autant de miracles que de variables diuersitez” and pp. 14-15: “Pour nous qui sommes instruits en meilleure eschole, ou nous apprenons du maistre & gouuerneur de toutes choses, ... nous tenons pour resolu que ce n'est nullement par fortune que nous venons à nostre profession; mais que d'vne prouidence superieure, chacun reçoit sa tasche en ce trauail public de la vie; auquel nous sommes sans exception nés & destiniés”.

³⁶ Cf. Myers, ‘Division of labour as a principle of social cohesion’.

³⁷ De Roover, ‘Monopoly theory prior to Adam Smith’, p. 513.

was not possible except in social and political life".³⁸ The same logic can be found in the economic literature of the period. A nice example of a rather detailed account of the distinct trades in society is provided in a monetary tract by Joseph Harris. "Men", he writes with reference to the 'wise appointment of divine Providence', "are endowed with various talents and propensities, which naturally dispose and fit them for different occupations; ... This creates a dependence of one man upon another, and naturally unites men into societies".³⁹ Never able to fulfil all necessary arts and employments individually, man stands in permanent need of the aid of others.

Of course, the imperfection of the individual could in no way imply a shortcoming in the divine order of nature. It is simply a mistake, Richard Steele argued in *The Tatler*, to consider man a perfect creature. For "if we rightly examine things, we shall find, that there is a sort of oeconomy in Providence, that one shall excel where another is defective, in order to make men more useful to each other, and mix them in society".⁴⁰ God-given physical and intellectual inequalities moreover show that all talents should be employed for the public benefit. This prevents "tyranny of the mind" which suggests that the learned should labour for their own glory and reputation, without paying homage to Providence who conferred these talents upon them by a "free and entirely voluntary dispensation". Even though God himself has introduced different ranks and stations in society, one author explained, talents were distributed without regard to distinctions arising from riches or birth.⁴¹ Vice versa intellectual labour is just as useful as more mundane work. In the diagnosis of Isaak Iselin, a Swiss philosopher and supporter of Physiocracy,⁴² the fact that some people must do the necessary labour while others can afford to devote themselves to more noble professions and arts is necessary to bring all classes in society to the "highest possible happiness in the most perfect proportionality".⁴³

Especially in the eighteenth century, a new emphasis was placed on the relationship between the social division of labour and exchange. Departing from a shared

³⁸ Johannes Althusius, *Politica Methodice digesta* (1610), ch. 1, p. 6: "Ob quam cauſam etiam Deus opt. max. sua dona varie distribuit inter homines. Non enim uni contulit omnia, sed aliis alia, ut ego tuis, tu meis indigeres, ita ut quasi neceſſitas communicandorum necessariorum & utilium hinc nata sit, quæ communicatio non nisi in politica vita sociali fieri poterat" (transl. from 1995 Liberty Fund edition). In the third edition from 1614, this passage is complemented with references to 1 Corinthians 10 and, somewhat unexpectedly, to *De republica* (1609), bk. I, ch. 10 'De civitate', consisting of quotations by classical philosophers and church fathers, by the Spanish bishop Diego (or Jacobo) de Simancas.

³⁹ [Joseph Harris], *An Essay upon Money and Coins*, prt. I, *The Theories of Commerce, Money, and Exchanges* (1757), p. 15.

⁴⁰ [Richard Steele], *The Tatler*, no. 92, November 9, 1709, in *The Lucubrations of Isaac Bickerstaff Esq*, vol. II (1710), p. 262.

⁴¹ [Charles] Rollin, *Histoire ancienne des Egyptiens, des Carthaginois, des Assyriens, des Babyloniens, des Medes et des Perses, des Macédoniens, des Grecs*, vol. X (1736), p. 281: "tyrannie d'esprit" and p. 280: "par le partage libre & purement volontaire".

⁴² Bretschneider, *Isaak Iselin*.

⁴³ [Isaak Iselin], *Träume eines Menschenfreundes*, vol. I (1776), 'Die wirtschaftliche Ordnung', p. 67: "größte mögliche Glückseligkeit in dem vollkommenen Ebenmaaſe".

premise of innate physical and mental inequalities,⁴⁴ various philosophers of the Scottish Enlightenment for example argued that variety of talents is fundamental to trade. David Fordyce, appointed professor of moral philosophy in Aberdeen in 1742, took the fact that “[s]ome men are better formed for some kinds of ingenuity and labour, and others for other kinds” as the “foundation of all commerce, or exchange of commodities and goods one with another”.⁴⁵ The different intellectual talents, he claimed earlier on in the book, are given to us by the “Almighty Head of Society” and therefore should continuously be improved and with the utmost effort. The theologian George Turnbull, another teacher in Aberdeen who eventually became an Anglican clergyman, went even further and envisioned a connection between a God-given “division of talents, genius’s and abilities” and a “general commerce among mankind”.⁴⁶ The peculiar adaption of people to different kinds of labour establishes a need for cooperation, not only at a national level but also universally. It is the variety of talents and dispositions prevailing everywhere in mankind, Turnbull seems to suggest, which only multiplies the existing natural inequality between countries.

As Herodotus had done 2000 years before, sometimes an explicit link was made between the international division of resources and the division of talents among human beings. Amidst the products of Northern humanism, an outstanding example is found in *Querela pacis*, one of the pacifist writings of Erasmus. In her lamentation, Lady Peace begins with the Stoic observation that everywhere in the universe harmony prevails, except among mankind in its irrational state. The four elements are in a happy equilibrium, the celestial bodies move with perfect harmony without clashing, animals of the same kind live together in amity, and even in the human body all parts and functions cooperate for the common good of health. The human race, on the contrary, is in a constant state of war. Apparently it was in vain that Nature endowed man with the power of reason and speech, the seeds of virtue and pitiful tears. Yet human friendship on a larger and smaller scale is pleasant as well as necessary. For this reason, Nature has “soo parted and diuided the gyftes as well of the body, as of the soule, that there is no man so wel furnished, but that nowe and than he maye be releuyd and holpen by the officye of the inferiours. Nor she attributhe nor geueth not the selfe same, nor yet the lyke vnto all men, that this inequalitie myghte be made equall through mutuall loue and amitie. Divers thinges come forth of diuers countrise, that the very vse of them should teache mutuall

⁴⁴ Cf. George Turnbull, *The Principles of Moral Philosophy* (1740), pp. 35-36, 75-76, 184, 188-190; [Adam Ferguson], *Analysis of Pneumatics and Moral Philosophy* (1766), p. 12; Ferguson, *An Essay on the History of Civil Society*, prt. I, sect. 5 ‘Of intellectual powers’; Ferguson, *Institutes of Moral Philosophy* (1769), prt. I, ch. i, sect. x ‘Disparity and rank’; [Henry Home, Lord Kames], *Sketches of the History of Man* (1774), vol. I, pp. 181ff. “Diversity of manners”, Kames writes in the second edition, “enters into the plan of Providence, as well as diversity of talents, of feelings, and of opinions”.

⁴⁵ David Fordyce, *The Elements of Moral Philosophy* (1754), bk. II, ch. vi ‘Social duties of the commercial kind’, pp. 184-185.

⁴⁶ George Turnbull, *A Discourse upon the Nature and Origin of Moral and Civil Laws* (1740), in Johann Gottlieb Heineccius, *A Methodological System of Universal Law* (1741), p. 280.

merytes and deseruynges [*commercia*]”.⁴⁷ Unlike the practice of solitary animals, there is nothing in human affairs which can be independent and self-sufficient.

Two centuries later, economic writers still regarded unequal endowments of humans and nations as two sides of the same heavenly coin. “Men and countries”, the Irishman Henry Brooke observes, “have their several advantages and defects. God suffers not any distinct climate upon earth to be answerable to the wants and desires of its inhabitants. Different men are endowed with different talents and powers, insufficient in many respects, though superfluous in others, to their own occasions. Different countries are also endowed with different productions, superfluous in many respects to natives, though necessary or desirable for the well-being of foreigners”.⁴⁸ From this the author draws the Erasmian conclusion that reciprocal assistance, or commerce, is necessary and mutually advantageous alike. Also Benjamin Franklin, a prolific writer on economics but better known as one of the Founding Fathers of the United States, in an early writing argued that it is variety on both a national and international level that makes exchange attractive for all parties. “As Providence has so ordered it, that not only different countries, but even different parts of the same country, have their peculiar most suitable productions; and likewise that different men have geniuses adapted to a variety of different arts and manufactures; therefore commerce ... is highly convenient and beneficial to mankind”.⁴⁹ Its benefits only increased, Franklin goes on to explain, when mankind began to invent mediums of exchange.

Climatic influences

To some the international division of labour and the divine distribution of human talents were more than parallels or analogies. With some intellectual imagination, the one could be seen as the cause of the other. In an interesting tract on the magnificence of commerce and the dignity of traders, the relatively unknown Dutch author Alexander de Metre claims that “each climate receives its particular influences, from which emerge various qualities, which form various talents of the mind, and in consequence distribute multiple sciences and arts among the people: the Author of nature divided his gifts and talents unequally among men, to establish a necessity of commerce, community, communication

⁴⁷ Desiderius Erasmus, *Querela pacis* (1517), p. 5: “Eoque tum corporum, tum animorum dotes ita partita est, ut nemo sit omnium tam instructus, quin infimorum etiam officio nonnumquam adiueatur, nec eadem attribuit omnibus, nec paria, ut hæc inæqualitas mutuis amicitijs æquaretur. Alijs in regionibus alia proueniunt, quo uel usus ipse mutua doceret commercia” (transl. from English 1559-edition). In his book-length commentary on the proverb *dulce bellum inexpertis*, Erasmus likewise spoke of a natural division of intellectual and physical gifts, not to make people mutually dependent but “so that everyone could find in someone else something to love and respect for its excellence, or to pursue and prize for its usefulness and necessity”. See *Collected Works of Erasmus*, vol. 35, *Adages III iv 1 to IV ii 100*, p. 403.

⁴⁸ [Henry Brooke], *The Interests of Ireland Considered, Stated, and Recommended, Particularly with Respect to Inland Navigation* (1759), pp. 15-16.

⁴⁹ [Benjamin Franklin], *A Modest Inquiry into the Nature and Necessity of a Paper Currency* (1729), in *The Works of Benjamin Franklin*, pp. 263-264.

and society among them".⁵⁰ This idea that, thanks to varying climatic conditions, people from different parts of the world have different aptitudes may have been derived from Renaissance writers like Botero or Bodin. First expressed in classical antiquity, theories of environmental influence as such are much older.⁵¹ As early an author as Hippocrates attempted to describe relationships between differences in physiology, character and behaviour of people and the natural environment they are living in. Aristotle provided it with a political interpretation by claiming that the Greeks are better suited to governing than the peoples of cold and hot regions since their temperate climate had rendered them high-spirited and intelligent. Later classical philosophers related these environmental ideas to the idea of design. Supposing a close relationship between God, the earth and man, also medieval theologians were interested in correlations between climate, race and (religious) behaviour.

While both Botero and Bodin around the same time combined the universal economy doctrine with a theory of climatic influence, only the latter connected this to a division of labour. In fact the Frenchman observed multiple divisions at work simultaneously. In addition to an international one, caused by a distribution of material resources, there would be a separation of tasks within the soul of man between an imaginative, reasonable and intellectual part and on a larger scale within society between divines and philosophers, magistrates and officers, and the common people. Mediated by differences in environment and different combinations of the humours, Bodin as well supposed a talent-based division of labour between countries. As can be read in the fifth book of the *Republiecque*, people in the cold northern, temperate Mediterranean and hot southern regions of the earth obviously have different characters, habits and needs. As much as the separation of tasks on an individual and societal level is conformable to common sense, "[w]e may conclude the like of the vniuersall commonweale of this world, the which God hath so ordained by his admirable wisdome: as the people of the south are made and appointed for the search of hidden sciences, that they may instruct other nations: those of the north for labour and manuall artes: and those of the middle betwixt the two extremes, to negotiat, traffique, iudge, plead, command, establish commonweales; and to make lawes and ordinances for other nations".⁵²

⁵⁰ [Alexander Christian / Alexandre Chrétien de Metre], *De Metrens Remonstrantie, Op 't Woord, Van de Kaas-Verkoopers; Vertoonende de Heerlijkhed der Commercie, en de Digniteyt der Koop-huyden* (1673), p. 8: "Elck climaet ontfanght sijne particulare influentien, uyt de welcke ontstaen verschede qualiteyten, die oock verschede talenten des geests formeeren, en volgens consequentie veelderhanden wetenschappen en kunsten onder de menschen uytdeelen: hebbende den Autheur des natuurs syne gaven en talenten soo ongelijk aan de menschen uytgedeelt, om de necessiteyt van commercie, gemeenschap, communicatie en societeyt onder de selven op te richten". Note that large parts of the *Remonstrantie*, including this quotation, were plagiarized from Jean Éon's (alias Mathias de Saint-Jean) *Le commerce honorable ov considerations politiques* (1646), pp. 129ff.

⁵¹ See index entry 'environmental influence, theories of' in Glacken, *Traces on the Rhodian Shore*. More specifically, see chs. 6 'Environmental influences within a divinely created world', 9 'Environmental theories of early modern times' and 12 'Climate, the moeurs, religion, and government'.

⁵² Jean Bodin, *Les six livres de la republiecque* (1576), bk. V, ch. 1, p. 535: "Nous pouuons dire le semblable de la Republique vniuerselle de ce monde: que Dieu a tellement ordonné, par vne sagesse esmerueillable, que les peuples de Midi sont ordonnez pour la recherche des sciences les plus oc-

It should be noted that the role of climate in different talents and productions, as suggested by Bodin and De Metre, was not recognized by everyone. For example, Henry Home, better known as Lord Kames, explicitly denied the dependence of temper and talents on climate. This conclusion was shared by his correspondent Josiah Tucker. Though subscribing to the undeniable truth that the “bountiful Creator” has formed different soils and climates to create an mutually beneficial and universally benevolent intercourse, Tucker argued that “even where there is no remarkable difference of soil, or of climates, we find a great difference of talents; and if I may be allowed the expression, a wonderful variety of strata in the human mind”.⁵³ By way of example, Tucker points to the different productions of Norwich and Manchester. Both places in England are similar with respect to geography, soil and resources, but judging from the products that they bring forth seem to be situated 1000 miles apart. The theories of environmental influence more generally, which in the eighteenth century culminated in the work of Charles de Montesquieu, were increasingly criticized.⁵⁴ Government and institutions, and the progress made in them under the influence of enlightened thought, it was claimed, have a greater impact on the inhabitants of nations than the climate and geography they are living in.

Ernst Ludwig Carl

Interestingly, most of the ideas on the division of labour converged in the work of Ernst Ludwig Carl, the much-neglected German cameralist who was active in Paris and by some is considered the true founder of the science of economics.⁵⁵ In his three-volume treatise on the wealth of princes and their states, the “separation des professions”, “metiers” and “fonctions” is repeatedly mentioned and more or less forms a cornerstone. In addition to a social division of labour, Carl discriminates between technical specialization within the main sectors of production (agriculture, manufacturing and commerce) and an international specialization across borders. The similarities with Adam Smith’s account are striking. Similar to the author of the *Wealth of Nations*, Carl regards the division of labour as the ultimate source of wealth, believes that it leads to more skilful workers and cheaper products, sees a connection between the extent of the market and the degree of specialization, and uses the example of the pin-maker. “The more the object of

cultes, affin d’enseigner les autres peuples: ceux de Septentrion au labeur, & aux ars mechaniques: & les peuples du mylieu pour negotier, traffiquer, iuger, haranguer, commander, establir les Republiques, composer loix & ordonnances pour les autres peuples” (transl. from English 1606-edition).

⁵³ [Josiah Tucker], *The Case of Going to War, For the Sake of Procuring, Enlarging, or Securing of Trade* (1763), pp. 32-33. For an earlier expression of the existence of a *genius locorum* that differs between places, see Jakob Bornitz, *Tractatus Politicus. De Rerum Sufficientia in Rep. & Civitate procurandi* (1625), pp. 252-253.

⁵⁴ For a good summary of the theories, see Thomas, *The Environmental Basis of Society*, ch. 4 ‘Climatic influences: early-modern theories’.

⁵⁵ Tautscher, *Ernst Ludwig Carl* and ‘Die Arbeitsteilung als Grundproblem der National-ökonomie bei Ernst Ludwig Carl (1722)’. In Tautscher’s eyes, Turgot and Smith for their ideas on the division of labor were indebted to Carl.

an art is small & limited”, his general conclusion reads, “the easier & perfect it becomes, the greater is its production. It is a truth confirmed by an infinity of experiences”.⁵⁶

To Carl, the division of labour is more than a means to gain wealth. More fundamentally, the social separation of tasks is required for human survival. Born with an innate desire to have more, individual man is never able to satisfy all his wants through labour. The same is true of individual countries, whose rulers do not find all that is necessary and pleasing on their own soil. Men and countries are therefore equally dependent on exchange and cooperation. In order to promote this order of mutual dependence, they have been endowed unequally by God, the former with different dispositions, the latter with different resources. The more evident international distribution, caused by differences in situation and climate, teaches man that cooperation leads to prosperity. In Carl’s words, “Nature itself shows us this way, by giving different qualities to the soil of each village”.⁵⁷ Just as it is beneficial for countries to specialize in industries in which they have a comparative advantage, it pays for farmers to focus on the cultivation of a single product, and for artisans and merchants to keep on subdividing labour. It is true that an ongoing division of labour causes an increasing entanglement of interests, but this precisely is the intent of the divine plan.

4.4 Concluding remarks

Considering that in the early-modern period God’s hand was still seen at work everywhere, it does not come as a surprise that the division of labour was associated with the divine too. In denying chance, everything could have higher meaning and this was all the more likely for an arrangement that existed in all human societies and species of social animals alike. Any doubts about the divine origin of the phenomenon would soon have been taken away by the testimony of the classics, Scripture and the fathers and doctors of the Church. Judging by the number of occurrences, the idea of a divine division of labour in society in the early-modern period was less popular than its international equivalent. Thinking about specialization was still in its infancy, though, and in this light theological remarks by well-known pioneers like Harris, Franklin and Tucker are not without relevance. The ease with which these economists *avant la lettre* related the division of labour to the providence of God possibly betrays something of the idea’s wider dispersion.

Following Aquinas, the idea was embraced by seventeenth and eighteenth-century theologians as proof for the existence of God. In his influential *Physico-Theology*, originally delivered as a Boyle Lecture, Derham in a ‘survey of man’ applauded the division of labour as an “admirably wise, as well as most necessary provision for the easy, and sure transacting the world’s affairs; to answer every end and occasion of man; ... all, without any great trouble, fatigue of great inconvenience”. Thanks to the “especial

⁵⁶ ‘Mr. C.C.d.P.d.B. Allemand’ [Ernst Ludwig Carl], *Traité de la richesse des princes et de leurs etats*, vol. II (1723), p. 242: “Plus l’objet d’un art est petit & borne, plus il devient aisé & parfait, plus ses productions sont nombreuses. C’est une vérité confirmée par une infinité d’expériences”.

⁵⁷ Carl, *Traité de la richesse des princes et de leurs etats*, vol. II, p. 131: “La nature même nous montre ce chemin, ayant donné de différentes qualitez aux terres de chaque village”.

concurrence and design of the infinitely wise Creator”, he writes, there are “various genii, or inclinations of men’s minds” to various kinds of business. A footnote interestingly lists the heretical *Zodiacus vitæ* by the Italian poet Marcellus Palingenius Stellatus and Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey* as sources of the idea. “Homer”, as the index of the book has it, “ascribes men’s endowments to God”. Hence some people are attracted to the art of agriculture, commerce or navigation, while others take a delight in learning and books, mechanics or architecture. By virtue of the variety of genius, to some people even the greatest and most dangerous labours are a joy rather than a burden.⁵⁸

Criticism of the providential idea was scarce. If there was any doubt at all, then it focused on the Lockean question whether differences in talents and abilities could be called innate. Philip Stanhope, the 4th Earl of Chesterfield, was among the few who believed it could not. The reason why few people reproach Nature for an unfair distribution of talents and wit, he explains to the readers of *The World*, is that she cannot be held responsible. In truth, “nature, seldom profuse, and seldom niggardly, has distributed her gifts more equally than she is generally supposed to have done”. What cause the great differences between people are situation and education, not a lack of natural talents. This means that potentially there are “many Bacons, Lockes, Newtons, Cæsars, Cromwells and Marlboroughs, at the plough-tail, behind counters, and, perhaps, even among the nobility”.⁵⁹ An acquaintance of the Scot, Chesterfield possibly derived this idea from David Hume’s essays, which he recommended to his son and which describe men as being “nearly equal” in bodily force and mental powers if cultivated by education.⁶⁰ This exactly was the standpoint of Adam Smith twenty years later, to whom we return at the end of this chapter.

What about the role of Providence in his account of the division of labour? At first sight there is no such role. For while elsewhere in his *Wealth of Nations* Smith explicitly or implicitly refers to the Author of Nature, in this context hints at a divine plan are absent. It is true that like previous writers Smith takes his starting point in a “difference of natural talents”. However, these would be “not upon many occasions so much the cause, as the effect of the division of labor”. In reality talents are less diverse than we suppose, and skills are mainly acquired by the practice of those professions that we choose by “habit, custom and education”. The differences in genius and disposition between a philosopher and street porter may look great, but foremost arise from a different upbringing and education. The division of labour in Smith’s conception is not based, in other words, on innate and inborn talents. In this respect, his views implied a clear break with the preceding tradition of thought and it is known that some contemporaries criticized the Scottish philosopher on this point.⁶¹

⁵⁸ William Derham, *Physico-Theology: or, a Demonstration of the Being and Attributes of God from his Works of the Creation* (1714), bk. IV, ch. 1, pp. 273-275.

⁵⁹ [Philip Dormer Stanhope], *The World*, no. 120 (Thursday, April 17, 1755), in *The World. By Adam Fitz-Adam*, vol. IV (1757), pp. 128-129.

⁶⁰ David Hume, *Essays, Moral and Political* (1748), p. 291.

⁶¹ Roncaglia, *The Wealth of Ideas*, pp. 145-149.

At the same time, it is maintained by Smith that the division of labour is “not originally the effect of any human wisdom, which foresees and intends that general opulence to which it gives occasion”. Rather it is the necessary consequence of a “certain propensity in human nature ... to truck, barter, and exchange one thing for another”. The instinct for bartering, only present in humans and not found in any other species, thus precedes the division of labour. Man, according to Smith, once upon a time began to realize that it pays to specialize in a single profession and to obtain other necessary goods and services by means of exchange. Apparently, people are not so much naturally dependent on the cooperation and assistance of others but have decided to divide labour for reasons of convenience. Nevertheless, everything can be traced back to a disposition to truck, barter and exchange. This typical human feature, Smith stated elsewhere, is the “great foundation of arts, commerce, and the division of labour”.⁶² In contrast to the division of labour, it is “strongly implanted by nature” and thus not a trait that is obtained through education alone. Whether or not Smith conceived of the disposition to exchange as a God-given principle is unclear and was left to the reader of his work to judge.

⁶² Adam Smith, *Lectures on Justice, Police, Revenue and Arms*, p. 232. On the relationship between Smith’s lectures and the final text in *The Wealth of Nations*, see Meek & Skinner, ‘The development of Adam Smith’s ideas on the division of labour’.

5

Value and price: a providential abundance of necessities

5.1 Introduction

A question that has puzzled economic thinkers for centuries is why many useful goods are so cheap while various useless goods are so expensive. Why, for example, is such a vital substance as water almost free and are trivial diamonds prohibitively priced? Why is bread so cheap and are gold and silver sold for large sums of money? With questions like these we are right at the heart of the theory of value and price in which this problem is known as the ‘paradox of value’ or, indeed, the ‘water-diamonds paradox’. The paradox arises because there is a play with concepts like ‘value’, ‘price’ and ‘usefulness’ or ‘utility’. It turns out that value-in-use, a thing’s utility for the person who possesses it, and value-in-exchange, a thing’s market value (whether or not translated into a market price), are getting confused. In addition, scarcity and marginal utility are ignored: in the establishment of a market price based on a market value not only the (intrinsic or subjective) utility of a good plays a role, but also the quantity supplied and demanded. Finally, the market price does not reflect a good’s total utility but its marginal one. It is definitely true that all water is much more useful than all the diamonds in the world, yet to a buyer diamonds normally have a higher marginal utility.

The paradox of value has become famous because Adam Smith drew attention to it, using the same example of water and diamonds, in his *Wealth of Nations*. “The things which have the greatest value in use”, we are told in a chapter on the origin and use of money, “have frequently little or no value in exchange; and, on the contrary, those which have the greatest value in exchange have frequently little or no value in use. Nothing is more useful than water: but it will purchase scarce any thing; scarce any thing can be had in exchange for it. A diamond, on the contrary, has scarce any value in use; but a very great quantity of other goods may frequently be had in exchange for it”.¹ By phrasing it in this way, and distinguishing two kinds of value, the Scottish moral philosopher nearly burdened modern commentators with a second *Adam-Smith-Problem*, the first being the agreement between his book on the moral sentiments and the one on economics. For unlike his predecessors, Smith seemed to fail in unravelling the paradox, while

¹ Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (1776), bk. I, ch. iv ‘Of the origin and use of money’, p. 34.

yet having access to a long tradition of thought on value and price that was successful in doing so.²

The water-diamonds paradox indeed was recognized long before the founding father of modern economics did so. In spite of those who believe that it was only solved with the late nineteenth-century marginal revolution,³ plausible explanations had been around for centuries. Having an adequate understanding of the puzzle, some early writers deliberately used it as a rhetorical device. Some of the scholastics referred to it in arguing that even though utility affects the value of things, scarcity plays an even more important role. As early as the thirteenth century, the Franciscan theologian Peter Olivi remarked that “the same grain is valued more highly at a time of dearth and famine or penury than at a time of general abundance. Thus also the four elements, water, earth, air and fire, have with us a lower price because of their abundance than gold and balsam, although the former are more necessary and useful for our life”.⁴ With Olivi a tradition in value theory was born that lasted up to Francis Hutcheson, the immediate teacher of Smith. It maintained that value-in-exchange, and consequently price, is determined by a combination of utility (*virtuositas* or *utilitas*), difficulty of production or acquisition (*difficultas*) and scarcity (*raritas*) among other things. Not seldom was the paradox of value introduced in this context to make clear that utility is not the dominant factor in market value.

What interests us here is that discussions of value and price often gave occasion to a thought-provoking theological idea. Thanks to divine intelligence, it was argued, the most necessary goods are supplied in the greatest quantities. Luxury goods, in contrast, exist only in small quantities. To use the earlier example, water abounds while diamonds are scarce. The prevalence of necessities over luxuries was seen as providential for if it were otherwise human life could not persist. If not diamonds but grain, water and other necessary goods were scarce then these would be highly priced, with disastrous consequences. The aforementioned Hutcheson in his compendium of moral philosophy put it as follows: “Some goods of the highest use, yet have either no price or but a small one. If there’s such plenty in nature that they are required almost without any labour, they have no price; if they may be acquired by easy common labour, they are of small price. Such is the goodness of God to us, that the most useful and necessary things are generally very plentiful and easily acquired”.⁵ Hutcheson’s remark thus solves the paradox of value: the

² On the theories of value of Smith and his predecessors on the Glasgow Chair of Moral Philosophy, see Robertson & Taylor, ‘Adam Smith’s approach to the theory of value’. Robertson and Taylor rightly point out that in his *Lectures* of 1762-3 Smith did discuss the paradox adequately. Cf. Winfrey, ‘Derailing value theory’.

³ On this point and other fables about the paradox of value in economics, see Fayazmanesh, ‘The magical mystical paradox of value’ and White, ‘Doctoring Adam Smith’.

⁴ Peter Olivi, *Tractatus de emptione et venditione, de contractibus usurariis et restitutionibus*, quoted in Langholm, ‘Olivi to Hutcheson’. The paradox was stated in nearly identical words by his contemporaries Anthony of Florence and Bernard of Sienna.

⁵ Francis Hutcheson, *Philosophiae moralis institutio compendiaria* (1745), bk. II, ch. 12 (‘De rerum pretio’), p. 156: “Rerum autem utilissimarum saepe nullum, saepe exiguum est pretium. Ubi enim earum tanta est copia, ut ubique nullo fere labore reperiantur, nullum erit pretium: ubi labore facili

reason why some highly useful goods are so cheap is that they were supplied in abundance by the Creator.

In this chapter, the idea of a providential abundance of necessities is discussed in more detail.⁶ I will show that Hutcheson was by no means the only early-modern observer of this divine constellation in the economy. As it happened, various other writers of name, in the natural-law tradition and the developing economic discourse alike, pointed to it in their discussions of value and price. Before turning to their arguments and the context in which they were uttered, I first trace the history of the idea back to classical antiquity (§ 5.2). It appears that we are again facing an ancient idea here, which entered the economic discourse of our period with all its philosophical and theological associations. As regards the seventeenth and eighteenth century, I describe the way in which the idea was employed both in natural-law philosophy (§ 5.3) and political economy (§ 5.4). In order to show that the economic providentialism inherent in the idea of an abundance of necessities fitted in with a more widely shared optimism, in the penultimate section (§ 5.5) a brief excursion is made to eighteenth-century natural theology. The final section (§ 5.6) concludes our discussion.

5.2 As Pindar said: ancient and medieval origins

Theorizing about value and price has a long history.⁷ Its earliest beginnings should not be sought in the early-modern period nor the Middle Ages but in classical antiquity, and in Greek philosophy more specifically. Smith's distinction between value-in-use and value-in-exchange goes all the way back to Aristotle's *Politics*, where it is explained that a shoe can either be used for wear or for exchange. Elsewhere, in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, the philosopher treated the subject in more detail by asking how in economic exchange the value of goods is taken into account. The natural measure for determining value, Aristotle argues, is demand or need (*χρεία*). From yet another writing, it appears that he did not regard this need as something objective per se. In daily life the use-value of a good is not the same for everyone, something that will be reflected in the demand for it.⁸ Similar views can be found in earlier Greek thinkers. For instance, that economic values involve a degree of subjectivity, either because not everyone recognizes a thing's use-value or because there is such a thing as marginal and diminishing utility, had been proclaimed since Democritus, the pre-Socratic philosopher living in the fifth century BC.

& minime artificioso comparantur, exiguum. Pro insigni enim Dei bonitate, quae res sunt utilissimae, & maxime necessariae, illae copiosae sunt & parabiles" (transl. from English 1747-edition).

⁶ The only discussion of this subject I know of is Viner, *The Role of Providence in the Social Order*, pp. 27-32.

⁷ For overviews, see Sewall, *The Theory of Value and Price before Adam Smith*; Kaulla, *Die geschichtliche Entwicklung der modernen Werttheorien*; Kauder, 'Genesis of the marginal utility theory'; and Lichtblau, 'Wert/Preis'.

⁸ Aristotle's theory of value is discussed in Gordon, *Economic Analysis before Adam Smith*, pp. 54-60.

Interestingly, the Greeks were familiar with the paradox of value too.⁹ It was precisely the observation that conveniences happen to have a higher exchange value than necessities that made them aware of the role of scarcity in the formation of prices. In one of his dialogues, Plato has Socrates say that “it is rare, Euthydemus, that is precious, while water is cheapest, though best, as Pindar said”. These words appear to be addressed to two sophists who are advised not to perform too often and even to ask a fee from their audience so to prevent copying of their verbal techniques. Aristotle, in turn, in a discussion about relative goodness and relative utility, states that “that which is scarcer is a greater good than that which is abundant, as gold than iron, although it is less useful, but the possession of it is more valuable, since it is more difficult of acquisition. From another point of view, that which is abundant is to be preferred to that which is scarce, because the use of it is greater, for ‘often’ exceeds ‘seldom’; whence the saying: ‘Water is best’”. The second-century sceptic Sextus Empiricus, finally, in an account of constancy or rarity of occurrence, relates rarity to worth. “Rare things too we count as precious, but not what is familiar to us and easily got. Thus”, he goes on, “if we should suppose water to be rare, how much more precious it would appear to us than all the things which are accounted precious! Or if we should imagine gold to be simply scattered in quantities over the earth like stones, to whom do we suppose it would then be precious and worth hoarding?”¹⁰

Unlike these early philosophers, who simply referred to a fortunate state of affairs or an incongruous mental habit, Philo of Alexandria associated the paradoxical relationship between utility and value with the Creator. Responding to the objection that in this life evildoers seem to flourish more than the pious, the Hellenistic Jewish writer in his treatise on Providence claimed that the first are never really happy, not the least because external goods are worthless to God. Indeed, “mines of silver and gold are the most worthless portion of the earth, utterly and absolutely inferior to that which is given up to the production of fruit. For there is no likeness between abundance of money, and the food without which we cannot live. The one clearest proof of this is famine, which tests what is truly necessary and useful. For anyone would gladly exchange all the treasures in the world for a little food. But when the lavish supply of necessities spreads in a vast resistless flood from city to city we enjoy the luxury of these good gifts of nature but are not content to confine ourselves to them”.¹¹ Such trivial matters as exclusive clothes, reputation, beauty and bodily strength have as little special value in the eyes of God as do gold and silver. Value and utility, Philo suggests, need not coincide, and this only comes to light when necessities become scarce.

⁹ Bowley, ‘Some seventeenth century contributions to the theory of value’, pp. 112-113. An expansion and revision of this article can be found in her *Studies in the History of Economic Theory before 1870*.

¹⁰ Plato, *Euthydemus*, 304b in *Plato*, vol. II, p. 495; Aristotle, *The “Art” of Rhetoric*, bk. I, ch. 7, p. 75 (1364a24-31); Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, bk. I, ch. xiv, § 143, p. 85. Plato and Aristotle refer to Pindar’s first Olympian ode. See Erasmus’s commentary on the proverb *optima quidem aqua* in *Collected Works of Erasmus*, vol. 36, pp. 424-425.

¹¹ Philo, *On Providence*, 2.10-12 in *Philo*, vol. IX, p. 465.

The idea of a providential abundance of necessities had been put forward a few decades before by the pagan writer Vitruvius in his *De architectura* (15 BC), a classic piece of work rediscovered in the Renaissance. In one of the chapters on finding water, the Roman architect expresses his amazement at the fact that the four elements are indispensable for life and yet have no price. Precisely because of their great use, “the Divine Mind [*divina mens*] has not made those things which are specially necessary to mankind as inaccessible and expensive as are pearls, gold, silver and the like, which neither our body nor our nature requires, but has poured forth ready to hand through all the world what is necessary for the safety of our mortal life. Therefore, if of these elements there is a need of breath, the air appointed to supply it, does so. The heat of the sun and the invention of fire are ready to help us with warmth and to render our life more safe. Further, the fruit of the earth, surpassing our need of food by abundant supplies, feeds and nourishes animals by unfailing diet. Water, moreover, by furnishing not only drink but all our infinite necessities, provides its grateful utility as a gracious gift”.¹² Vitruvius thus contrasted four useful and free gifts from the Creator, namely air, fire, earth and water, with precious metals and stones which, because they are difficult to obtain or otherwise, command a high price.

Although Vitruvius seems to have been the first to present the central idea of this chapter in full splendour, some of its ingredients are definitely older. Apart from the paradox of value, this for example holds true for the observation that Nature takes care of an abundance of necessities. “Thanks be to blessed Nature [*μακαρία φύσει*],” a statement attributed to Epicurus reads, “because she has made what is necessary easy to supply, and what is not easy unnecessary”.¹³ A similar remark, from which the statement may have been derived, appears in Epicurus’s letter to Monoceus on ethics, in which he advises to be content with little and to become independent of outward things.¹⁴ Also the disdain for gold, silver, diamonds and jewels is a constant in classical thought. Philosophers and poets used to scorn these products since they were thought to incite people to

¹² Vitruvius, *On architecture*, vol. II, bk. VIII, preface, § 3, p. 135: “divina mens, quae proprie necessaria essent gentibus, non constituit difficilia et cara, uti sunt margaritae, aurum, argentum ceteraque, quae neque corpus nec natura desiderat, sed sine quibus mortalium vita non potest esse tutta, effudit ad manum parata per omnem mundum. Itaque ex his, si quid forte defit in corpore spiritus, ad restituendum aer adsignatus id praestat. Apparatus autem ad auxilia caloris solis impetus et ignis inventus tutiorem efficit vitam. Item terrenus fructus escarum praestans copiis supervacuis desiderationibus alit et nutrit animales pascendo continenter. Aqua vero non solum potus sed infinitas usu praebendo necessitates, gratas quod est gratuita praestat utilitates”.

¹³ Epicurus, *Epicurea*, fr. 469, p. 300. Apparently, the ideas discussed in this chapter were not alien to Epicurean philosophy. In his Epicurean poem *De rerum natura*, Lucretius describes how after the discovery of the metals initially brass and iron were valued higher than gold and silver because of their utility but over time the dignity of things changed. What the poet actually wanted to say, an eighteenth-century translator notes, is that “those wretched misers who sit brooding over their unprofitable gold and silver, and contemn brass and iron, those more useful metals, act contrary to the dictates of nature, who teaches to set value on things according to the utility and usefulness of them”. See T. Lucretius Carus, *Of the Nature of Things* (1714), vol. II, p. 573.

¹⁴ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, vol. II, book 10, §§ 130-131, p. 655: “whatever is natural is easily procured and only the vain and worthless hard to win”.

vice and greed. An example is the following exclamation by Horace: “let us deposit precious stones, jewels, and useless gold, the source of our chief affliction, in the Capitoline temple to which the shouts of approving citizens summon us, or else into the nearest sea”.¹⁵ Despite the existence of early theories on the ‘natural’ formation of metals and precious stones, as witnessed by Aristotle’s *Meteorology* and Theophrastus’s *On Stones*,¹⁶ it was believed that the gods once carefully hid and buried them deep in the bowels of the earth and in the sea to protect human beings from their moral harm. Man’s impiety and depravity, however, led him to seek them out, thus bringing a curse on himself.¹⁷

Christian interpretations

Once we proceed to the Church Fathers the number of statements about value, price and scarcity increases significantly.¹⁸ This is hardly surprising, as the Fathers simultaneously drew from the pagan and sacred tradition, and especially in Scripture many passages invite discussion of these issues. One could think of Jesus’s command from the Sermon on the Mount not to give “that which is holy unto the dogs, neither [to] cast ye your pearls before swine” (Matthew 7:6), the remark in one the letters of Peter the Apostle that women should not strive for “outward adorning of plaiting the hair, and of wearing of gold, or of putting on of apparel” (1 Peter 3:3), and the description of heavenly Jerusalem as a city built from and decorated with gold, twelve species of precious stones and an equal variety of pearls (Revelation 21:10-21). Acknowledging that Scripture as well contains many positive statements about material valuables and thus does not portray them as objectionable in themselves, the main message of the early Christian writers was that the value of things is only relative. Precious metals and stones are only priceless because people value and covet them; to a wise and virtuous man, concerned with God and his neighbour, however, they are not worth pursuing.

If the value of gold, silver and other luxury goods is only relative, the same can be said of such notions as wealth and poverty. Several Fathers accordingly emphasized that the rich and poor are ultimately equal because they share in the same generosity of

¹⁵ Horace, *Odes and Epodes*, bk. III, ode xxiv, lines 45-50 (p. 201): “vel nos in Capitolium, / quo clamor vocat er turba faventium, / vel nos in mare proximum / gemmas et lapides, aurum et inutile, / summi materiem mali, / mittamus”. In the eighteenth century these lines were quoted by Galiani (see below).

¹⁶ See lemma ‘mineralogy’ in Hornblower, Spawforth & Eidinow, *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*.

¹⁷ Expressions of this view can be found in Cicero, *On Duties*, bk. II, § 13; Horace, *Odes*, bk. III, poem 3, lines 49-52; Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, bk. I, lines 138-142; Seneca, *On Benefits*, bk. VII, § 10; Seneca, *Natural Questions*, bk. V, ch. xv; Seneca, *Moral Letters to Lucilius*, epist. XCIV, § 56-57; Pliny, *Natural History*, bk. XXXIII, ch. 1; and Boethius, *De consolatione philosophiae*, bk. II, metrum v, lines 27-30. For a sixteenth-century echo, see [Dirck Volkertsz. Coornhert], *Zedekvnst dat is Wellevenskunste* (1586), bk. IV, ch. 12 ‘Vande ghiericheyd’.

¹⁸ In the remainder of this section only a few examples are provided. Other relevant passages include Clement of Alexandria, *Pædagogus*, bk. II, ch. iii ‘On costly vessels’; Gregory of Nazianzus, *Orationes*, XXVIII, § 26 and XXXIII, § 1; Basil, *De spirito sancto*, ch. xvii, § 42; Chrysostom, *In epistulam ad Philippenses*, hom. X (near the end).

the Creator. “God”, John Chrysostom reasons, “giveth all those things with liberality, which are more necessary than riches; such for example, as the air, the water, the fire, the sun; all things of this kind. The rich man is not able to say that he enjoys more of the sunbeams than the poor man; he is not able to say that he breathes more plenteous air: but all these are offered alike to all”. In his *Περὶ προνοιῶν*, Theodoret of Cyrus adds that poor people actually inhale more of the last “source of wealth”, since they are more plentiful, have stronger lungs and are free from superfluous burdens. Air, but also the roof of the sky, lamps like the sun and the moon, and running water were given to all men in common. Earlier Seneca similarly argued that some people need luxury goods to distinguish themselves from others. In a digression from his reflections on clouds and rainfall, he criticizes the rich for buying deep frozen snow during summer time in order to drink it. Why on earth would people pay for something that flows abundantly and is freely available to everyone? “So, nothing can please luxury unless it is expensive. Water was the one thing which reduced the wealthy to the level of the mob. In this, the wealthy could not be superior to the poorest man”.¹⁹

Some Christian writers addressed the paradox of value more explicitly. Obviously, their aim was not to analyse the economy but to teach the Christian way of life. Speaking about the appropriate apparel of women, Tertullian claimed that gold and silver are not superior in origin or utility to other metals. As regards their origin, all these metals are extracted from (and made of?) the earth. Usually gold and silver are valued higher than iron and brass, while thanks to a special disposition of the Creator the latter are far more useful. After having provided some illustrations as well as a brief account of precious stones and pearls, Tertullian concludes that “[i]t is only from their rarity and outlandishness that all these things possess their grace; in short, within their own native limits they are not held of so high worth”.²⁰ That an unusual abundance of things can affect their value is clear from an example of barbarians who, due to a surplus of gold, use to bind their wicked criminals with golden chains.²¹ Chrysostom in his instruction to the catechumens on similar grounds taught that women need not adorn their faces with pearls or gold. Gold is no better than clay, and in terms of utility subordinate to iron or even simple stones used to build houses and walls. Apparently, “the value of material things is not owing to their nature, but to our estimate of them”.²²

Interestingly, the same observation turns up in Augustine’s highly influential *City of God*. In a chapter ‘Of the ranks and differences of the creatures, estimated by their

¹⁹ Chrysostom, *De statuis homiliae ad populum Antiochenum*, hom. II, § 19, in Schaff, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, vol. IX, p. 351; Theodoret of Cyrus, *On Divine Providence*, p. 81; Seneca, *Naturales quaestiones*, vol. II, bk. IVb, ch. 13, § 4 (pp. 66-67): “adeo nihil illi potest placere nisi carum. Unum hoc erat quod divites in aequum turbae deduceret, quo non possent antecedere pauperrimum”.

²⁰ Tertullian, *De habitu muliebri*, bk. I, ch. vii, in Cleveland Coxe, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, p. 17.

²¹ This story about the Ethiopians, which also turns up in Dio Chrysostom’s *On Wealth* (a discourse that questions the true value of precious metals, stones and ivory), is derived from Herodotus, *Histories*, bk. III, ch. 23.

²² Chrysostom, *Ad illuminandos catechesis*, instr. II, § 4, in Schaff, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, vol. 9, p. 169.

utility, or according to the natural gradations of being', frequently commented upon by the scholastics, the theologian remarks that there are basically two ways to determine the value of things. Firstly there are "gradations according to the order of nature"²³ which value living things higher than lifeless ones, those with the power of generation higher than those lacking this quality, sentient beings higher than things without sensation, animals higher than trees, intelligent beings higher than unintelligent ones, and immortal beings higher than mortal ones. Secondly, in addition to this "scale of justice", there are "standards of value" like utility and need which overturn this order. In everyday life, people like bread rather than mice in their house, prefer gold to fleas, and give more for a horse than a slave and more for a jewel than a maid. Whereas "the former considers what value a thing in itself has in the scale of creation, while necessity considers how it meets its need; reason looks for what the mental light will judge to be true, while pleasure looks for what pleasantly titillates the bodily sense".²⁴

To my knowledge, only one early Christian writer explicitly related the paradox of value to God's providence, again in a moralizing remark directed at women. Clement of Alexandria, in a chapter 'Against excessive fondness for jewels and gold ornaments', writes that it is childish and silly to yearn for precious stones and metals. "For first necessities, such as water and air, He [the Creator] supplies free to all; and what is not necessary He has hid in the earth and water. Wherefore ants dig, and griffins guard gold, and the sea hides the pearl-stone. But ye busy yourselves about what you need not. Behold, the whole heaven is lighted up, and you seek not God; but gold which is hidden, and jewels, are dug up by those among us who are condemned to death".²⁵ Citing Matthew 6, the theologian concludes that we should first search for the Kingdom of Heaven and all these things then shall be added upon us. To be clear, Clement's interpretation of the paradox of value is markedly different from that of Vitruvius. In contrast to the pagan writer who does not pass a value judgment on luxury goods, Clement takes the difficulty to obtain them as an indication that women should refrain from them. Having supplied mankind with an abundance of necessities, God deliberately hid and made inaccessible what is useless to human life.

On medieval thinking about value and price we can be briefer. The reason is certainly not that in this period there was no interest in these issues. On the contrary, in a time when the correct assessment of value was of great importance in practical life, the just price and its relationship to the nature and properties of tradable goods in fact was one of the central questions of scholastic economics. The question what determined the value and price of goods even gave occasion to the emergence of different 'schools' of

²³ On the doctrine of the 'scale of values', see Viner, 'The economic doctrines of the scholastics', pp. 54-61. The passage from Augustine resembles Cicero, *De officiis*, bk. II, § 11, which in turn depends on Aristotle's *De anima*.

²⁴ Augustine, *De civitate dei*, bk. XI, ch. xvi, in Schaff, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, vol. II, p. 214.

²⁵ Clement of Alexandria, *Pædagogus*, bk. II, ch. xiii, in Cleveland Coxe, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. II, p. 268. The ants and griffins example is derived from Herodotus's *Histories*.

thought.²⁶ More than others, Albertus Magnus, his pupil Thomas Aquinas and John Duns Scotus put an emphasis, though not an exclusive one, on the invested amount of labour and material and transportation costs (*labores et expensæ*) as a measure for the just price. Followers of Olivi, including Anthony of Florence, Bernard of Sienna and the members of the later School of Salamanca, on the other hand, did so for subjective usefulness and scarcity. When it came to the paradox of value and the accompanying idea of a divine abundance of necessities, however, from roughly the thirteenth to the sixteenth century no new thoughts were developed. Like their predecessors, the scholastics continued to highlight the paradoxical relationship between utility, value and price. Some of them, apparently living in times of affluence, praised God's providence for making water and corn cheap by supplying it in abundance.

5.3 As Vitruvius justly philosophizes: natural-law philosophy

The rise of the modern worldview did not put an end to scholastic thinking about value and price. Apart from its survival in neo-scholastic theology, including the writings of the School of Salamanca which sometimes served as intermediary, it was one of the sources from which the seventeenth-century natural-law philosophy drew. Combining scholastic theories with ideas from classical philosophy and the Church Fathers, the jurists thus can be ascribed an important role in passing on a long tradition of economic thought.²⁷ In line with Grotius's *De iure belli ac pacis* (1625), most of the period's treatises on the law of nature and nations contained sections on value and price. Although in the course of time also monographs on the subject were published, usually legal discussions on these issues stood in a broader perspective. Interested as they were in the foundations of rights,²⁸ the jurists discussed the introduction, out of a natural state in which everything was held in common, of private property, trade and commerce, and economic obligations like loans and insurances. It was in this context that they examined factors affecting the value and price of things, and by doing so Grotius and his followers obviously contributed to the later science of economics.²⁹

Usually regarded as the father of the modern law of nature and nations, Grotius himself was first in line to point to the blessing of an abundance of indispensable goods. Following Aristotle, he identifies want (*indigentia*) as the most natural measure of value.

²⁶ In addition to the literature mentioned in footnote 7, see Grice-Hutchinson, *Early Economic Thought in Spain 1177-1740*, pp. 83-87; Langholm, *Price and Value in the Aristotelian Tradition and Wealth and Money in the Aristotelian Tradition*.

²⁷ Hutchison, *Before Adam Smith*, pp. 97-100. This book contains accurate summaries of the 'micro-economic' theories found in Grotius, Pufendorf, Gershom Carmichael, Jean Jacques Burlamaqui, Ludvig Holberg and Huteson. Kaulla, *Die geschichtliche Entwicklung der modernen Werttheorien* discusses Christian von Wolff and lesser-known authors such as Johann Heinrich Boecler (Boelerus), Heinrich Uffelmann and Heinricus Cocceji. Note that the transmission of scholastic ideas was sometimes mediated by members of the School of Salamanca: Grice-Hutchinson, *Early Economic Thought in Spain*, pp. 107-115 ('The survival of the scholastic doctrine of value').

²⁸ Tuck, *Natural Rights Theories*.

²⁹ On Grotius's and Pufendorf's contribution, see Dooley, *The Labour Theory of Value*, pp. 7-15.

It is the measure common to the *barbaros populous*, though, and not the only way in which things are valued. As Grotius observes with several Greek writers, pride, curiosity, fancy and extravagance attached a value, and even a great one, to luxury goods as well. Fortunately, “it happens, that things which are indispensably necessary, are on the account of their plenty abundantly cheaper”.³⁰ Illustrations of this natural state of affairs, which incidentally is not explicitly related to Providence, would have been provided by Seneca in his *De beneficiis*. In the relevant section of the book, however, Seneca does not discuss the abundance of necessities but gives a number of “instances to prove that valuable things are sold at a low price”. A visit to a doctor, a lodging in the wilderness, a shelter for the rain and a hot bath in cold weather all show that “the price paid for some things does not represent their value”.³¹ Grotius goes on to observe that the price of a good is settled by the common estimation of the market and further pays attention to various price-determining factors.

In the work of Samuel Pufendorf, the second greatest natural-law philosopher of the seventeenth century, the discussions of value and price have been significantly expanded. Not only his main work *De jure naturæ et gentium* (1672) but also Pufendorf’s early *Elementorum jurisprudentiæ universalis* (1660) and the *De officio hominis et civis* (1673), an abridgement of the first book, contain a separate chapter on the subject. Especially in his influential *De jure naturæ et gentium*, the German writer discusses a great many factors affecting the rise and fall of value and prices, including utility, scarcity, the price of labour, workmanship and the ‘price of fancy’. Unlike his Dutch predecessor Grotius, Pufendorf empathically ascribes the abundance of the most necessary things to the goodness of God and Nature. That he attached importance to this observation is obvious since it returns in each of the above-mentioned books, including the much shorter abridgment intended for his students. Pufendorf, as is well known, wanted to design a theory of morality independent of theology and of confessional differences but nevertheless kept on referring to God the Creator.

In determining the value of things, Pufendorf argues in his *Elementorum*, “does the necessity of a thing, or the nobility of its application, fail always to have chief consideration, that, by a singular provision of nature [lit. *providentia naturæ*], those things which our life cannot do without are rather accorded less worth, because nature presents a bounteous supply of them. There it is rarity which is principally effective here”. In his *magnus opus* the idea follows the observation that the preference for goods is not so much based on their utility. “Nay, we generally find the most necessary things are cheapest, because by the peculiar Providence of God, Nature affords a greater increase of them”. This time the idea is supported with the quotations from Plato, Vitruvius and Sextus Empiricus that were provided earlier on in this chapter. In the abridgment, finally, it can be read that “not without the singular Providence of Almighty God, Nature has been very bountiful in providing plentiful store” of the things without which human

³⁰ Hugo Grotius, *De iure belli ac pacis* (1625), bk. II, ch. xii ‘De contractibus’, § 14, p. 283: “euenit vt res maximè necessariæ minoris sint propter copiam” (transl. from first English 1715-edition).

³¹ Seneca, *On Benefits*, bk. VI, chs. xvi and xv, in *Moral Essays*, pp. 395: “exampla ... quibus appareat parvo magna constare” and 393: “quaedam pluris esse, quam emuntur”.

life is least able to subsist. According to Pufendorf, value is especially enhanced by rarity and scarceness, which explains why the “wanton luxury of mankind has set extravagant rates upon many things which human life might very well be without; for instance, upon pearls and jewels”.³²

In each of these works the allusions to the role of providence in the value of goods serve the same purpose. It is the bounteous supply of necessary goods that makes clear why utility cannot be considered a decisive factor in the determination of value. In many cases scarcity rather than utility is most important. As in Grotius, the moralistic context in which the Church Fathers discussed the abundance of necessities is lacking. Concerned as he is with legal and moral-philosophical questions, Pufendorf is mainly interested in the factors that make value and price fluctuate. Be that as it may, in his final remark on the extravagant prices of pearls and jewels the ancient critique of luxury resounds. Supposing that human life can do without luxuries, the jurist somewhat surprisingly observes that enormous prices (*enormia pretia*) are paid for them. In his earlier *Elementorum*, the reference to divine providence is moreover preceded by a rather dismissive remark on the luxury and lustfulness of men (*luxuria hominum & libido*) who have placed an inordinate worth (*enorme plerunque pretium*) on what are merely conveniences. Pufendorf, so much is clear, was critical of man’s desire for luxury.³³

As was to be expected, in *De jure naturæ et gentium* the author discusses in most detail the phenomenon that luxury trade involves enormous prices. In the second, enlarged edition of the book, the fact that goods of certain intrinsic worth are valued on account of their scarcity or the number of possessors is called a case in which the “general inclination of men deviates from right reason”. The overestimation of the value of things simply is a consequence of the “depravity and corruption of human nature”. Vice versa, it would be the “folly of men” that fancies that highly priced goods will be special

³² Samuel Pufendorf, *Elementorum jurisprudentiæ universalis* (1660), bk. I, def. x, p. 78: “Heic enim usque adeo necessitas rei aut nobilitas usus primas semper non obtinet, ut potius non sine singulari providentia naturæ ea, queis vita nostra carere nequit, pretii sint vilioris, eo quod uberem earum proventum natura effundat. Facit igitur huc præprimis raritas” (transl. from W.A. Oldfather’s 1931-edition); *De jure naturæ et gentium* (1672), bk. V, ch. i ‘De pretio’, § 6, p. 595: “ut potius ea vilissima esse cernamus, quibus vita humana minime carere potest; ideo quod non sine singulari Dei providentia uberem eorum proventum natura effundat” (transl. from first English 1703-edition); *De officio hominis & civis juxta legem naturalem* (1682), bk. I, ch. xiv ‘De pretio’, § 4, p. 79: “non sine singulari Dei providentia uberem eorum proventum natura profundat. ... Inde ambitiosa hominum luxuria multis rebus, queis vita humana commodissime carere poterat, enormia pretia posuit, puta unionibus & gemmis” (transl. from first English 1691-edition).

³³ On Pufendorf’s condemnation of luxury, see Hont & Ignatieff, ‘Needs and justice in the Wealth of Nations’, pp. 33ff. In *De statu imperii Germanici* (1667), ch. 7, § 2, a book published under the pseudonym Severinus de Monzambano, Pufendorf argued that the German empire is so wealthy that it produces all things required for the support or pleasure of human life itself, and therefore all things that are imported from abroad, such as French wines, English cloth and Italian silks, are “either much less in value, or such things as the Germans might conveniently live without, if they knew how to suppress their luxury, or lay by their laziness and folly” (transl. from first English 1690-edition).

or extraordinary.³⁴ To reinforce his arguments, Pufendorf as usual substantiates these characterizations of human nature with quotations from the classics. The author's own position might be best summarized by one of his borrowings from Plutarch. This Greek historian tells of a philosopher called Ariston who is perplexed by the fact that people possessing the superfluities of life are called happy rather than those having access to what is necessary and useful.

Pufendorf's critical statement about the folly of men in valuing useless things is reminiscent of a passage from *Utopia* of Thomas More, whom he knew and criticized for his theory of property. In book 2 of his description of the best possible state of a commonwealth, More's spokesman Hythloday claims that "to golde and syluer nature hathe geuen no vse, that we may not wel lacke: yf that the folly of men hadde not sette it in hygher estymacyon for the rarenes sake. But of the contrary parte, nature as a moste tender and louynge mother, hath placed the beste and moste necessarye thynges open a brode: as the ayere, the water, and the earth it selfe. And hath remoued and hydde farthest from us vayne and vnprofytale thynges".³⁵ Thanks to Utopia's abundance of useful products, the exportation of surpluses to other countries is so great that the citizens receive immense quantities of silver and gold. Consequently gold and silver are valued lowly and are used to make chamber pots and vessels for private use, and chains and shackles for slaves. Pearls, diamonds and garnets collected at the seashore and on cliffs are given to small children to serve as toys and decorations. Only ignorant children and fools, Hythloday concludes, are attracted by such useless things as precious metals and stones. Iron alone, the only important resource that the utopians lack and which they obtain through exchange, is in itself far superior to gold and silver.³⁶ With these and other satirical observations, More revived a long-standing tradition of condemnation of man's greed.³⁷

In the footsteps of Grotius and Pufendorf almost all major natural-law philosophers paid attention to questions of value and price. Some of them continued to point to the beneficent order of nature. Imitating Grotius, some like Christian Wolff did so with-

³⁴ Pufendorf, *De jure naturae et gentium* (1684), bk. V, ch. i, § 6, pp. 672-673: "sit ex pravitate & malignitate ingenii humani", "à recta ratione communis hominum inclinatio abit" and "stultitia hominum".

³⁵ Thomas More, *De optimo reip. statu deque noua insula Vtopia* (1518), bk. II, p. 96: "auro, argentoque nullum usum, quo non facile careamus, natura tribuerit, nisi hominum stultitia precium raritati fecisset. quin contra, uelut parens indulgentissima optima quaeque in propatulo posuerit, ut aerem, aquam, ac tellurem ipsam, longissime uero uana ac nihil profutura semouerit" (transl. from first English 1551-edition).

³⁶ The inferiority of gold and silver to iron by nature is also mentioned in More's *A Dialogue of Comfort Against Tribulation* (1573) and *A Treatise upon the Passion of Christ* (unfinished).

³⁷ Doyle, 'Utopia and the proper place of gold'; Wilson, 'An affront to gold and silver'. As is demonstrated in *The Complete Works of St. Thomas More*, vol. 4, pp. 428-431, most ideas summarized in this paragraph have classical roots and parallels in the work of More's friend Erasmus. The attitude of the utopians towards precious metals and stones is similar to that of the Indians described in the letter 'Mundus novus' from 1502/3 (attributed to Amerigo Vespucci) who did not value and almost despised gold, pearls and gems. Also later utopian writings, such as Tommaso Campanella's *La città del Sole* (1602) and Francis Bacon's *Nova Atlantis* (1626), downplayed the value of gold and silver.

out explicit reference to the Creator. Others followed Pufendorf and explicitly mentioned the hand of Providence in the abundance of necessities. The German jurist Johann Gottlieb Heineccius, for example, noted that “the most necessary things have not always the highest price, kind providence having so ordered it, that the things which we can least dispense with the want of [sic] are abundant every where; and those things only are rare and difficult to be found, which are not necessary, and which nature itself does not crave, as Vitruvius justly philosophizes”.³⁸ Heineccius’s remark aims to relativize the belief that other people’s need and indigence will raise the price of things. Only a handful of jurists combined the providential idea with Pufendorf’s condemnation of excessive luxury. A critic of Mandeville’s eulogy of luxury, Hutcheson claims that “the prices or values in commerce do not at all follow the real use or importance of goods for the support, or natural pleasure of life. By the wisdom and goodness of Providence there is such plenty of the means of support, and of natural pleasures, that their prices are much lower than of many other things which”, he adds, “to a wise man seem of little use”.³⁹

5.4 Sand from the shores of Japan: economic interpretations

Of course, the body of ancient and medieval thought about value and price was not expanded in natural-law philosophy alone. Also the emerging economic discourse produced numerous reflections on these subjects, often as a prelude to theories of money.⁴⁰ The economic writers of the period can roughly be grouped into two currents, the roots of which go back to the Middle Ages. In the first place, mainly in Spain, Italy and France (except for the Physiocrats) there were supporters of the subjective theory of value, among them the natural-law philosophers. Without denying the role of production costs in the formation of prices, in this theory usefulness and (relative) scarcity are seen as the most important determinants of market value. Rather than intrinsic value, usefulness or utility is understood as the extent to which some good is able to satisfy someone’s subjective wants. A second group of writers, mainly but not exclusively of British-Irish origin,⁴¹

³⁸ Johann Gottlieb Heineccius, *Elementa iuris naturae et gentium* (1742), bk. I, ch. 13 ‘De rervm, in dominio constitvtarvm, commercio’, § 331: “quae maxime necessaria sunt, maximi pretii haberi, rem ita dirigente diuina prouidentia, vt illa, quibus non facile caremus, vbique obuia fint, et illa tantum, quae nec corpus, nec natura desiderat, difficilius rariusque reperiantur, vti recte philosophatur Vitruu. *Architect. VIII. praef.*” (transl. from English 1741-edition).

³⁹ Francis Hutcheson, *A System of Moral Philosophy* (1755), bk. II, ch. 12 ‘The values of goods in commerce and the nature of coin’, pp. 53-54. Hutcheson’s views of luxury contra Mandeville are discussed in Hont, ‘The early Enlightenment debate on commerce and luxury’, pp. 399-401.

⁴⁰ In addition to the literature mentioned in footnote 7, see Zuckerkandl, *Zur Theorie des Preises mit besonderer Berücksichtigung der geschichtliche Entwicklung der Lehre*; Dubois, ‘Les théories psychologiques de la valeur au XVIII^e siècle’ (on Galiani, Turgot and Condillac); Meek, *Studies in the Labour Theory of Value*, ch. 1 ‘Value theory before Adam Smith’; Bowley, *Studies in the History of Economic Theory before 1870*, ch. 2 ‘The development of value theory in the seventeenth century’; and Dooley, *The Labour Theory of Value*.

⁴¹ Kauder, ‘The retarded acceptance of the marginal utility theory’ makes the interesting claim that there might be a relationship between differences in theological background and the observation

advocated a cost-of-production theory of value. According to them, the value and price of things is above all determined by the price of invested labour and land, as these means of production could have been allocated otherwise. Even though under certain circumstances the market price could deviate from it, it would still be based on costs of production.

Both among supporters of the subjective theory and the cost-of-production theory the paradox of value remained a popular rhetorical device to introduce the subject to the reader. Apparently, the fact that explanations were around for centuries did not detract from its pedagogical use. A number of illustrations of the paradox, copied and commented upon by later authors, could be found in the *Lezione delle monete* (1588), a lecture by Bernardo Davanzati. After having provided an account of the history, advantages and definition of money, the Italian merchant raises the question “how comes it that things so valuable in themselves are worth so little gold? From what root springs it, that one thing is worth just so much of another, rather than so much, worth this rather than that quantity of gold?”. He tells of an egg that was “bought for half a grain of gold, kept count Ugolino alive in the castle for ten days, which all the treasure in the universe could not do”, a mole which is a “vile and despicable animal, but in the siege of Cassilino the famine was so great, that one was sold for 200 florins” and the inhabitants of Peru who “did at first barter ingots of gold for looking glasses, needles, little bells, and the like; because they put a high esteem upon those things then new to them”.⁴² Influenced as he was by the scholastic tradition, Davanzati’s message was clear: the value of things is not so much based on their objective utility as on subjective preferences and particular circumstances.

Also in the economic works of other writers relatively expensive diamonds and pearls and free water and air were mentioned to stress the role of scarcity, or labour, in the case of the cost-of-production theorists, in the formation of prices. Admittedly, much less frequently this constellation was explicitly associated with God’s providential order. Some writers like Charles Molloy, a legal writer influenced by Malynes, for example, seem to have based their ideas directly on Aristotle: “The natural measure is proportioned either by want, or plenty; in want we consider whether the thing be useful or necessary; things which are necessary are best, but of least price; as a loaf of bread is more necessary, but infinitely cheaper than a diamond”.⁴³ The absence of a reference to the Creator is not so surprising considering that traditionally the paradox of value and its theological reading formed an illustration rather than a fundamental part of the evolving

that supporters of ‘subjective value’ could be found mainly in Italy and France and supporters of ‘cost theory’ in Great Britain. See also his *A History of Marginal Utility Theory*.

⁴² Bernardo Davanzati, *A Discourse upon Coins* (1696), pp. 14-17. See p. 9 for a section relevant to chapter 3 and 4: “But no person is born fit for all sorts of business, some having a genius for one thing, and some for another; nor can any climate indifferently produce all the fruits of [the] earth”.

⁴³ [Charles Molloy], *De Jure Maritimo et Naval: or, A Treatise of Affaires Maritime, And of Commerce* (1676), bk. II, ch. 5 ‘Of moneys advanced by way of bottomerie, or Fœnus Nauticum’, p. 279. Large parts from this chapter, including the example on bread and diamonds, are identical to Anthony Ascham, *Of The Confusions and Revolutions Of Governments* (1649), prt. I, ch. 6 ‘Of the nature of mony, its civill use and valew’.

theory of value and price. Nevertheless in the period a number of certainly not insignificant writers belonging to both of the above-mentioned traditions illuminated their analyses with the providential idea first expressed in the work of Vitruvius.

Of the adherents of the cost-of-production theory, William Pulteney, Earl of Bath, cannot be passed over in silence. Regarded by some as the most advanced statement of the labour theory of value before the contributions of the classical economists,⁴⁴ his pamphlet on the interest of money among other things defended the thesis that a good's value in exchange is determined by the quantity of labour required to produce it. "Water", the later Member of Parliament immediately adds to this observation, "is as necessary for life as bread or wine; but the hand of God has poured out that upon mankind in such plenty, that every man may have enough of that without any trouble, so that generally 'tis of no price". In some places, however, "a ton of water may be as dear as a ton of wine", namely when its acquisition is troublesome and involves a significant amount of labour.⁴⁵ So even though some of the necessities of life are a combined effort of nature and the labour of men, it is the latter that makes the greatest part of a price. Surprisingly enough, here the paradox of value is not used to downplay the role of utility in the determination of value but to stress the importance of human effort. Goods with use value only acquire exchange value, Pulteney argues, when their production requires the intervention of human labour.

Another well-known writer, who authored navigational, monetary and agricultural tracts and just like Pulteney managed to fit the paradox into his labour theory of value, was Joseph Harris. Right at the beginning of his 1757 essay on money, the Welshman in line with William Petty and Richard Cantillon argues that the most important factor in the value of things is not utility or scarcity but the land, labour and skills required by their production. The surprising fact that water is of great use and yet of hardly any value is accordingly ascribed to the low expenses to produce it, not to its low scarcity. Diamonds, in contrast, have a great value while they are but of little use. Cheap commodities, according to Harris, usually are "natural products, either growing spontaneously, or requiring no great art and labour in their cultivation; as grain of all sorts, cattle for food or labour, timber and stone for building, fuel, &c". The reason why these essentials require few labour and skills is the following: "goodness of Providence having so ordered things, that those main supports of life should abound every where according to the exigencies of different climates. And of metals, that most useful one, iron, is in our happy clime the cheapest".⁴⁶

The paradox of value anyhow fitted the subjective theory of value better. Interestingly, one of its advocates expressing his gratitude to divine providence was John Locke, whose economic writings occupy an important place in the history of economic

⁴⁴ Meek, *Studies in the Labour Theory of Value*, p. 42.

⁴⁵ [William Pulteney], *Some Thoughts on the Interest of Money in General* (1738), p. 37.

⁴⁶ [Joseph Harris], *An Essay upon Money and Coins. Part I. The Theories of Commerce, Money, and Exchanges* (1757), p. 6.

thought.⁴⁷ His remark on the abundance of necessities is made in one of his tracts on interest and money, in a passage that deals with the question why prices rise and fall. As Locke observes, it is not the useful quality of a good, or the addition, increase or decrease of this utility that makes prices fluctuate. Prices depend exclusively upon the proportion between the supply and “vent” of a good, the last of which depends upon the subjective evaluation of individuals. “What more useful or necessary things are there to the being or well-being of men”, he writes with respect to the nature of goods, “than air and water, and yet these have generally no price at all, nor yield any money, because their quantity is immensely greater than their vent in most places of the world; but as soon as ever water ... comes any where to be reduced into any proportion to its consumption, it begins presently to have a price, and is sometimes sold dearer than wine; and hence it is, that the best and most useful things are commonly the cheapest, because, thought their consumption be great, yet the bounty of Providence has made their production large and suitable to it”.⁴⁸ Apart from the last remark, that God as it were adjusted the supply of necessities to their demand, Locke’s thoughts can scarcely be called original.

For a completely new application of the idea we must turn to *Della moneta* (1751), a much acclaimed book on the nature, value and circulation of money by Ferdinando Galiani.⁴⁹ Contrary to all sorts of moralists who stressed the artificiality of valuation, the Italian economist sought to show that the value of money, precious stones and rare things more generally are ultimately derived from principles inherent in (human) nature itself. In a preliminary chapter on the principles of value, showing Galiani’s familiarity with the (late) scholastic tradition, he unravels various instances of the value paradox by elucidating the interplay of utility and scarcity, without which goods have no value at all. For example, air and water lack value because they are not scarce. The same holds true for a bag of sand from the shores of Japan, which although extremely rare has hardly any utility (a term defined by the author in highly subjective terms). He goes on to explain the relationship between the paradox of value and Providence, the mechanisms of which he saw at work everywhere in history of human society. “Now if anyone is aston-

⁴⁷ The background of Locke’s contributions to the debate on value and money is provided in Appleby, ‘Locke, liberalism and the natural law of money’ and Vaughn, *John Locke. Economist and Social Scientist*, ch. 2 ‘Theory of value’. Note that in his *Two Treatises of Government* (1690) Locke seems to defend a cost-of-production theory, by calling labour “in great part the measure” of value, and for this reason is sometimes placed in that camp. See Vaughn, ‘John Locke and the labor theory of value’.

⁴⁸ [John Locke], *Some Considerations of the Consequences of the Lowering of Interest, and Raising the Value of Money* (1692), p. 62. Nicolas-François Dupré de Saint-Maur, *Essai sur les monnoies* (1746), p. 11 adopted Locke’s words as one of the *notions préliminaires* and summarized them follows: “Ce n’est point l’excellence des choses, non plus qu’une addition, ou une augmentation de valeur intrinseque qui en rend le prix plus ou moins grand, mais la quantité de l’espèce à vendre comparée avec la consommation que l’on en peut faire. L’air qui s’offre de lui - même à tout le monde, & l’eau bien plus abondante que ce que l’on en peut consommer, ne se vendent point malgré leur extrême utilité. Ainsi nous devons admirer la Providence dont la bonté a extrêmement multiplié les choses qui nous font les plus nécessaires”.

⁴⁹ Schumpeter, *History of Economic Analysis*, pp. 300-302. For a philosophical background, see Stapelbroek, *Love, Self-Deceit, and Money*, ch. 5.

ished”, he writes, “that precisely all the most useful things are of low value, while the less useful ones are of high and exorbitant value, he should note that, with marvellous providence, this world is so constituted for our good that utility, generally speaking, is never found with scarcity; but the more primary utility increases, the greater abundance is found with it, and therefore the value cannot be great. The things needed to sustain life are so plentifully spread over the whole earth, that they have no, or fairly little, value”.⁵⁰

However astonishing, this observation by Galiani is not new. Truly original is the Enlightenment thinker when he comes to speak about the share of labour in the quantity of goods. The prices of labour (which to him is no price factor but a requisite for products to get a market value anyway) are said to depend partly on the value of different human talents.⁵¹ According to Galiani, this value can be assessed in exactly the same way as the value of inanimate things, namely in terms of utility and scarcity. The reason being that “[m]en are born endowed by Providence with aptitudes for different trades, but in different degrees of scarcity, and corresponding with marvellous wisdom to human needs”. For instance, 60 percent of the people are predisposed for agriculture, 30 percent for manufacturing, 5 percent for trade and again 5 percent for learning and scholarship. The value of philosophers and scholars, in other words, is 12 times as high as that of farmers. “It is not utility alone, therefore, which governs prices: for God causes the men who carry on the trades of greatest utility to be born in large numbers, and so their value cannot be great, these being, so to speak, the bread and wine of men; but scholars and philosophers, who may be called the gems among talents, deservedly bear a very high price”.⁵² What Galiani presents here is the application of the idea of a divine abundance of necessities to the division of talents in society.

Someone else, finally, who employed the idea in a different context was Defoe, the mercantilist writer that we have met several times before. “It is true”, he states in one of the episodes of his *Review*, “the common mercies of life, and such as mankind can least want, our bountiful Creator has made most universal; such as water for drink, corn and cattle for food, salt, materials for building, fuell, and the like; and would men but consider, how ill they can bear the want of these ordinary necessities of the creation,

⁵⁰ Ferdinando Galiani, *Della moneta* (1780), bk. I, ch. ii, p. 35: “Se poi alcuno si maraviglierà come appunto tutte le cose più utili hanno basso valore, quando le meno utili lo hanno grande ed esorbitante; egli dovrà avvertire che con meravigliosa provvidenza questo mondo è talmente per bene nostro costituito, che l'utilità non s'incontra mai, generalmente parlando, colla rarità: ma anzi quanto cresce l'utilità primaria, tanto si trova più abbondanza, e perciò non può esser grande il valore. Quelle cose, che bisognano a sostentarci sono così profusamente versate sulla terra tutta, che o non hanno valore, o l'hanno assai moderato” (transl. from Monroe, *Early Economic Thought*).

⁵¹ Earlier writers like Hobbes, Pufendorf, La Bruyère and Duclos had compared the moral worth of men to the price of things. See Viroli, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau and the 'Well-Ordered Society'*, pp. 76-87 ('The price of things and the value of men').

⁵² Galiani, *Della moneta*, bk. I, ch. ii, p. 42: “Nascono gli uomini dalla Provvidenza a varj mestieri disposti, ma con ineguale proporzione di rarità, e corrispondente con mirabile sapienza a' bisogni umani. ... Non è dunque l'utilità, che sola dirigge i prezzi; perchè Iddio fa, che gli uomini, che esercitano mestieri di prima utilità nascono abbondantemente; nè può il valore perciò esserne grande, essendo questi quasi il pane e il vino degli uomini; ma i dotti, i savi, che sono quasi le gemme fra i talenti, hanno meritamente altissimo prezzo”.

perhaps they would be more thankful for them. - But, materials for cloathing, varieties for feeding, and many of the numberless *addenda* to the pleasures and conveniences of life; nay, some of the most sovereign remedies in capital distempers, how are they fix'd in the remotest parts of the world, in the inaccessible caverns of the earth, or beyond the unpassable oceans?”.⁵³ Defoe's remark, reminiscent of the words of Clement of Alexandria, at first sight seems to be aimed at those who wrongly attach value to the pleasures and conveniences of life. The context, however, is a different one. Stressing the benefits of international trade, Defoe's main point is that inaccessible caverns may be accessed through labour and industry and unpassable oceans be traversed by means of navigation. That necessary and useful goods are scattered over the world, even at the most inaccessible places, hardly implies that we should not collect them.

Precious metals reevaluated

What is lacking in the economic articulation of a providential abundance of necessities is the moralistic undertone found in classical expressions. Gone is the belief that God deliberately hid in the earth and the sea what is useless and dangerous. At the beginning of our period, this legacy from antiquity was explicitly attacked by the humanist writer Georgius Agricola.⁵⁴ His *De re metallica* (1556), a defence of mining, was a typical product of a new empirical approach to natural history and philosophy that developed in the sixteenth century. The discovery on the one hand of the breadth of classical thought and of new worlds and phenomena on the other made the old Aristotelian worldview began to falter. Empirical observations and descriptions suggested that the dogmas of Aristotle and other ancient writers could be flawed. After having presented various negative statements from antiquity about gold, silver and the like, Agricola indeed rejects the idea that Nature has concealed metals far within the depths of the earth because they are unnecessary for human life and a cause of great evils. Actually “those people who speak ill of the metals and refuse to make use of them, do not see that they accuse and condemn as wicked the Creator Himself ... [T]he earth does not conceal metals in her depths because she does not wish that men should dig them out, but because provident and sagacious Nature has appointed for each thing its place”.⁵⁵ Metals simply could not have been produced in any other element but earth, for if they were generated in air, they could not find a resting place and would fall down on earth anyway.

The new natural philosophy that was central to the work of Francis Bacon went hand in hand with a new look on nature itself.⁵⁶ Entirely created for man's sake, the natural environment was increasingly seen as a resource that could be controlled and put to use. In addition to industry, the advance of mankind was associated with cultivation of the arts and sciences. The duty to investigate and improve was also voiced by writers

⁵³ [Daniel Defoe], *Review*, vol. I, no. 55 (Thursday, February 5. 1713), p. 110.

⁵⁴ Kaiser, *Creational Theology and the History of Physical Science*, pp. 156-158.

⁵⁵ Georgius Agricola, *De re metallica*, p. 12.

⁵⁶ Webster, *The Great Instauration*, ch. 5 ‘Dominion over nature’; Glacken, *Traces on the Rhodian Shore*, ch. 10 ‘Growing consciousness of the control of nature’.

dealing with economic subjects. Samuel Hartlib, the educational and agricultural reformer who was inspired by Bacon and stood at the cradle of the Royal Society,⁵⁷ in one his treatises remarks that “God of his goodnes distribut[es] some peculiar blessings to every country”. By implication, metals and minerals are tucked away in the English soil with good reason. To those who believe that most of these resources are only of little worth and profit, the author responds by saying that “God hath made nothing in vain: every thing hath his peculiar use, and though some things seem to be of little worth and contemptible, as sand, loame, chalke; yet; it hath pleased the wise Creator to make these things very necessary for mans comfortable subsistence”.⁵⁸ Even an Augustinian like Jean Domat in the economic section of his book on civil law repeatedly stressed that there is “nothing in the universe, which God has not created for the use of man ... proportioned to his nature, and to his wants”. Within the infinite multitude of things, the most necessary goods that nobody can live without, such as air, light and water, do not require any industry or labour. Other useful but less essential goods for food, clothing and habitation, however, can only be obtained through labour.⁵⁹

In eighteenth-century writings, the growing optimism that man, through his creativity, could attain mastery over nature became even more manifest. In a book on ancient history containing lengthy sections on agriculture and commerce, Charles Rollin, an Augustinian writer too,⁶⁰ claims that divine providence took no less than a “delight in concealing its most wonderful gifts” in the bowels of the earth so that they would be discovered by chance and accident. It is therefore a sign of God’s beneficence and liberality, he observes with book 34 of Pliny’s *Natural History*, that iron which of all metals is the most indispensable is not only the most common, but also “the easiest to be found, less deep in the earth than any other”. Thanks to this, iron was discovered first. Another proof of God’s grace is that humans happened to discover the means to mine and process precious metals, often deeply hidden in the earth. As Cicero already established, “God in vain had formed gold, silver, and iron, in the bowels of the earth, if he had not vouchsafed to teach man the means, by which he might come at the veins, that conceal those precious metals”.⁶¹ Once they had been discovered, gold, silver and the like in antiquity became important articles of commerce.

⁵⁷ On Hartlib’s place in the history of economics and his relationship to Petty, see Letwin, *The Origin of Scientific Economics*, pp. 116-127.

⁵⁸ Samuel Hartlib, *Samuel Hartlib His Legacie: Or An Enlargement of the Discourse of Husbandry Used in Brabant and Flaunders* (1651), pp. 29 and 88.

⁵⁹ [Jean Domat], *Le droit public, suite des loix civiles dans leur ordre naturel* (1703), bk. I, tit. 7, sect. 4, § 1, p. 59 and tit. 8 (pp. 60-61): “il y a rien dans tout l’univers, que Dieu n’ait créé pour l’homme ... proportionné à sa nature & à ses besoins” (transl. from English 1722-edition).

⁶⁰ Orain, ‘The second Jansenism and the rise of French eighteenth-century political economy’.

⁶¹ [Charles] Rollin, *Histoire ancienne des Egyptiens, des Carthaginois, des Assyriens, des Babyloniens, des Medes et des Perse, des Macédoniens, des Grecs*, vol. X (1736), pp. 381-382: “elle se plait ordinairement à cacher ses plus merveilleux bienfaits”, 382: “le plus facile à trouver, le moins profondément caché en terre”, and 411: “en vain Dieu auroit formé dans le sein de la terre l’or, l’argent, l’airain & le fer, s’il n’avoit enseigné aux homes par quell moyen ils pouvoient parvenir jusqu’aux veines qui cachent ces précieux métaux” (transl. from first English 1736-edition). The sources of the latter idea is Cicero, *De divination*, bk. I, ch. 51.

5.5 The mighty hand of the Great Preserver: natural theology

It is very likely that Locke derived the idea of a divine abundance of necessities from Grotius or Pufendorf. A great deal of his economic thought was inspired by his readings of these natural-law philosophers, and in a sense he stood in this tradition himself.⁶² Galiani, in turn, may have borrowed it from Locke, since he translated the Englishman's *Some Considerations* of 1691 into his native tongue. Meanwhile, due to the absence of references, it is difficult to determine where Pulteney, Harris, Defoe and other economic writers outside the natural-law tradition got the providential idea from. We need not necessarily think of earlier economic or legal thinkers, though. As a matter of fact, the observation that necessary goods abound was also made in late-seventeenth and eighteenth-century natural theology. Naturally, in case of the physico-theologians the aim was not to explain the relationship between utility, scarcity and value but to demonstrate God's care for all His creatures. Natural theology among other sources drew from ancient treatises dealing with creation and providence, which from the outset had linked abundance to God's benevolence. Against the Epicurean idea of the "niggardliness of nature", as eighteenth-century writers used to call it, it optimistically stressed the ability of the earth to support all life.⁶³

To some the very idea of shortage was simply incompatible with the goodness of the Creator. Echoing Aristotle's *De anima*, John Ray sticks to the idea that *natura nec abundat in superfluis, nec deficit in necessariis* - nature abounds not in what is superfluous, nor is deficient in what is necessary.⁶⁴ According to William Derham, the most famous of the eighteenth-century physico-theologians, the great variety and quantity of all things upon and in the earth can be seen as an end in itself. For as a rule, "in greater variety, the greater art is seen". Of course, this truth did not rule out a secondary objective. Thanks to the God-given abundance of things, the diverse needs and comforts of all creatures can easily be met. The stunning numbers of beasts, birds, insects, reptiles, trees, plants, fishes, minerals and metals on the earth ensure that (under normal circumstances) no creature is ever short of anything. Even if each century would witness new habits with respect to food, clothing and building, Derham argues, the creation would not be exhausted. Fortunately, "the munificence of the Creator is such, that there is abundantly enough to supply the wants, the conveniences, yea, almost the extravagancies of all the creatures, in all places, all ages, and upon all occasions".⁶⁵ As Derham and his followers observed, in a wise provision of the Creator the quantity of food is also propor-

⁶² Haakonssen, *Natural Law and Moral Philosophy*, pp. 51ff; Tuck, *The Rights of War and Peace*, pp. 167ff.

⁶³ Glacken, *Traces on the Rhodian Shore*, pp. 72-73.

⁶⁴ John Ray, *The Wisdom of God Manifested in the Works of the Creation* (1691), p. 46.

⁶⁵ William Derham, *Physico-Theology: or, a Demonstration of the Being and Attributes of God, from his Works of Creation* (1714), bk. II, ch. vi, p. 55.

tioned to the number of eaters. Vegetables and insects, for example, are particularly numerous since they are most often on the menu of living beings.⁶⁶

A typical example of divine affluence that keeps on recurring in physico-theological works is that of wheat.⁶⁷ In his discussion of vegetables and plants, Ray remarks that wheat is not only the “best sort of grain” but also that “nothing is more fruitful”. The first appears from its many possible applications, for example in the most savoury and wholesome bread, the second is evidenced by a quote from Pliny. According to book 18 of the encyclopaedic *Natural History*, Nature (“he should have said, the Author of Nature”, Ray is quick to add) made no grain more prolific than wheat because it serves as man’s principal nutriment, after which follows an example of a place in Africa where four hundred shoots spring from a single grain. “If Pliny a heathen could make this fertility of wheat argumentative of the bounty of God to man”, Ray writes, “surely it ought not to be passed over by us Christians without notice taking and thanksgiving”.⁶⁸ Whether or not for this reason, also Derham makes mention of Pliny’s observation. To him the example of wheat is one of the proofs of the “remarkable” fact that “among the great variety of foods, the most useful is the most plentiful, most universal, easiest propagated, and most patient of weather, and other injuries”.⁶⁹

If the observation that the best and most useful is the most plentiful already evokes associations with the subject of this chapter, this is even more the case when the physico-theologians come to speak about metals. As Ray establishes, “it is remarkable, that those which are of most frequent and necessary use, as iron, brass and lead, are the most common and plentiful: Others that are more rare, may better be spared, yet are thereby qualified to be made the common measure and standard of the value of all other commodities, and so to serve for coin and money”.⁷⁰ Strikingly, here the scarcity of gold and silver, to which the author is referring, is not related to their futility but rather to the altogether different monetary purpose that these metals serve. Providence, as Noël Antoine Pluche expressed it, in this case has “wisely acted by a contrary rule” than that of men. Whereas humans, if they had the choice, would have created the greatest amount of that metal that they covet and admire most, namely gold, God decided otherwise. Since the “chief worth and excellency of gold arises from its scarcity, he has therefore given it to us with sparing hand [avec économie]”.⁷¹ Ray subsequently goes on to claim that the total

⁶⁶ Cf. Christoph Christian Sturm, *Betrachtungen über die Werke Gottes im Reiche der Natur und der Vorsehung auf alle Tage des Jahres* (1785), vol. I, pp. 291-293 (‘Der 21^{te} April. Verhältniß aller Geschöpfe gegen einander’).

⁶⁷ Another example is that of wood. See Sturm, *Betrachtungen*, vol. II, pp. 447-449 (‘Der 3^{te} December. Nutzen des Holzes’).

⁶⁸ John Ray, *The Wisdom of God Manifested in the Works of the Creation* (1701), prt. I, p. 126.

⁶⁹ Derham, *Physico-Theology*, bk. IV, ch. xi, p. 181.

⁷⁰ Ray, *The Wisdom of God Manifested in the Works of the Creation* (1691), pp. 70-71. This idea is repeated almost verbatim in John Wesley, *A Survey of the Wisdom of God in the Creation: or a Compendium of Natural Philosophy*, vol. II (1763), prt. III, ch. iii, § 4, p. 9.

⁷¹ Noël-Antoine Pluche, *Le spectacle de la nature* (1735), vol. III, p. 458: “Dieu a fait tout le contraire. Comme le mérite & la grande commodité de l’or provident de sa rareté, Dieu nous l’a donné avec économie” (transl. from first English 1736-edition).

number of particles and atoms that make up air, water and earth is abundantly greater than that of metals and minerals. The reason being that the first aggregates are “necessary to the life and being of man and all other animals, and therefore must be always at hand”, while the latter are “only useful to man, and serving rather his conveniences than necessities”.⁷² The parallel between this example of a relative abundance of necessities as compared to conveniences and its economic variant is striking.

Our final example of the similarity between economic and physico-theological ideas comes from Bernard Nieuwentyt. Near the end of his 67-page account of the wondrous world of water, the influential Dutch writer points out that this highly useful substance is so cheap. “Before we quite leave this subject”, he writes, “let us in the last place beseech all unhappy [i.e. ‘atheistic’] philosophers, seriously to consider, that this water, which bring along with it so great and so many advantages, is to be found in such great plenty, and to be procured by those that want it, almost in all places, for nothing. Cannot we see herein the goodness of the Giver!”.⁷³ According to Nieuwentyt, the abundance of cheap water is all the more astonishing if one realizes how much of this fluid through the ages has been consumed, used up, evaporated and ‘worn out’, a possibility by the way that was denied by other physico-theologians. In view of the fact that the levels of seas and rivers remain the same, it must somehow be constantly replenished by the “mighty hand of a Great Preserver”. Without divine preservation, water would run out, the world would be destroyed and all life would inevitably die out. Hence that “water is always abounding, and never fails” is a twofold grace of the Creator to His creatures.

5.6 Concluding remarks

Nowadays the paradox of value is still used in economic textbooks to teach students the first principles of value and price theory. Some of these books in their historical enthusiasm even want them to believe that Adam Smith invented the paradox. The providential idea that for centuries accompanied the paradox, however, seems to be completely forgotten. The belief in a divine abundance of necessary goods as compared to luxury goods belongs to bygone times and strikes us as naive. From an economist’s point of view, it seems to arise from a misunderstanding of the economy, since it tends to explain the scarcity of certain goods in terms of their luxury status instead of the other way around.⁷⁴ Diamonds are not scarce because they are expensive, as some of the thinkers that we have discussed suggested, but expensive because they are scarce. Yet the ancient idea of a divine hand in supply and demand has been part of economic thought for centuries and

⁷² Ray, *The Wisdom of God Manifested in the Works of the Creation*, p. 72.

⁷³ Bernard Nieuwentyt, *Het regt gebruik der werelt beschouwingen* (1715), ch. 20 ‘Van het water’, § 89, p. 450: “Alleen, eer wy hier volkommen afscheiden, laat ons aan alle ongelukkige Philosophen voor het laatste nogh met ernst in opmerkinge geven; dat dit water, het welk soo veel en soo groote nuttigheden heeft, over al soo overvloedigh te vinden, en by yder, die het van noden heeft, meest op alle plaatsen voor niet te krygen is. Siet men hier geen goedheit van den Gever in?” (transl. from first English 1718-edition).

⁷⁴ Viner, *The Role of Providence in the Social Order*, p. 31.

for that reason cannot be ignored by historians of economics. As we have seen, towering figures like Pufendorf, Locke and Hutcheson expounded it without questioning the underlying worldview. As such the idea is a good example of the lasting theological influence in early-modern economic thought.

All the same, it is important to take notice of the specific way in which the idea was used in our period. In the first place, more or less for the first time it was employed in a typically economic context. Originating from philosophical and theological discussions, the alleged providential abundance of necessities was now used by economic thinkers to clarify their accounts of value and price. Pufendorf, for example, mentions it to explain that utility is not the primary factor in valuation, Hutcheson to explain that prices do not at all reflect the real use of things, and cost-of-production theorists like Pulteney and Harris to explain that goods only get value-in-exchange when their production involves labour. In the second place, the moralizing aspect that was still present in some ancient texts was almost completely abandoned. Perhaps with the exception of More, Pufendorf and Hutcheson, early-modern writers simply gratefully observed that God provided plenty of necessary goods and limited the amount of conveniences. From this they refused to conclude that luxury goods are to be dismissed. Whereas some of the classical philosophers and early Christian theologians believed that God deliberately made redundant goods inaccessible and difficult to obtain, most seventeenth- and eighteenth-century writers left this aspect unmentioned.

At the same time, the pagan idea once taken over by the Church Fathers was readopted in eighteenth-century natural theology. But also in the hands of the physico-theologians it underwent some striking changes. In some cases, such as the amount of food or the number of particles in the air, the providential idea was converted into the more general observation that the useful is abundant while the useless is scarce. The negative view of useless things is abandoned here too. The emphasis is on the benevolence of the Creator who has arranged things so that all creatures are cared for. Since natural theology was one of the more prolific genres of the eighteenth century, it is likely that the idea of divine abundance found its way to many other writers of the period. Some of them regarded it as a matter of intelligence. “If the extent of the human view could comprehend the whole frame of the universe”, Samuel Johnson tells the readers of *The Idler*, “I believe it would be found invariably true, that Providence has given in greatest plenty, which the condition of life makes of greatest use ... [to] increase real and rational felicity”.⁷⁵

⁷⁵ [Samuel Johnson], *The Idler*, no. 37 (Saturday, December 30, 1758), in *The Idler. In Two Volumes* (1761), vol. I, pp. 206-207 ('Iron and gold').

6

Self-interest: the invisible hand of God

6.1 Introduction

In the history of economic thought the pursuit of self-interest has long been viewed with strong suspicion.¹ The Greek-Roman philosophers, Christian Fathers and scholastic theologians obviously were not blind to the omnipresence of this human trait, but nevertheless deemed it unnatural and irrational. The highest good after which all human beings ought to strive was defined in non-material, external terms and economic activity in this respect only played a supportive role. Central to pre-modern economic life was the self-sufficient local community, which was vulnerable to greed, fraud and exploitation. Private economic interests were potentially dangerous as they could undermine the fragile stability of the local economy. Economic behaviour had to be aimed at the satisfaction of human needs, and any surplus was to be spent on noble ends like friendship, religious worship and charity. The deadly sin of avarice, an excessive desire to possess more than what is needed, would be a sign of moral degeneration and had to be tamed and suppressed at all cost. This was a duty first of all of the individual, who not for nothing had been crowned with reason to regulate his passions, and only secondarily of political and religious authorities. Economic self-interestedness, in short, was looked upon as problematic and was not associated with public benefits.

With the rise of mercantilism in the sixteenth century, which focused on the nation state rather than the local community and took a totally different stance towards the accumulation of wealth, things began to change. Long before the classical economists did so, the early mercantilist writers recognized the predominant role of self-interest and employed an embryonic economic man.² Detached as the new economic discourse was to become from the moral and theological framework in which the relationship between the individual and the community had long been discussed, it was simply assumed that most if not all economic behaviour is driven by the hope of private gain. As early as 1549, a namesake of Adam Smith wrote that “everie man naturally will folow that whearin he seeth most proffit”. Translating the Latin saying *honos alit artes* as “proffitt or ad-

¹ Newhauser, *The Early History of Greed*; Medema, *The Hesitant Hand*, ch. 1 ‘Adam Smith and his ancestors’. Some key texts, also from the early-modern period, are collected in Rogers, *Self-Interest*.

² Viner, *Studies in the Theory of International Trade*, pp. 92–93; Chalk, ‘Natural law and the rise of economic individualism in England’; Grampp, ‘The liberal elements in English mercantilism’, pp. 482 and 486; Appleby, *Economic Thought and Ideology in Seventeenth-Century England*, pp. 93–95, 115, 190–192; Sutherland, ‘The new economics of the Enlightenment’, p. 474.

vauncement norishethe euerie facultie", he added that the right way to deal with this motive in a commonwealth is not to constrain it by prohibitions and laws. As long as private interests were not prejudicial to those of others, they by definition were profitable to the commonwealth at large and their pursuit might be allowed. Men, the author moreover concluded, can be encouraged to do the right things if their labour and industry are steered "by allurement, and rewardes".³

However, the fact that the mercantilists took human self-interest for granted, and even based their policy proposals on it, is not to say that it could be left alone. The profit motive in the end not only was a driving force for economic progress but also formed a potential threat to the commonwealth. While some writers came near to advocating non-intervention in domestic affairs,⁴ there were serious worries as well about potential conflicts between private and public interests.⁵ Common wisdom held that, unless regulated from above, the interests of individuals might easily run counter to the interests of the nation as a whole. In the sixteenth century, a new spectre was born in the figure of the selfish merchant enriching himself at the expense of his own country, for instance by importing expensive luxury goods or dumping undervalued domestic products at foreign markets. Lacking the conception of a pre-established harmony of interests, the solution was sought in political control and intervention. The wise management of politicians, as Bernard Mandeville later called it, consisted in preventing excessive self-interest from ruining the nation by subjecting it to rigorous control, either through legal or economic rewards or punishments. Formulated positively, their challenge was to harness and guide private interests into socially beneficial directions.

In the course of the early-modern age the distrust of self-interest gradually disappeared, eventually resulting in the *laissez-faire* ideas of the Enlightenment.⁶ Whereas the existence of an artificial or spontaneous coincidence of interests had occasionally been assumed in specific economic debates before,⁷ the eighteenth century experienced a growing faith in the possibility of an overall harmony of interests. Among the variety of causes of this profound change, including not to forget the emergence of commercial society as such, was the 'discovery' of the public benefits of vices like covetousness, prodigality and luxury. In economic texts, the belief in the (unintended and unconscious) economic advantages of self-interest was frequently voiced from the 1690s onwards. In other discourses, ideas like these already existed for centuries. As early as the fifteenth century, some Italian humanists had argued that a non-excessive pursuit of gain by individual merchants could be seen as a blessing to republics like Florence, as they

³ W[illiam] S[mith], *A Discourse of the Common Weal of this Realm of England*, pp. 57-58 and 60.

⁴ Heckscher, 'Revisions in economic history. V. Mercantilism', pp. 52-54.

⁵ Robertson, *Aspects of the Rise of Economic Individualism*, ch. 3 'The Renaissance state'; Keohane, *Philosophy and the State in France*, ch. 5 'Public utility preferred to private: mercantilism and *raison d'etat*'; Wiles, 'The development of mercantilist economic thought', pp. 168-170.

⁶ Verburg, 'The rise of greed in early economic thought'.

⁷ Gunn, *Politics and the Public Interest in the Seventeenth Century*, ch. 5 'Economic argument: the public interest quantified'.

stimulated the economy and helped to satisfy local needs.⁸ It was only in the late-seventeenth and eighteenth century, however, that the public benefits of avarice and luxury were further analysed in economic debates.⁹ However reprehensible from other points of view, self-interested behaviour was increasingly thought to make a positive contribution to the general level of prosperity.

Intellectually, the gradual affirmation of self-interest in the West was a highly complex development, not only because the ancient and medieval heritage offered so little support, and therefore new justifications needed to be invented, but foremost because the economic debate was closely linked - at least terminologically - to discussions in theology, philosophy and ethics. First of all, the term 'self-interest' (*intérêt propre* or *particulier*; *Eigennutz*), coined in the period itself, did not have the narrow economic meaning it has today. Derived from the Latin *inter esse*, it carried with it a long history with substantial semantic shifts.¹⁰ Having originated in Roman Law and medieval legal discourse, in which it meant a (compensation for) loss and was used as a euphemism for usury, in the course of the fifteenth century the term 'interest' was dematerialized. It could now refer to any kind of advantage or utility in a political, moral and economic sense alike. Besides economic gain it covered such human aspirations as security, honour and glory. In the next century, the term entered the new discourse on statecraft. By contrasting it with the private advantage of citizens, a new level of analysis in terms of reason of state or princely interest was created.¹¹ In the writings of theologians and moralists, self-interest became identified with sinful egoism, an association that lasted for centuries.

Secondly, discussions about economic self-interest overlapped with the great controversy on the legitimacy of self-love and its role in self-preservation.¹² More or less equivalent to, but much more prevalent than 'self-interest', the term 'self-love' (*amour propre*; *Selbstliebe*) initially had a highly negative connotation. In Christian theology, and in the Augustinian tradition in particular, the self-centred passion of *amor privatus* or *proprius* had always been portrayed as the opposite of the pure love for God. Closely related to pride and covetousness, self-love was the root of all sin. Despite attempts by Renaissance writers to rehabilitate the term, the same pessimistic view prevailed in the post-medieval period. Love that was not aimed at God, or one's neighbour, could have nothing but negative consequences. It was only in the long eighteenth century that self-love acquired a more neutral meaning. Using a distinction first made by Augustine, some philosophers began to distinguish between a sinful self-love, close to selfishness, and an

⁸ McGovern, 'The rise of new economic attitudes'; Skinner, *The Foundation of Modern Political Thought*, vol. 1, *The Renaissance*, p. 78.

⁹ On the subject of luxury, which will be discussed in this chapter, see Berry, *The Idea of Luxury* and Hont, 'The early Enlightenment debate on commerce and luxury'.

¹⁰ Gerhardt, 'Interesse'; Hirschman, 'Interests', pp. 882-887 (also published as 'The concept of interest: from euphemism to tautology'); Heilbron, 'French moralists and the anthropology of the modern era'.

¹¹ Tuck, *Philosophy and Government 1572-1651*.

¹² See Fuchs, 'Amour-propre, amour de soi(-même)'; Mulsow, 'Selbsterhaltung'; Dierse, 'Selbstliebe'; and Knoche, '[Selbstliebe] II'; Fuchs, *Entfremdung und Narzissmus*.

innocent love of oneself (*amour de soi* or *soi-même*), stemming from a desire for self-preservation and happiness. Others simply accepted self-love as an innate trait common to all living beings, the effects of which could be studied ‘objectively’ like that of other God-given passions. Self-love here was one of the instruments of self-preservation.

Instead of reconstructing the whole debate on the passions and the interests, this chapter focuses on the contributions by some eighteenth-century economists as well as other thinkers of importance. More specifically, it deals with the question how theories of providence were used to legitimize the pursuit of self-love and self-interest.¹³ In France this was done by Pierre Boisguilbert and the Physiocrats, in Italy by Ferdinando Galiani and in Great Britain by Josiah Tucker. Their theories can be seen as anticipations of the “invisible hand” of Adam Smith which, as I will suggest in the final section (§ 6.5), has been rightly interpreted as a divine mechanism that establishes a harmony of interests in society. Before turning to these economists (in § 6.4), I discuss the views on the matter of the seventeenth-century French Jansenists and eighteenth-century British sentimentalists (§ 6.3). Besides having exercised a direct influence on the economic writers just mentioned, the two currents of thought helped to shape the economic thought of the period more generally. Especially the British sentimentalists can be ascribed an important role in the emergence of the *laissez-faire* ideas of the later classical school of economics. First of all, however, I sketch what may be called the ‘Hobbes-Mandeville challenge’ (§ 6.2). After all, it was to Hobbes and Mandeville and their disturbing ideas about self-interest that all writers discussed in this chapter directly or indirectly responded.

6.2 From war to market-friendship: the Hobbes-Mandeville challenge

As said, the question of self-interest in the early-modern period was not exclusively an economic one.¹⁴ Man’s desire for economic advantage was part of a whole range of passions and interests which were studied from different angles. Bringing along their own assumptions and vocabularies, moral philosophers, theologians and moralists all contributed to a wider debate on what it is that ultimately holds society together. Due to the widespread theological and political discord, traditional religious and moral-philosophical precepts to protect human society against harmful manifestations of self-love could no longer be relied upon. What was needed were new theories about man and his relationship to civil society. Following the Italian politician-philosopher Niccolò Machiavelli, who believed that a realistic conception of human nature is a more reliable foundation of statecraft than the idealistic ones proposed by the moralists, several writers in formulating them concentrated on man as he really is, driven by passions and interests. Although the theories of others like Samuel Pufendorf at times sounded equally

¹³ Insightful accounts that I relied on throughout this chapter, are Viner, ‘The invisible hand and economic man’, in *The Role of Providence in the Social Order*, pp. 55-85; Manenschijn, *Moraal en eigenbelang bij Thomas Hobbes en Adam Smith*; Verburg, *The Two Faces of Interest*, esp. pp. 18-37 and 97-135; and Perrot, ‘La main invisible et le Dieu caché’, in *Une histoire intellectuelle de l’économie politique*, pp. 333-354.

¹⁴ Force, *Self-Interest before Adam Smith*, ch. 4 ‘Passions, interests, and society’.

egoistic,¹⁵ it was Thomas Hobbes and Bernard Mandeville who were most maligned because of their dark image of man. More than anyone else they stimulated the debate on the passions and the interests, the former by fuelling it in the middle of the seventeenth century and the latter by reviving it at the turn of the next.

The views of these writers represented two different positions in the debate on how to deal with the destructive passions of man.¹⁶ Hobbes, first of all, favoured the most common solution in terms of repression or coercion. The task of public authorities would be to restrain by force the destructive passions of man, including his love of gain. Mandeville rather preferred a harnessing approach, in which political power is employed to transform or channel disruptive passions into socially beneficial directions. A third position, first 'discovered' in the seventeenth century, was based on the idea of counter-valliance. According to this principle, stronger passions could be played off against weaker ones or even against each other. Interestingly, economic passions like greed, avarice and love of lucre were counted among man's dominant passions that could be used to check less innocuous ones like ambition or lust for power. Economic self-interestedness in this view should not be suppressed but encouraged since it is stronger than other human motivations forming a greater threat to the stability of society. This idea, the first rudiments of which can be found in Hobbes and Mandeville, later in the economic discourse was translated into the belief that excessive self-interest could be neutralized in market situations.

Thomas Hobbes

First of all a political (and natural) philosopher, Hobbes was criticized not so much for his economic views, which are also sufficiently present in his work,¹⁷ but for his political theory and the anthropology that underlies it.¹⁸ His *Leviathan* (1651), as well as his lesser known *Elementorum philosophiae ... de cive* (1642), is a provocative plea for absolute monarchy, necessary to keep in check the destructive passions of the subjects. The English writer explicitly rejected the Aristotelian-Grotian idea of man as a sociable *zoon politikon*. Rather than being born fit for society and concerned with the welfare of his fellows, man is essentially egoistic and selfish. As Hobbes explained in *De Cive*, we do not "by nature seek society for its own sake, but that we may receive some honour or profit from it. ... For if they meet for traffique, it's plaine every man regards not his fellow, but his businesse; if to discharge some office, a certain market-friendship is begotten, which

¹⁵ Saether, 'Self-interest as an acceptable mode of human behavior'. On Pufendorf's Epicurean stance (as Hutcheson saw it) in reconciling Grotius and Hobbes, see Hont, 'The language of sociability and commerce'.

¹⁶ Hirschman, *The Passions and the Interests*; Suttle, 'The passion of self-interest'.

¹⁷ Bonar, *Philosophy and Political Economy in Some of Their Historical Relations*, pp. 78-86; Levy, 'Economic views of Thomas Hobbes'; Hont, *Jealousy of Trade*, pp. 17-22 and 41-46.

¹⁸ The secondary literature on Hobbes's moral and political philosophy alone is vast. For an overview of recent books and articles, see the bibliography provided in Lloyd & Sreedhar, 'Hobbes's moral and political philosophy'. A clear introduction to Hobbes's philosophy is Tuck's *Hobbes*.

hath more of jealousie in it then true love".¹⁹ Now such a relatively peaceful market-friendship is only possible within civil society. Starting from an individualistic perspective, the key question in Hobbes's political writings is precisely how societies can be formed and held together while any innate, natural sociability is lacking.

According to Hobbes, human life is in a perpetual motion, caused either by desire or aversion, of the atoms that constitute us. In the state of nature (i.e. in the absence of laws and government) people are wholly driven by self-interested passions, appetites and desires.²⁰ Among the variety of passions, catalogued in chapter six of *Leviathan*, are such typical economic ones as covetousness, the desire of riches, and luxury. Since all people are equally endowed with a constant desire for happiness and ease, the result is a restless pursuit of gain, power and glory. The inevitable outcome of this is contention, enmity and eventually a war of everyone against everyone. Fortunately, in obedience to the first law of nature (*lex naturae*) that prescribes self-preservation, men's voice of reason urges them to renounce their natural right (*ius naturale*) to everything and to seek peace. By subjecting themselves to the power of a sovereign by means of a social contract, a commonwealth of people is formed in which peaceful coexistence is possible. The only way out of conflict and war, in other words, is the subjection to an authoritative ruler responsible for devising and enforcing laws. His sovereignty is necessarily absolute, undivided and unlimited since otherwise conflicts of interests may easily arise, resulting in discord and civil war.

Though Hobbes did not phrase his account of the emergence of civil society in these terms, at crucial points in his theory of society economic interests play a role. Firstly, in the state of nature the desire for gain is one of the strongest passions. Seeing that bodily and intellectual differences between people are negligible, competition for scarce means (material and psychological alike) is inevitable and one of the causes of quarrel and war. "Competition", Hobbes writes, "maketh men invade for gain". Secondly, the desire for gain is a major reason for them to enter into a social contract. "The passions that encline men to peace" are not only fear of death but also the "desire of such things as are necessary to commodious living; and a hope by their industry to obtain them". The destructive war of everyone against everyone leaves no room for industry, culture of the earth, navigation and importation of commodities.²¹ The driving force for people to subject to a ruler therefore is self-interest, also in an economic sense. Thirdly, once civil society has been established, the authority and power of government are partly aimed at serving the economic interests of individuals. It is up to the monarch to secure

¹⁹ [Thomas Hobbes], *Elementorum philosophiae sectio tertia de cive* (1642), ch. 1, § 2, p. 3: "Non socios igitur, sed ab illis honore vel commodo affici naturâ quærimus; hæc primariò, illos secundariò appetimus. Quo autem consilio homines congregantur, ex iis cognoscitur quæ faciunt congregati. Si coëant enim commercij causâ, vñusquisque non socium, sed rem suam colit; si officij causâ, nascitur forensis quædam amicitia, plus habens mutui metûs quam amoris" (transl. from English 1651-edition).

²⁰ For a systematic account of Hobbes's anthropology, see Goldsmith, *Hobbes's Science of Politics*, ch. 3 'Human nature'.

²¹ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan, Or The Matter, Forme, & Power of a Common-Wealth Ecclesiastical and Civill* (1651), prt. I, ch. xiii, pp. 61-63.

private property and to make sure that people can live a commodious life. Each individual, in turn, has a selfish interest in maintaining this political order. For within civil society, the desire for gain and the resulting competition for resources continue unabatedly.²²

The publication of *Leviathan* at the end of the English Civil War gave rise to a wave of criticism. The author was accused of atheism, and 'Hobbism' became a pejorative catchword for everything that ran counter to good morals and true religion. Hobbes's views were objectionable to many of his contemporaries, but for a variety of reasons. Next to his advocacy of an all-powerful monarchy on the basis of a social contract rather than divine right, what offended most of them was the Hobbesian view of human nature. His enemies called it 'Epicurean', even though Hobbes parted company with Epicurus in denying the existence of a *summum bonum*. Hobbes, it was thought, had undermined human morality as the foundation of civil society by depicting man as a thoroughly selfish being, both in his natural state and within the borders of civil society. The first part of his book, entitled 'Of man', indeed contains lengthy discussions of the restless and destructive passions of the individual, all of which are narrowly self-centred. Justice and morality according to the Englishman are only artificial constructs. Outside the sphere of state power and the social contract there are no laws and thus no criteria of right and wrong. The only reason for man to lay down his right to everything is the law of nature forbidding him to endanger his life. Self-interest in Hobbes is everywhere.²³

Bernard Mandeville

His thoroughly self-central interpretation of human nature was revived by the Dutch-born satirist Mandeville.²⁴ He became infamous for his poem 'The grumbling hive' (1705), albeit only after republishing it with additional remarks and essays. It tells of a bee hive, representative of the English society of his days, which initially prospers thanks to the vicious behaviour of the bees but eventually, after honesty and virtue are being introduced, falls into economic recession. The moral of the story provided by the author himself reads as follows: "Then leave complaints: fools only strive / to make a great and honest hive. / T' enjoy the world's conveniences, / be fam'd in war, yet live in ease, / without great vices, is a vain / *eutopia* seated in the brain. / Fraud, luxury and pride must live, / while we the benefits receive".²⁵ What Mandeville suggested in a provocative way is that commercial societies cannot flourish without vices, which manifest themselves openly or in disguise. Greed, prodigality and fraud may be objectionable, butulti-

²² Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism* famously portrayed Hobbes's model of society as "possessive market society".

²³ Myers, *The Soul of Modern Economic Man*, ch. 3 'Thomas Hobbes. Self-interest and the public destruction'.

²⁴ The best account of Mandeville's thought available is Hundert, *The Enlightenment's Fable*.

²⁵ [Bernard Mandeville], *The Fable of the Bees: or, Private Vices, Publick Benefits* (1732), p. 23. The *Fable* was first published in 1714, this sixth edition was the last authorized edition that appeared in Mandeville's lifetime.

mately (and often unintendedly) provide for employment, industry and wealth. Against those who believed that economic success depended on virtues like frugality, Mandeville argued for a close tie between individual vices and the public economic good. “Private vices, publick benefits”, the subtitle of the *Fable of the Bees* in which the poem was reprinted, perfectly summarizes this paradox.

While certain vices seem to have a natural tendency to produce economic benefits, Mandeville was no advocate of a complete *laissez faire* approach within the domestic economy.²⁶ As he repeatedly states, for example in the accompanying essay on the nature of society and the vindication of the book, what the subtitle of the *Fable* is meant to say is that “private vices by the dextrous management of a skilful politician may be turn’d into publick benefits”.²⁷ The greatest challenge of politicians is to curb the passions of the individual members of society. Selfish and unsocial as they are, people need to be merged into a single political body. Instead of repressing them, their passions must be made subservient to the happiness of the public. That in Mandeville’s view vices are inseparable from flourishing societies is not to say that they should be unreservedly encouraged. It is crucial to distinguish between harmful and useful vices, to promote only the latter, and to curb them once they have grown into crimes. Another task of statesmen is to make men believe that it is sometimes in their own interest to promote the good of others. True virtue, Mandeville argues, in a corrupted world is virtually impossible since it requires disinterestedness and self-denial. Therefore an artificial distinction between virtue and vice had to be ‘invented’ first. Playing on human emotions like vanity, pride and shame based on this distinction, politicians can manipulate individuals to serve the common good.

Like Machiavelli, Hobbes and Spinoza before him, Mandeville sought to found his theory of society on a realistic view of human nature. Unlike writers who teach men what they should be, Mandeville writes, “I believe man to be a compound of various passions, that all of them, as they are provoked and come uppermost, govern him by turns, whether he will or not”.²⁸ As the poem intended to show, the same passions form the foundation of a flourishing society. All passions and wants ultimately spring from self-love, an instinct given by Nature for man’s self-preservation. According to Mandeville, human beings are thoroughly selfish. Consistent with the “whole design of life”, his Epicurean observation is that all humans strive after happiness and pleasure. Man’s self-centredness is so profound that seemingly sympathetic and altruistic deeds are basically manifestations of self-love, an idea suggested long before by the French moralists.²⁹ Also the supposed social characteristics of man, like the love of company and aversion to soli-

²⁶ Note that opinions vary widely on this point, especially because insufficient distinction is made between Mandeville’s views on domestic and foreign policy. Here I follow Viner, ‘Introduction’, in Mandeville, *A Letter to Dion* (1732), pp. 11ff and Rashid, ‘Mandeville’s Fable’. Goldsmith, *Private Vices, Public Benefits*, pp. 123ff argues that, in a strict sense, Mandeville was not an “economic theorist” with an “economic philosophy” at all.

²⁷ Mandeville, *The Fable of the Bees*, p. 428, cf. p. 476.

²⁸ Mandeville, *The Fable of the Bees*, p. 25.

²⁹ On Mandeville’s indebtedness to the French Augustinian tradition, see Horne, *The Social Thought of Bernard Mandeville*, ch. 2 ‘Mandeville and the French moral tradition’.

tude, which are supposed to distinguish him from lower animals, are but manifestations of self-love in disguise. It is true, Mandeville grants, that there is a “desire which he has naturally after company; but he has it for his own sake, in hopes of being the better for it; and he would never wish for, either company or any thing else, but for some advantage”.³⁰

Surprising, therefore, is Mandeville’s lip service to the view that man is made for society. He openly criticises Hobbes for suggesting that man is rather born unfit for society. Man’s capability to think, reflect and speak as well as the usefulness of his hands and fingers sufficiently show that he is a social being. But Lord Shaftesbury’s idea of an innate propensity for sociability (to be discussed below) is also mistaken. It is true that among humans there is such a thing as a desire for company, but this does not proceed from a fondness of their own species. What makes them long after commerce with others is their desire for ease, security and personal improvement. Man stands in need of society because without it he would never be able satisfy his manifold desires. Society, in other words, is a source of advantage, and love of society a form of intelligent self-love. All the same, Mandeville paradoxically maintains that “Nature had design’d man for society”.³¹ The reason is that thanks to their constitution human beings are governable. Their fear of death and punishment as well as their understanding of the advantages of servitude ensure that large groups can be “joyn’d together, and artfully manag’d”. Although these capacities of man are “evidently derived from God, who made him”,³² government is a work of art rather than a work of nature. Without the human wisdom of rulers, civil societies will fall apart.

However impious his ideas sounded to his contemporaries, Mandeville himself explicitly denied that religion was anywhere ridiculed in the *Fable*. Whether or not out of prudence, in part II of the *Fable* the author went as far as to claim that the first book was designed for “modern deists”, people who reject a divine revelation but nevertheless believe in the existence of God and the reality of divine providence.³³ It seems that Mandeville counted himself among them, since in both parts he sticks to the idea of general providence.³⁴ Cleomenes, Mandeville’s spokesman in part II, refuses to speak about miraculous events in nature and history and prefers the term “Providence, or the all-governing Wisdom of God”. The nature of inanimate and animate things, including their properties and instincts, he argues, are the product of this Wisdom. A few pages later a definition of providence (this, at least, is how Mandeville refers to the passage in the index of the book) is provided. Providence stands for the “unalterable Wisdom of the Supreme Being, in the harmonious disposition of the universe; the fountain of that in-

³⁰ [Bernard Mandeville], *The Fable of the Bees. Part II* (1729), p. 203.

³¹ Mandeville, *The Fable of the Bees. Part II*, p. 205.

³² Mandeville, *The Fable of the Bees. Part II*, p. 206.

³³ Mandeville, *The Fable of the Bees. Part II*, pp. 98-99, cf. 377. In *Free Thoughts on Religion, the Church, and National Happiness* (1720), p. 3, Mandeville defined a deist as someone “who believes, in the common acceptation, that there is a God, and that the world is rul’d by Providence, but has no faith in any thing reveal’d to us”.

³⁴ Cf. Gunn, ‘Mandeville and Wither’.

comprehensible chain of causes, on which all events have their undoubted dependence".³⁵ A more deistic definition is hardly thinkable. Throughout the dialogues, Mandeville's "friend" Cleomenes gives several examples of God's remarkable wisdom observable in order of things. In each of these cases providence works through natural causes, such as the instincts of animals and the constitution of man, not through miraculous interventions.

Mandeville's allusions to providentialism (which, of course, say nothing about his true beliefs) are important because they shed a new light on his theory of society. If Nature has endowed man with a variety of instincts and inclinations serviceable to his self-preservation and this fits in with the divine government of the world, then the same arguably applies to his self-love and selfishness. That in some cases private vices have public benefits can therefore be understood as a providential mechanism. In several places, Mandeville indeed qualifies his paradoxes by saying that they only apply to "meer man, in the state of nature and ignorance of the true Deity".³⁶ This Augustinian proviso, that corrupted man is incapable of being virtuous unless regenerated by the grace of God, is not insignificant. As we will see later on in this chapter, the same theological assumption was earlier used by the French Jansenists in their apology of self-love.³⁷ Whether Mandeville too conceived of commercial society as a divine remedy for a fallen world is unclear. Something like this at least is suggested in his remark that "nothing can render the unsearchable depth of the Divine Wisdom more conspicuous, than that man, whom Providence had designed for society, should ... by his own frailties and imperfections be led into the road to temporal happiness".³⁸ Mandeville's theological views however were highly ambivalent.³⁹

6.3 Enlightened self-love: theological and philosophical counterattacks

The dismal views of Hobbes (the 'Monster of Malmesbury') and Mandeville ('Man-Devil') caused great intellectual commotion.⁴⁰ Numerous theologians, moral philosophers and political theorists of all sorts launched attacks on almost every aspect of their works. Both authors were so controversial that much of the moral and political philosophy of the period, certainly in the English speaking world, can be understood as an attempt to find a

³⁵ Mandeville, *The Fable of the Bees. Part II*, pp. 272-275.

³⁶ Mandeville, *The Fable of the Bees* (Part I), p. 26, cf. 166.

³⁷ Waterman, 'Theology and the rise of political economy in Britain in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries', pp. 101-102 argues that what Mandeville presents in his *Fable* is a "reduction ad absurdum of the Augustinian theodicy" employed by the Jansenist theologians. Hundert, *The Enlightenment's Fable*, p. 51, however, holds that Mandeville is "parodying" seventeenth-century theodicies in the style of Bayle.

³⁸ Mandeville, *The Fable of the Bees* (Part I), pp. 43-44.

³⁹ Monro, *The Ambivalence of Bernard Mandeville*, ch. 6 'The theologian'.

⁴⁰ The contemporary reaction in England to Hobbes is discussed in Mintz, *The Hunting of Leviathan* and Parkin, *Taming the Leviathan*. Early responses to the *Fable of the Bees* are reprinted in Stafford, *Private Vices, Publick Benefits?*.

persuasive answer to the challenge that they posed.⁴¹ Everyone writing on the nature of man and his relationship to society basically was expected to take a stance on what Hobbes and Mandeville had dared to say on the matter. Most of them rejected the outrageous ideas of the two English writers altogether. Others adopted their realistic view of human nature but supplemented it with man's more noble characteristics. The latter strategy was adopted by neo-Stoic writers, who argued that man is endowed with both self-interested passions and social passions which should and can be balanced through the practice of virtue. It was at odds with the neo-Augustinian and neo-Epicurean position which both stressed the fundamental selfishness of man, although on totally different grounds, the first by teaching original sin, the second by assuming that all human actions seek to maximize pleasure.

During the seventeenth and eighteenth century, the debate on the passions and the interest was deeply marked by the world views of these three groups.⁴² Of the currents of thought that were directly engaged with Hobbes and Mandeville, including the Cambridge Platonists and theological utilitarians, the French Jansenists and British sentimentalists from our point of view were particularly interesting. While the first were neo-Augustinians, stressing man's fallen state, the second were followers of Lord Shaftesbury who was deeply influenced by Stoic philosophy and had a highly optimistic view of man.⁴³ Both 'schools' not only had great intellectual appeal among contemporaries but were also of demonstrable importance to the emerging science of economics. For besides having influenced some important eighteenth-century writers on economics, respectively in France and Great Britain they created an intellectual climate conducive to the later *laissez-faire* and free trade views.⁴⁴

French Jansenism

Jansenism was a seventeenth-century Catholic movement, inspired by the Flemish theologian Cornelius Jansen who in his *Augustinus sev doctrina sancti Augstini de humanae naturae sanitate, ægritudine, medicina aduersus Pelagianos & Massilienses* (1640) had defended and systematized the Church Father's views on sin and grace. With Calvinism, which strongly relied on Augustine too, it shared such theological doctrines as divine

⁴¹ Perlman & McCann, *The Pillars of Economic Understanding*, ch. 2 'The British patristic legacy. Understanding the Hobbes challenge'.

⁴² The early-modern clash between the Epicurean-Augustinian and Stoic tradition is central to Force, *Self-Interest before Adam Smith*, a book that shows how much the later economic science was preceded by philosophical debates about self-love and self-interest. See also Leddy & Lifschitz, *Epicurus in the Enlightenment* and Brooke, *Philosophic Pride*.

⁴³ Bernstein, 'Shaftesbury's optimism and eighteenth-century social thought'.

⁴⁴ This point has been repeatedly emphasized by Jacob Viner, for example in his *Studies in the Theory of International Trade*, p. 91 and 'The intellectual history of laissez faire', p. 58. See also Myers, 'Philosophical anticipations of laissez-faire', p. 163 and his *The Soul of Modern Economic Man*; Teichgraeber III, 'Free Trade' and Moral Philosophy; Rashid, 'Lord Townsend and the influence of moral philosophy on laissez faire'. Still valuable is Hasbach, *Die allgemeinen philosophischen Grundlagen der von François Quesnay und Adam Smith begründeten politischen Ökonomie*.

predestination, irresistible grace and man's unfree will. Against the Jesuits, with whom they were engaged in a fierce controversy, the Jansenists pessimistically stressed the deep damage caused by the fall of man to human nature and morality. Without God's special grace, man would be wholly ruled by concupiscence, only capable of doing evil. In addition, they adhered to a typical moral rigorism. Virtue, defined as charitable behaviour out of pure love of God, was clearly distinguished from vice, and any neutral area in between was denied. All that was not virtue, in short, was considered vice. Two Jansenist writers who applied these theological views to typically economic issues were Pierre Nicole and Jean Domat.⁴⁵ They clearly had an influence on Mandeville, whose view of man shows signs of neo-Augustinian theology, and Boisguilbert, a French political economist to be discussed below.

Of the two, the more important writer in our story was the moralist Nicole.⁴⁶ His *Essais de morale*, first published in the 1670s, were immensely popular and won a wide circulation. English translations appeared from 1678 onwards and none other than John Locke translated several of them for the Countess of Shaftesbury. The *Essais* deal with a variety of moral questions, such as the obedience to God, the duties of man and the education of the prince, but two of them were of particular relevance to the debate on (economic) self-interest: 'De la grandeur' and 'De la charité & de l'amour propre'. They show the influence of Blaise Pascal, the most famous of the Jansenists, and interestingly also of Hobbes. It turns out that Nicole shared some of Hobbes's views, including some basic elements of his theory of human nature.⁴⁷ Man in his fallen and corrupted state, Nicole argues, is full of *amour propre* and highly self-centred. Man only loves himself, loves himself without limits and beyond measure, and cannot endure the same disposition in others. As in Hobbes, the pursuit of riches, pleasure and the fulfilment of desire inevitably results in violence. According to Nicole, "if he who hath said, that men are born in a state and condition of war, and that each man is naturally an enemy to all other men" meant this in a descriptive sense without approving it, "he would have said a thing as conform to truth and experience".⁴⁸

In Nicole's diagnosis, self-love is not merely a cause of war of everyone against everyone - it is also an incentive to unite oneself with others. It is self-love that makes man realize that self-preservation and an easy and convenient life are only guaranteed in civil society, the laws of which form a check upon excessive selfishness and violence. The "first tye of civil society, and the first check of self-love" indeed is the fear of death. Civil society is established because people fear the violence of others. At the same time, it reintroduces another kind of fear by enforcing observance of its laws through public

⁴⁵ Viner, 'Secularizing tendencies in Catholic social thought from the Renaissance to the Jansenist-Jesuit controversy'; Keohane, *Philosophy and the State in France*, pp. 293-306.

⁴⁶ Keohane, 'Non-conformist absolutism in Louis XIV's France'; Van Kley, 'Pierre Nicole, Jansenism, and the morality of enlightened self-interest', pp. 69-85.

⁴⁷ For a comparison of the two, see Hont, *Jealousy of Trade*, pp. 47-51.

⁴⁸ [Pierre Nicole], 'De la charité & de l'amour propre', in *Essais de morale*, vol. III (1675), pp. 155-156: "si celuy qui a dit qu'ils naissent dans un état de guerre, & que chaque homme est naturellement ennemi de tous les autres hommes ... il auroit dit une chose aussi conforme à la vérité & à l'expérience" (transl. from first English 1684-edition).

punishments. A third tie and check upon self-love, which I mention first, is the desire to be loved and esteemed. Springing from self-love, this desire partly occurs because people are dependent on the help and services of others. Even more important to the subject of this chapter is the second check upon self-love: economic interest (*intérêt*). Being excluded from open violence, Nicole argues, men start to seek other ways to satisfy their material needs. One thing that they discover is that their self-love is best served by satisfying the self-love of those whom they stand in need of. This idea, that one gives in order to receive, according to the Frenchman is the “source and foundation of all commerce practice amongst men and which is varied a thousand ways”.⁴⁹ The exchange of labour, merchandise and services basically takes over the place of force and tyranny.

The threefold voluntary transformation of self-love in society is designated “enlightened self-love” (*amour propre éclairé*), a term probably coined by Nicole himself. The suppression and concealment rather than Christian annihilation of self-love is precisely what makes for human civility. Enlightened self-love, or “self-love more intelligent” (*amour propre plus intelligent*), as he calls it elsewhere in the essay, comes down to the knowledge of one’s true interests. It is the recognition that self-love is best served within civil society and with the self-interested help of others. Though clearly admiring this remedy for man’s corrupted nature, Nicole nonetheless denounces man’s self-love in the most vivid terms. To him as to the other Jansenists, there clearly is nothing more opposed to charity, i.e. the love of God and one’s neighbour, than that. All the same, the central point of the essay on charity and self-love is that despite their opposite motivations these forces have similar effects. Nothing resembles the effects of charity better, Nicole somewhat unexpectedly claims, than self-love. The latter imitates the former so perfectly that it is sometimes impossible to distinguish them. That self-love can have the love for others as a secondary effect is most evident in economic exchange: “by the means and help of this commerce, all necessaries for this life are in some sort supplied without intermixing charity with it”.⁵⁰

In his essay on grandeur, of which the first part was translated separately as *The Grounds of Sovereignty and Greatness* (1675), Nicole discusses the relationship between self-love, charity and commerce in more detail. After the Fall, we are told, the manifold wants of man were no longer satisfied by charity but by concupiscence. As the essay attempts to develop in remarkable detail, we “cannot enough admire” the noble means that are used by this form of self-love. Albeit unintentionally, concupiscence is the reason that travellers are being offered services and lodgings along the road, that people build and furnish complete houses for others, and that manufactures, drugs and curiosities are being imported from faraway countries. For an ordinary gentleman, it is as if a million men in the kingdom are working for him. All this, Nicole adds, concupiscence does cheerfully and without complaining. Its great benefits are not without dangers, though. “As soon as it’s left to it self, it flies out and keeps within no bounds. Instead of being

⁴⁹ Nicole, *Essais de morale*, vol. III, p. 158: “C'est la source & le fondement de tout le commerce qui se pratique entre les hommes”.

⁵⁰ Nicole, *Essais de morale*, vol. III, p. 159: “par le moyen de ce commerce tous les besoins de la vie sont en quelque sorte remplis, sans que la charité s'en mesle”.

beneficial to human society, it utterly destroys it. There is no excess it will not run into, if not held back".⁵¹ Fortunately, there is such a thing as the art of polity which may use the fear of punishment to keep concupiscence within bounds and make it serviceable to supplying the necessities of life.

An important difference between Hobbes's account of the emergence of civil society and that of Nicole is that the latter explicitly understood it as a fruit of general providence for a sinful world. Even though monarchy and other forms of government originally spring from the decision and consent of people, rulers derive their authority from God alone. Only God Almighty communicates His ruling power to the king and gives him power to punish those people who violate the laws of nature and society. In spite of the majority of wicked people inhabiting civil society, Nicole even calls rulers "the ministers God makes use of to procure men the greatest and most essential goods this world has. ... We reap no advantages by commerce, receive no profit from the industry of men, or from human society, but by the means of public discipline".⁵² Whenever the self-love of men takes destructive forms, rulers can rely on the "admirable invention" of policy to curb it. According to Nicole, the great benefits from commerce and concupiscence alike are derived from the hands of God, mediated by the intervention of well-ordered governments.

Nicole's conception of civil society and government as God-given remedies for the evil of man was adopted by another Jansenist and friend of Pascal, the jurist Domat. One of the chapters of his influential treatise on civil law precisely addresses "the state of society after the Fall of man, and how God makes it subsist". Man, according to Domat, substituted self-love for mutual love, which originally united men in their pursuit of the common good. Since self-love undermines the foundation of society, the question arises why this "poison" or "universal plague" does not destroy it. As Domat argues, we owe the preservation of society to God. The four natural causes He uses to this end are: the spirit of true religion, the "secret government of God over society in the whole universe", the God-given authority of sovereign powers, and the innate light of reason. The second of these foundations of society is nothing else than God's general providence over mankind. It is by His almighty power and infinite wisdom that God "divides the earth among men, and that he distinguishes nations by that diversity of empires, kingdoms, repubicks, and other states; that he regulates the bounds and duration of them ... and that amidst all these changes he forms and maintains the civil society in every state".⁵³ A fifth, non-natural cause used by the Almighty to prevent the ruin of society is self-love.

⁵¹ [Pierre Nicole], 'De la grandeur', in *Essais de morale*, vol. II (1675), p. 207: "Car si on la laisse à elle même, elle n'a ny bornes, by mesures. Au lieu de servir à la société humaine elle la détruit. Il n'y a point d'excès dont elle ne soit capable lors qu'elle n'a point de liens" (transl. from first English 1680-edition).

⁵² Nicole, *Essais de morale*, vol. II, p. 204: "les ministres dont Dieu se sert pour procurer aux hommes le plus grands & les plus essentiels des biens qui soient dans le monde. ... on ne reçoit les avantages du commerce; on ne tire des services de l'industrie des autres hominnes & de la société humaine, que par le moyen de l'ordre politique".

⁵³ [Jean Domat], *Les loix civiles dans leur ordre naturel* (1695), bk. I, ch. ix, § 6, p. 42, "partage la terre aux hommes, & qu'il distingue les nations, par cette diversité d'empires, de royaumes, de

In Domat's eyes, God only permitted evil to happen in the world because He foresaw it could be used to draw a greater good out of it. So too in the case of self-love. While nothing is more opposed to mutual love which naturally unites men, God employs self-love as a means to preserve society in a sinful world. The Fall of man did not free man from his wants but rather multiplied them and thus augmented his dependence on others. Unable to procure all necessities and conveniences of life through labour himself, man came to rely on the "ties" of intercourse, exchange and commerce. At the same time, he discovered ways to accommodate, hide and disguise his self-love in order to reap a greater advantage from others. Self-love in its accommodated disguise is so refined that is often hard to distinguish it from genuine virtue. "We see then in self-love", Domat concludes, "that this principle of all the evils is, in the present state of society, a cause from whence it derives an infinite number of good effects ... And thus we may consider this venom of society, as a remedy which God makes use of for supporting it; seeing that although it produces in those person whom it animates, only corrupted fruits, yet it imparts all these advantages to society".⁵⁴

To conclude, the importance of Nicole's and Domat's contribution to the debate on self-interest cannot be overstated.⁵⁵ Writing decades before Mandeville, they in fact gave it a whole new twist by emphasizing the positive side-effects of enlightened self-love in the context of modern commercial society. The view that outward virtuous behaviour in society often is egoism in disguise had been expressed by French writers before,⁵⁶ but unprecedented was their apology of self-love based on Augustinian anthropology. It should once more be stressed that Nicole and Domat did not in any way regard self-love as acceptable or pleasing to God. They only admired the paradoxical way in which this evil is used by the Almighty to preserve the order of society. Even in the absence of charity, civil society can be held together and flourish thanks to civilized forms of self-love among its members. The Jansenists meanwhile favoured a strong political power. Self-love in commercial society may have a self-regulating tendency since it is held in check by economic and other interests, but still cannot be left to itself. Due to its potentially destructive forces, which manifest itself most clearly outside civil society, self-love only

republiques, & d'autres etats: qu'il en règle & l'étendue & la durée ... parmi tous ces changements, il forme & soutient la société civile dans chaque etat" (transl. from first English 1722-edition).

⁵⁴ Domat, *Les loix civiles dans leur ordre naturel*, bk. I, ch. ix, § 3, p. 40: "On voit donc dans l'amour propre, que ce principe de tous les maux est dans l'état présent de la société une cause d'où elle tire une infinité de bons effets, qui de leur nature étant de vrais biens, devraient avoir un meilleur principe. Et qu'ainsi on peut regarder ce venin de la société, comme un remède dont Dieu s'est servi pour la soutenir ; puis qu'encore qu'il ne produise en ceux qu'il anime que des fruits corrompus, il donne à la société tous ces avantages".

⁵⁵ On the "turning point" caused by Nicole, see Heilbron, 'French moralists and the anthropology of the modern era', 91-97.

⁵⁶ On this French tradition of thought, before and after Nicole and Domat, see Keohane, *Philosophy and the State in France*, pp. 111-113 (Montaigne), 162-165 (Hotman, Monchrétien), 286-311 (Silhon, La Rochefoucauld, Nicole, Domat, La Bruyère, Malebranche, Abbadie). Cf. Krailsheimer, *Studies in Self-Interest* and Levi, *French Moralists*.

yields its beneficial social consequences if it is kept within limits and boundaries by a higher authority.

British sentimentalism

Much more antagonistic to Hobbes, and in their case also to Mandeville, were the British sentimentalists. Inspired by Richard Cumberland, in whose book on natural law the “Hobbesian philosophical elements, together with the moral and civil ones, [were] considered & refuted”,⁵⁷ this group of writers defended a Stoic-Christian view of human nature in which the possibility of sincere virtue was, again, rehabilitated. In contrast to other British moralists who stressed the role of man’s intellect in questions of good and evil, they did so by assuming an innate capacity for morality. The ‘school’ of sentimentalism (also known as moral sense theory or aesthetic intuitionism) was founded by Anthony Ashley Cooper, the third Earl of Shaftesbury, of whom Mandeville wrote “that two systems cannot be more opposite than his Lordship’s and mine”, and included notable followers like Francis Hutcheson and Bishop Joseph Butler. The first initially sought to explain and defend the principles of Shaftesbury against Mandeville, the last mainly attacked Hobbes while correcting some deficiencies in the work of Lord Shaftesbury. David Hume and Adam Smith belonged to the same tradition, but will not be discussed here as they placed different emphases and in their objectives were further removed from the Hobbes-Mandeville challenge.

A feature shared by all sentimentalists was an emphatic rejection of the “selfish hypothesis”, as Hume called it.⁵⁸ According to this hypothesis, which they associated with Epicurus and modern Epicureans like Hobbes, La Rochefoucauld and Mandeville, all human behaviour in the end is motivated by self-love, even to such an extent that seemingly disinterested principles of action can be reduced to interested ones, making life a continuous pursuit of self-interest. These claims were clearly unacceptable to the sentimentalists who, inspired by classical Stoicism, optimistically stressed the existence of irreducible virtue and disinterestedness. Realists that they were, the objection raised by Shaftesbury and his followers was not that human beings are free from self-love. On the contrary, they believed that the concern for self-interest is a genuine human characteristic which in human affairs can hardly be overestimated. Nor was there any intention to condemn it, since without a concern for one’s private interest man would fail in his Stoic duty of self-preservation. “We know”, as Shaftesbury summarized the matter, “that every creature has a private good and interest of his own, which nature has compell’d him to seek, by all the advantages afforded him, within the compass of his make”.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Richard Cumberland, *De legibus naturæ* (1672), title page: “elementa philosophiae Hobbianæ, cum moralis tum civilis, considerantur & refuntatur”. Cumberland’s views on self-love are discussed in Schneewind, *The Invention of Autonomy*, ch. 6, esp. pp. 107-109 (‘From self-love to benevolence’).

⁵⁸ Maurer, ‘Self-interest and sociability’.

⁵⁹ [Anthony Ashley Cooper, Earl of Shaftesbury], *An Inquiry concerning Virtue, or Merit* (1699), in *Characteristicks of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times* (1711), vol. II, p. 15.

Self-interest is not man's only principle of action, though. An important, if not the most fundamental idea for the sentimentalists is that the human mental constitution is much richer. Man is thought of as a compound of affections, appetites, desires, passions and sentiments, which are either of a private or public, interested or disinterested, reflective or non-reflective kind. The detailed accounts of Shaftesbury, Hutcheson and Butler of the "inward frame" of man and the subtle differences between them need not be provided here.⁶⁰ It suffices to observe that they believed that not all human passions and affections are self-interested. According to the "common saying", Shaftesbury writes, "interest governs the world. But, I believe, whoever looks narrowly into the affairs of it, will find, that passion, humour, caprice, zeal, faction, and a thousand other springs, which are counter to self-interest, have as considerable a part in the movement of this machine".⁶¹ Shaftesbury himself next to "self-affections" distinguished several "natural affections, which lead to the good of the publick". Hutcheson, in turn, supplemented man's self-love with a "love of benevolence" of which already "the very name excludes self-interest". Also Butler recognized a "natural principle of benevolence ... which is in some degree to society, what self-love is to the individual".⁶²

Against Mandeville, it is maintained that these other-regarding springs which tend to promote the happiness of others are irreducible to self-love. It is true that they are often overwhelmed by self-love, and that some uncivilized people seem to lack them altogether. But this does not alter the fact that most people show an unselfish concern for others. The reason according to the sentimentalists is that man's passions and affections for others are innate. Contrary to Hobbes, man is seen as a social being who does not seek society to derive advantage from it but because sociability is natural. Proof of this is man's mental makeup that renders him fit for living in society. As an essential part of human nature, the social passions and affections form a counterbalance to the self-interested ones. Virtue exactly amounts to the balancing of the two sorts of passions and affections. Rather than following the strongest instinct present, man ought to give due weight to all the principles of action that he encounters in himself. This, the sentimentalists argue, is what the Stoics meant by living in accordance with nature. It is the achievement of a mental "oeconomy" (a term used by all three writers) in which excessive manifestations of both self-regarding passions and affections and other-regarding ones are suppressed.

In this search for a right balance within, man was thought to be assisted by a reflective principle. Shaftesbury and Hutcheson call it a "moral sense", a psychological faculty akin to our other senses which helps to discriminate between virtue and vice,

⁶⁰ See Selby-Bigge, 'Introduction', in *British Moralists*, pp. xi-lxx; Tufts, 'The individual and his relation to society as reflected in the British ethics of the eighteenth century'; Darwall, *The British Moralists and the Internal 'Ought' 1640-1740*; Gill, *The British Moralists on Human Nature and the Birth of Secular Ethics*; Schneewind, *The Invention of Autonomy*, chs. 14 and 16.

⁶¹ [Anthony Ashley Cooper, Earl of Shaftesbury], *Sensus Communis: An Essay on the Freedom of Wit and Humour*, in *Characteristicks of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times* (1711), vol. I, p. 115.

⁶² Shaftesbury, *An Inquiry concerning Virtue, or Merit*, pp. 86-87; [Francis Hutcheson], *An Inquiry into the Original of our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue* (1725), p. 129; Joseph Butler, 'Upon the social nature of man', in *Fifteen Sermons Preached at the Rolls Chapel* (1729), pp. 6-7.

approves of moral qualities, and gives us a notion of public interest. Butler speaks of “conscience”, the voice of God within which obliges us to behave in a virtuous way. Leaving undiscussed the differences between their theories on this point, the sentimentalists agree that it is this human faculty which approves of actions that are harmonious, i.e. consistent with private as well as public interest. Man cannot do without it, since his passions and affections tend in two directions and a principle is needed to remind him of the importance of both ends. Though it may be darkened or perverted, for example by poor education or erroneous religious beliefs, its moral dictates are inevitable and immediate. According to Shaftesbury and even more so Hutcheson, the moral sense somehow is biased towards the manifestation of benevolence. After all, self-love is usually a stronger principle of action and easily degenerates into egoism.

The moral philosophy of the three writers becomes even more relevant to the subject of this chapter in view of their idea that private and public interests are closely related. To Shaftesbury, it is a strange hypothesis that the two are opposed. In reality, “to be well affected towards the public interest and one’s own, is not only consistent, but inseparable”.⁶³ It is consistent, first of all, because natural affections are a source of self-enjoyment. Humans derive mental pleasure from doing good to others. Public and private interests are moreover inseparable, since they are equally served by a right balance of self-affections and natural affections. Immoderate self-affections lead to the misery of others and the individual alike. Similarly, too strong natural affections fail to achieve their objective in society and hinder the pursuit of private interests. Denying that we behave in a virtuous way because it will be rewarded by personal happiness, Hutcheson argues that thanks to the guidance of our moral sense, “while we are only intending the good of others, we undesignedly promote our own greatest private good”.⁶⁴ Acting out of disinterested benevolence thus yields long-term benefits to the actor, even if this is no part of his intention.

Butler, in turn, writes that self-love and benevolence “do indeed perfectly coincide; and to aim at publick and private good are so far from being inconsistent, that they mutually promote each other”.⁶⁵ The misconception that they are inconsistent in his opinion arises from a false analogy with property. Wrongly assuming that happiness consists in the possession of things, some people argue that since by increasing the property of others one’s own property decreases, the same holds true for promoting the happiness of our fellow men. However, to seek the good of others and one’s own are not mutually exclusive. Self-love may indirectly promote the happiness of others, and benevolence can be a source of happiness to the benefactor. Butler moreover maintains that duty or virtue, that which is required by conscience, and our interest are seldom inconsistent. “Self-love ... does in general perfectly coincide with virtue; and leads to one and the same course of life”.⁶⁶ Reasonable or “cool self-love”, which considers what combination of passions and affections in us in a particular situation really contributes to our

⁶³ Shaftesbury, *An Inquiry concerning Virtue, or Merit*, p. 81.

⁶⁴ Hutcheson, *An Inquiry into the Original of our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue*, p. 124.

⁶⁵ Butler, ‘Upon the social nature of man’, p. 5.

⁶⁶ Joseph Butler, ‘Upon the natural supremacy of conscience’, in *Fifteen Sermons*, p. 55.

private happiness, results in appropriate actions which are suitable to our nature and thus consistent with the happiness of others too. When they are well-cultivated, reasonable self-love and conscience take into account what is in our interest and what is in the interest of others.

Interestingly, Butler claims that even without any reflection on what is reasonable and virtuous, private and public interests will usually both be served. Distinct from self-love and benevolence, which are reflective and respectively tend to private and public good, there are numerous particular passions and affections which are beneficial to the individual and to society. Examples include the desire of esteem, love of society and an appetite like hunger. Regardless of whether these primarily serve a private or a public end, their gratification is usually conducive to the good of both. They regulate our behaviour such that it becomes a service to our fellows. By acting merely from self-regard, Butler writes, “without any consideration of the good of others, men often contribute to publick good”. As such, the particular passions and affections are “instruments ... in the hands of Providence, to carry on ends, the preservation of the individual and good of society, which they themselves have not in their view or intention”.⁶⁷ What Butler provides here is an early allusion to the invisible hand-idea. His illustrations of this phenomenon are taken from human psychology, however, not from economics.

To be clear, although the problem of reconciling self-interest and public interest is at the heart of their moral philosophy, the writings of the sentimentalists cannot be called economic. The term ‘interest’ is understood in a general sense and used interchangeably with the ‘good’, ‘happiness’ or ‘advantage’ of groups or individuals. Still, Shaftesbury, Hutcheson and, to a lesser degree, Butler occasionally touch upon economic subjects.⁶⁸ In discussing the natural affections, the first stresses the importance of a good and honest employment for those persons in society who live from the pains and labour of their inferiors. Inactivity and idleness, in Shaftesbury’s view, will produce a total disorder of the passions. A few pages later, luxury and avarice are discussed as examples of excessive self-affections, clearly working against our real interest. Aiming for wealth in a moderate, reasonable and impassionate degree, in contrast, is said to be compatible with the private as well as public good. Hutcheson stresses the importance of a right of property and commerce for man’s labour and industry, two activities flowing from self-love rather than benevolence and highly necessary for furnishing society with all necessities. Just like Shaftesbury, he elsewhere contrasted the calm desire for wealth, which is a

⁶⁷ Butler, ‘Upon the social nature of man’, p. 12.

⁶⁸ Note that in the work of Hutcheson several anticipations of utilitarianism can be found. By writing that those actions are the best “which procure the greatest happiness for the greatest numbers” he even coined the phrase later used by Bentham. Although clearly important for the later science of economics, this idea will not be further discussed as it distracts too much from the main subject of this chapter.

powerful instrument for virtuous and generous action, with passionate forms of avarice and luxury, which overrule the more noble dispositions.⁶⁹

How about the providential outlook of British sentimentalism? Nowadays there is a tendency to call their theories ‘secular’, because they did not depart from what is revealed and proceeded independently of Christian theology. The latter is undoubtedly true. Shaftesbury, Hutcheson and the theologian Butler alike search for a natural basis for morality and find it in the mental constitution of man. The obligation to virtue is not derived from Scripture, but man, in Butler’s terms, is a “law to himself”. This does not mean, however, that theological aspects are completely absent. As a matter of fact, man is expressly presented as a created being, endowed by the Author of Nature with a well-balanced mental makeup. Shaftesbury, for example, constantly refers to man as “creature” who owes his constitution to the “Wisdom of what rules, and is First and Chief in nature”. Also Hutcheson’s language at times is remarkably deistic in tone. He believes that the Author of Nature has “fashioned” us for social life, “wonderfully adapted” our constitution to promote benevolence, and “implanted” in us a moral sense. Contrary to what one might expect, of the three, Butler in his *Sermons* on human nature uses theological language most sparingly. But he too writes that the particular passions and affections are “instances of our Maker’s care and love both of the individual and species” and calls conscience the “guide assigned us by the Author of our nature”.⁷⁰

Therefore it is not far-fetched to claim that intelligent design is a common thread running through their moral philosophy. British sentimentalism is permeated by the modern idea of teleology, according to which final causes are immanent in nature. The portrayal of man as a product of a higher “designing Principle or Mind”, as Shaftesbury phrases it, is significant for it provides a justification for his self-interested passions and affections. The very fact that these are present in human nature is taken as a proof of their necessity. Being part of the “whole economy” of man, they must somehow be necessary for attaining earthly happiness. In Butler’s words, the many passions and affections in human nature, both of a self-regarding and other-regarding kind, “no way imply disease: nor indeed do they imply deficiency or imperfection of any sort; but only this, that the constitution of nature according to which God has made us, is such as to require them”.⁷¹ As he observes elsewhere, that man is adapted to preserve himself and to live in society is reason to believe that the Author of Nature intended it so. With the Stoics, also Hutcheson believes that virtue is nothing else than “acting according to what we may see from the constitution of our nature, we were intended for by our Creator”.⁷²

⁶⁹ In his commentary on Pufendorf, Hutcheson’s teacher Gershom Carmichael similarly spoke of a form of “harmless self-interest”. See Gregg, ‘Commercial order and the Scottish Enlightenment’, p. 51.

⁷⁰ Shaftesbury, *An Inquiry concerning Virtue, or Merit*, p. 175; Butler, ‘Upon the social nature of man’, p. 13 and ‘Upon the natural supremacy of conscience’, p. 50.

⁷¹ Joseph Butler, ‘Upon compassion’, in *Fifteen Sermons*, pp. 89–90.

⁷² [Francis Hutcheson], *An Essay on the Nature and Conduct of the Passions and Affections* (1728), p. xvii.

A second theological, or rather metaphysical, idea in the sentimentalists is that of the systematic nature of reality. Not only the natural world but also the social world is understood as a collection of systems, organized wholes consisting of multiple interacting parts which together serve an external purpose. An instance of such a system is individual man himself. Human nature is conceived of as an “economy” or “fabrick” of various interacting affections and passions. Shaftesbury and Butler compare man to a clock, a machine that is more than the sum of its parts, designed to measure time. Just like the latter purpose in a sense is external to the watch, so also the human constitution is adapted to a higher aim, namely virtuous behaviour. Humans are no independent systems but again part of the larger whole of society and of the human species in general. That is why self-regarding and other-regarding affections and passions are equally necessary. Whereas the former are indispensable first of all for men’s self-preservation, the latter enable them to promote the interest and good of the collective. This idea that the individual is a subsystem leads Shaftesbury to believe that well-understood self-interest and public interest will coincide. Thanks to the designing principle, there need not be a contradiction between part and whole.

Metaphysical assumptions like the principle of design and the existence of self-regulating systems in reality ensure that in the moral philosophy of Shaftesbury and his followers there is no need for religious obligation. It is precisely this question as to the relationship between religion and virtue which is raised by Shaftesbury at the beginning of his inquiry. His conclusion, reminiscent of Pierre Bayle and repeated by Hutcheson, is that theism is not required to live a virtuous life. However unorthodox this may sound, the sentimentalist as well maintained that the belief that “every thing is govern’d, order’d, or regulated for the best, by a designing Principle, or Mind, necessarily good and permanent”⁷³ is advantageous in the exercise of virtue. Admiration for the design and harmony manifest throughout nature opens our eyes to the same well-orderedness of society and our mental constitution. As such it forms an incentive to preserve our mental economy by balancing the passions and affections springing from self-love and benevolence. Finally, the belief in God strengthens our feelings of benevolence.

Self-love and social the same

The above ideas of the sentimentalists were popularized by Alexander Pope in his *Essay on Man* (1734).⁷⁴ The relationship between private and public interest is addressed literally at the heart of this poem, culminating in the famous conclusion that “thus God and Nature link’d the gen’ral frame / and bade self-love and social be the same”.⁷⁵ Drawing upon Shaftesbury and his followers, albeit with some clear modifications, Pope distinguishes between two innate principles in human nature which are equally necessary and thus not good or bad in themselves: “self-love, to urge” and “reason, to restrain”. With

⁷³ Shaftesbury, *An Inquiry concerning Virtue, or Merit*, p. 11.

⁷⁴ Myers, ‘Philosophical anticipations of laissez-faire’, pp. 170-172 and *The Soul of Modern Economic Man*, pp. 60-62.

⁷⁵ Alexander Pope, *An Essay on Man, Being the First Book of Ethic Principles* (1734), p. 45.

pleasure and aversion of pain as their shared object, self-love is stronger and manifests itself in the form of multiple passions. The strife between them precisely accounts for the diversity of human life, and it is up to reason to temper them and to establish an inner balance. Regardless of whether we as individuals succeed in finding a reasonable middle road between egoism and unnatural self-sacrifice, Pope observes in an almost Mandevillean way, “the ends of Providence and general good are answer’d in our passions, and imperfections”.⁷⁶ For although people pursue their own goals, it is “Heaven” that keeps an eye on the entire system.

Contrary to what is often suggested, Pope’s remark on the coincidence of self-love and the social is not an invisible hand-argument in that the pursuit of self-interest unintendedly contributes to that of the public. His account in the second epistle of the nature and state of man as an individual is followed by a conjectural history of human society in the third epistle in which the poet explains how self-love came to operate to the social and public good. Instinct and self-love, Pope ‘argues’, under the supervision of reason, were a driving force in the development of human society but also degenerated into a Hobbesian ambition and lust for power and lucre. That ultimately self-love came to correspond with the social is a matter of what Nicole termed enlightened self-love. Realizing that within society self-love may have destructive consequences, people agreed to restrain it and to subdue their private good to that of the public. By thus finding “the private in the public good”, enlightened rather than egoistic self-love becomes consistent with the happiness of others. Like planets that rotate around their own axis as well as around the sun, man’s soul is simultaneously motivated by a force that is self-regarding and one that is concerned with the larger whole.

6.4 The laws of commerce: solutions from political economy

In a sense, both the Jansenists and the British moral philosophers believed in an internal regulation of the passions. Whether or not incited by the government to do so, man was considered able to mitigate his self-love thanks to either his enlightened attitude or psychological constitution. A new solution to the Hobbes-Mandeville challenge, which placed the regulation of self-love and self-interest in a different perspective, was offered by political economy.⁷⁷ The gradual discovery in the period of the modern market, a self-operating mechanism of supply and demand with its own laws and dynamics, suggested that the excesses of self-interestedness could be neutralized through economic competition. Indeed, in a competitive market the love of gain is not opposed to other passions but to itself. Everyone being motivated by similar interests, the greed of one person is neutralized by that of countless others. And fortunately so, for when each individual out of reasons of self-interest aims at good prices in buying and selling, there will be a general tendency towards fairness and reasonable gains. In the long run, the greedy will not

⁷⁶ Pope, *Essay on Man*, ‘The contents of the first book’.

⁷⁷ Faccarello, ‘La “liberté du commerce” et la naissance de l’idée de marché comme lien social’. See also Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, ch. 2 ‘Political economy as theodicy and agonistics’ and the reply by Waterman, ‘Is “political economy” really a Christian heresy?’.

be able to systematically buy below the market price and sell above it. An ongoing pursuit of self-interest moreover promotes the public interest. Full competition for buyers and material resources will result in lower prices, which in turn strengthens the nation's competitiveness.

To those who were aware of it, the market had always been a remarkable mechanism. Emerging as an unplanned and unintended consequence of countless individual actions, it is an example of spontaneous order - an idea that was so dear to the philosophers of the Scottish Enlightenment, and the first detailed expression of which was provided in Mandeville's *Fable of the Bees*.⁷⁸ The market, like the moral and natural order, was increasingly seen as a self-regulating order with its own checks and balances. Its spontaneity could of course be disrupted by political intervention, and it was with this threat in mind that several eighteenth-century writers on economics called for *laissez faire*. Though the call for more freedom was uttered mostly in the context of international commerce, it also extended to relationships of buying and selling in the domestic economy.⁷⁹ Sometimes pleas for non-intervention were explicitly grounded in the belief that the spontaneous economic order emerging from it was the product of higher intelligence. So too in case of the French writer on economics Boisguilbert, who saw the market as a providential arrangement and first developed a systematic theory of *laissez-faire* economics.

Pierre Boisguilbert

The Norman magistrate Pierre Le Pesant de Boisguilbert⁸⁰ was part of an anti-Colbertist reform movement which at the end of the seventeenth century called for more economic freedom and less government interference.⁸¹ Boisguilbert penned many letters to the successive *contrôleurs généraux des finances*, uttering his grievances against the paralysing tax system, and between 1695 and 1707 presented his proposals to the public in several anonymous writings. Besides advocating a complete revision of the tax system, the Frenchman stressed the importance of a high level of consumption since this, and not a great stock of money or precious metals, is what wealth consists of. Consumption and the income of the ruler and his subjects, according to Boisguilbert, are two sides of the same coin. The expenditure of one man basically is another man's income. In an exchange economy of his days, with more than two hundred professions, he argues, people are highly interdependent. Recognizing that no one can be self-sufficient and that trade is reciprocal, all occupations work for each other and mutually maintain each other by

⁷⁸ Barry, 'The tradition of spontaneous order'; Hamowy, *The Scottish Enlightenment and the Theory of Spontaneous Order*.

⁷⁹ Oncken, *Die Maxime Laissez faire et laissez passer, ihr Ursprung, ihr Werden*; Castelot, 'Laissez-faire, laissez-passé, history of the maxim', p. 116; Faccarello & Steiner, 'Interest, sensationism and the science of the legislator'.

⁸⁰ Van Dyke Roberts, *Boisguilbert, Economist of the Reign of Louis XIV*, esp. ch. 15 'Laissez faire'; Keohane, *Philosophy and the State in France*, pp. 350-357; Faccarello, *Aux origines de l'économie politique libérale* and *The Foundations of Laissez-faire*.

⁸¹ Cole, *French Mercantilism 1683-1700*, ch. 5 'Attacks on mercantilism'.

means of continual exchange. The destruction of consumption and spending, one of the causes of France's economic decline, is therefore to be avoided at all costs. The ruin of consumption means a ruin of income and will bring the economy in a downward spiral.

Brought up in a Jansenist family and having attended the 'Jansenist' Petites Écoles of Port-Royal, Boisguilbert's writings show clear traces of Augustinian theology.⁸² Characteristically, on several occasions the infancy or innocence of the world is contrasted with the corrupt state of affairs after the Fall. Frequently referring to man's terrible depravity and its consequences for his economic behaviour, also Boisguilbert's view of man is Augustinian. In his writings it is simply taken for granted that people are wholly self-interested, above all in the economic sphere. Corruption of the heart leads everyone to continually look after his private economic interests. In everyday reality, "each individual intends to procure his personal interest to the highest degree and with [the] greatest ease possible".⁸³ People are not unwilling to establish their opulence upon the ruin of others. There is no labourer, Boisguilbert somewhere claims, who does not try to sell his merchandise at three times its real value and to buy it from his neighbours at three times less than what it costs to produce it. The market place in his work is depicted as a realm of deception, in which merchants fail to act in accordance with the golden rule of the gospel and easily forget that the same is done to them.

How then can these two basic notions, namely the egoism of individuals and the reciprocal nature of wealth, be reconciled? It seems, as Boisguilbert acknowledges in a chapter praised later on by the Physiocrats, that a powerful *police* is needed to enforce the laws of economic justice "by the tip of the sword". Yet the need for government supervision is emphatically denied, since the maintenance of justice and order is "what Nature and Providence have charged themselves with". Just as they have arranged shelters for weaker animals in order not to fall prey to the stronger ones, who are equipped to live from slaughter by birth, "they have established such an order in the business of life that, provided it is left alone [*laissez faire*], it is not in the power of even the most powerful in buying a commodity from a miserable man to prevent the sale from providing him with his subsistence".⁸⁴ Everyone will benefit from trade and be able to gain a livelihood, provided that nature is given its freedom and no one meddles with it, save to grant general protection and prevent violence. "Nature or Providence",⁸⁵ as Boisguilbert now de-

⁸² Faccarello, 'From the foundation of liberal political economy to its critique', pp. 76-80. Cf. his *Foundations of Laissez-faire*, chs. 1 'The context (I). Social and political Augustinianism' and 2 'The context (II). On some problems in the governing of an ordered state'.

⁸³ Quoted in Faccarello, *Foundations of Laissez-faire*, p. 97.

⁸⁴ [Pierre Le Pesant de Boisguilbert], *Factum de la France*, in *Le détail de la France, sous le règne présent* (1707), vol. II, pp. 29-30: "Ce n'est qu'à la pointe de l'épée que la justice se maintient dans ces rencontres: c'est néanmoins de quoy la Nature & la Providence se sont chargées ... dans le commerce de la vie elle a mis un tel ordre, que pourvû qu'on la laisse faire, il n'est point au pouvoir du plus puissant en achetant la denrée d'un miserable, d'empêcher que cette vente ne lui procure sa subsistance".

⁸⁵ Cf. [Pierre Le Pesant de Boisguilbert], *Traité de la nature, culture, commerce & intérêt des grains* (1704), in *Le détail de la France*, vol. I, p. 276: "la Nature, qui n'est autre que la Providence".

notes it in deistic terminology, accomplishes its task of making men observe economic justice by establishing among them an equal necessity to buy and to sell and an equally strong desire for profit. All market participants, however egoistic, have an equal need and interest to trade their labour, services and merchandise. It is this natural condition that tempers man's egoism and makes exchange mutually beneficial.

Another means in the hands of Nature personified to neutralize the socially harmful effects of greed and cupidity is competition. Just as a shared interest in buying and selling between two parties yields an "equilibrium or balance", also at a larger scale an equilibrium within and across markets can be obtained when many buyers and sellers compete. In such a happy situation, there exists a just proportion between production and consumption and between prices and costs. Sellers will then have an incentive to produce and buyers will face with reasonable prices. The preservation of this equilibrium, the "unique protector of general opulence", is an affair of the wisdom and foresight of Nature, who "loves everyone equally, without distinction, & in the like manner wishes them all to make their subsistence".⁸⁶ But here too it is crucial to leave her to her own course. When Nature is unbalanced or disturbed, for example through unwholesome policies of rulers or monopolists, the public opulence that she produces will be ruined. Competition provides an appropriate and sufficient means to compensate for the pursuit of self-interest and to make everyone better off.

It is not farfetched to claim that it was Boisguilbert who first 'discovered', or at least first committed to paper, the idea of a self-regulating market economy. Undoubtedly building on older ideas, the Frenchman was the first to conceive of the sphere of production and exchange as a natural order, providentially designed to reconcile the private interests of a great many people with the common good of society. "All", he maintains, "preserve [their wealth] night & day by their private interests, and contribute at the same; although it is what they think about the least, to the common good".⁸⁷ By combining ideas like the unintended consequences of self-interest, the harmonious reconciliation of private interests and the common good, and the self-regulatory nature of the market, Boisguilbert was far ahead of his time. Sometimes regarded as the founder of the science of political economy in France, he had an influence on the major French economic writers of the eighteenth century, including Richard Cantillon and the

See for Boisguilbert's non-miraculous interpretation of the term 'Providence', which he "uses in some decisive passages in his work", Faccarello, *Foundations of Laissez-faire*, pp. 32-33.

⁸⁶ [Pierre Le Pesant de Boisguilbert], *Dissertation de la nature des richesses, de l'argent & des tributs* (1704), in *Le detail de la France*, vol. II, pp. 258: "unique conservateur de l'opulence générale" and 261: "aime également tous les hommes, & les veut pareillement sans distinction faire subsister".

⁸⁷ Boisguilbert, *Dissertation de la nature des richesses*, p. 254: "Tous l'entretiennent nuit & jour par leur intérêt particulier, & forment en même temps; quoy que ce soit à quoy ils songent le moins, le bien général".

Physiocrats.⁸⁸ The latter, to be discussed next, recognized him as precursor of their school and further popularized the phrase *laissez faire, laissez passer*.⁸⁹

The Physiocrats

When it comes to their contribution to the eighteenth-century debate on self-interest, the views of the Physiocrats are often presented unjustly.⁹⁰ That is, they cannot simply be summarized by 'laissez faire-economics', as if the French *économistes* believed that the various interests in society always harmonize and government intervention is by definition unnecessary. They admittedly attached great value to individual liberty in economic affairs. Freedom to pursue one's private interest (*intérêt particulier* or *personnelle*) is most important, not the least because it makes for the industriousness and riches of a country. More importantly, it corresponds with the nature of man. To better one's condition and to accumulate one's property are, in a Lockean sense, a natural right granted by the Creator. Seeing that rights come with obligations, the individual has a sacred duty to preserve himself and to seek and appropriate all that is useful to his existence. Like private property itself, Mirabeau argues, "our needs, ... our forces, our intelligence, & and all our physical & moral talents" are a "divine institution".⁹¹ We should therefore be left free to satisfy our needs, by employing our bodily and intellectual forces. It is man's constitution that points at the validity of self-interest as well as the importance of appropriation, which is his most permanent interest and the first tie of society.

The idea that this personal liberty must be constrained because it forms a threat to the public interest (*intérêt public, particulier* or *commun*) according to the Physiocrats is nonsensical. How, Mercier de la Rivière objects to people who imagine this, can the public interest of a body like the state be in opposition to the private interests of its members? Does not the interest of a nation correspond with that of all its individual subjects? The Physiocrats, it is clear, had no sympathy at all with a public interest understood in terms of reason of state.⁹² Rather than to increase its economic and military power, the role of the state would be to conserve the rights and interests of the people living on its territory. The public or general interest of a nation, as their famous slogan reads, is nothing else than the sum of the various particular interests of all its members. For this reason it is counterproductive to suppress the self-interested behaviour of individuals. By entrusting their interests to freedom, thanks to a "desire to enjoy irritated

⁸⁸ On other French writers on economics influenced by the Jansenist tradition, whether or not through Boisguilbert, see Perrot, 'Le main invisible et le Dieu caché', pp. 352-353.

⁸⁹ Groenewegen, *Eighteenth-Century Economics*, ch. 11 'Laissez-faire. Reflections on the French foundations'.

⁹⁰ Actually the subject of self-interest received only little attention in the vast secondary literature on the Physiocrats. A still insightful account, on which I rely here, is Weulersse, *Le mouvement Physiocratique en France*, vol. 2, bk. 4, ch. 3, esp. pp. 93-100.

⁹¹ [Victor Riqueti Mirabeau], 'Septième lettre de M.B. à M... première sur la restauration de l'ordre légal', in *Ephemerides du citoyen* (1768), vol. III, p. 40: "nos besoins, qui sont d'institution divine, comme nos forces, notre intelligence, & tous nos talents physiques & moraux".

⁹² Gunn, *Politics and the Public Interest*, app. A 'A sum of interests in Physiocratic writings'.

by competition" everyone will always work for his greatest possible benefit, thereby augmenting the sum of private interests.⁹³

Quesnay and his followers were not so naive to suppose that these interests never clash. In a society characterized by economic freedom, a *débat d'intérêts* is even likely to occur. Especially for merchants it is tempting to establish their profits at the expense of others. Still, in their view there is no inevitable conflict between them. To show this is one of the aims of their extensive collection of writings. As long as the pursuit of their self-interest is reasonable and enlightened, so respecting the rights of others and taking into account what is one's real and long-term advantage, people can continue to benefit without inflicting a loss on others. Thanks to the natural reciprocity between human beings, they are reluctant to harm others by exaggerating their self-interest. It is the individual's private interest that is threatened when he violates the rights of others. Besides the awareness of being mutually dependent, there are the blessings of the market mechanism. The desire for gain among numerous individuals will lead to competition which tempers excessive greed. Under a regime of freedom and protection of private property, both of the conditions ensure that individuals are protected against each other and society at large against the individual. In this respect, economic justice is a spontaneous product of exchange and competition between reasonable, self-interested individuals.

Up to this point, the views of the Physiocrats were hardly new. Boisguilbert, but also d'Argenson and Josiah Tucker (see below) had earlier on expressed a similar belief in the possibility of a harmony of interests under conditions of freedom. Also the societal benefits of *l'amour-propre éclairé* were acknowledged before, for example by Nicolas Malebranche, a philosopher who was an important source of inspiration to the Physiocrats. The contribution of the French could therefore be ignored, were it not that their economic views were embedded in an overwhelmingly theological framework.⁹⁴ Friedrich Melchior Grimm, one of their critics, accused them of trying to make a mystical science of agriculture and of employing an "apocalyptic and devout" language, contrary to the enlightened spirit that haunted eighteenth-century Europe.⁹⁵ Their writings are indeed packed with references to *l'Eternel*, *l'Être Suprême*, *le Très-Haut* and many other impersonal allusions to the God of the philosophers. It is also crystal clear that they greeted the revenue of the soil as a free gift of Providence and regarded the art of agriculture as a divine institution, in which the Author of Nature as it were cooperates with man. Their theological inclinations, however, went deeper than that. Actually the whole system of Physiocracy is founded in a comprehensive deistic world view, which colours their views on self-interest as well.

To the French economists, it is beyond all doubt that this reality we live in is created by a benevolent Being. God is not part of this reality nor actively involved in it but its Creator, who from eternity subjected everything to a natural law (*loi naturelle*).

⁹³ [Paul-Pierre Le Mercier de La Rivière], *L'ordre naturel et essentiel des sociétés politiques* (1767), pp. 35-36.

⁹⁴ Vereker, *Eighteenth-Century Optimism*, pp. 197-206.

⁹⁵ Quoted in Weulersse, *Le mouvement Physiocratique en France*, vol. 1, bk. 1, ch. 2, p. 144.

This law that He instituted consists of a physical order with laws to regulate material events on the one hand, and closely related to this a moral order with rules for human action on the other. They providentially aim at man's happiness and are "self-evidently the most advantageous to the human race".⁹⁶ It is therefore a wise choice as well as a duty to act in accordance with nature. For rulers this implies that they had better bring their government and positive laws in conformity with the twofold natural law. Any violation of the latter, for example by ignoring the primacy of agriculture, is a "crime" against nature with harmful effects. The best policy is to enable the laws of nature to produce their own effects, and to let nature itself rule. This, exactly, is the meaning of the name *physiocratie*. Some of the Physiocrats even approvingly spoke of a *théocratie*,⁹⁷ since when the laws of nature rule it is 'as if' God himself, from whose will they emanated, is governing.

Although they operate independently of man's will, some of the Creator's physical and moral laws do not necessarily overrule the choices that people make. "Providence", Mirabeau maintains, "has arranged everything for the happiness of men: it enlightens them, but it does not force them, it wants nothing else than acts of [free] choice".⁹⁸ The physical order and moral order being part of the same natural law, justice is intimately linked to physical laws. In defining morality it is therefore unnecessary, as Baudeau argues, to refer to such "occult qualities" as beneficence (Cumberland), natural sociability (Pufendorf) or moral sense (Shaftesbury and Hutcheson). In the end morality is not founded in human psychology but in the physical order to which mankind is subjected. It is "physical sanctions" that decide on the justice or injustice of human behaviour. Economic actions that are consistent with God's physical laws of nature will yield means of subsistence, wealth and happiness to everyone, while actions that oppose them will ruin the well-being of society. The same holds true for the individual's pursuit of self-interest. The divine order of nature allows for a reconciliation of private interests in society, but only if everyone understands and looks after his true advantage.

This is where the need for an absolute monarch comes in. As against aristocratic forms of government, in which the interests of the rulers easily conflict, the Physiocrats advocate a monarchy with a single sovereign who stands above all individuals in society and is able to check all "unjust undertakings" of private interests. His own interests need to be intertwined with those of his subjects so as to prevent the general welfare being lost sight of. The task of the sovereign is to carry out the Physiocratic program, centred around maximizing the net product of agriculture. Whereas commercial nations are characterized by conflicting class interests, in the agricultural economy advocated by

⁹⁶ [François Quesnay], 'Le droit naturel', in *Physiocratie, ou constitution naturelle du gouvernement le plus avantageux au genre humain*, vol. I (1768), p. 25: "évidemment les plus avantageux au genre humain".

⁹⁷ See, for example, [Victor Riqueti Mirabeau], *Philosophie rurale, ou économie générale et politique de l'agriculture* (1763), pp. xviii, 298, 352 and 394, and [Francois Quesnay], 'Dépotisme de la Chine', in *Ephemerides du citoyen* (1767), vol. XV, p. 22.

⁹⁸ Mirabeau, *Philosophie rurale*, p. 411: "La Providence a tout arrange pour le bonheur des hommes: elles les éclaire, mais elle ne les force pas, elle ne veut que des actions de choix".

Quesnay and his followers everyone's pursuit of self-interest will further the sum of all private interests. "Everyone", Mirabeau writes, "is, or feels free in his sphere, & everyone is driven by the view of his own good to contribute to universal good. The whole magic of well-ordered society is that everyone works for others, while believing that they work for themselves". This *magie* shows us, he continues, that the Supreme Being directly bestowed upon us the principles of economy and harmony, which He also revealed in the form of religious laws.⁹⁹

The pursuit of self-interest, in sum, is not harmful as long as it takes place within the economic order proposed by Nature itself. It is this order, providentially imposed on this reality by the Supreme Being, which binds together the interests of the king and all his subjects. Paradoxically, the private undertakings of the latter are only beneficial to society if property rights and freedom are sufficiently enforced by the all-powerful ruler. Possible conflicts of interest, for example between farmers, labourers and merchants, must be prevented and individuals should be instructed about their *intérêt bien entendu*. Under enlightened conditions like these even the vice of cupidity is transformed into all kinds of benefits. In contrast to an ignorant nation, Quesnay argues, "[w]ith an enlightened people ... even cupidity is nothing more than a natural spring & means to let people give all activity & all intelligence possible in their labour, and it evidently contributes to the multiplication of wealth & the advantage of society".¹⁰⁰

Among the writers who sought to spread the Physiocratic doctrines in the German-speaking world, one was particularly clear about the hand of God in reconciling private interests.¹⁰¹ Isaak Iselin, who in his writings introduced the expression *laßt der Natur ihren Gang* as translation of the French maxim, believed that a struggle (*Kampf*) between private economic interests was an indispensable aspect of the order of nature established by the Creator. "The advantage of the one", he writes, "seems to be opposed to the benefit of the others. What is gain for the one, seems to be loss to the other. Meanwhile Providence has wisely ordered it so, that from the struggle between their various advantages emerges a general well-being".¹⁰² In a society in which free competi-

⁹⁹ Mirabeau, *Philosophie rurale*, p. 50: "Chacun est, ou se croit libre dans sa sphère, & chacun est entraîné par la vue de son propre bien à concourir au bien universel. Toute la magie de la société bien ordonnée est que chacun travaille pour autrui, en croyant travailler pour soi. Cette magie dont l'ensemble & les effets se développent par l'étude dont nous traitons, nous démontre que le grand Etre nous donna, en père des principes économiques & de concorde quand il daigna nous les annoncer & nous les prescrire en Dieu, comme loix religieuses".

¹⁰⁰ [François Quesnay], 'Discours de l'éditeur', in *Physiocratie, ou constitution naturelle du gouvernement le plus avantageux au genre humain*, vol. I, p. xxxviii: "Chez un peuple éclairé ... la cupidité même ne seroit plus qu'un ressort naturel & utile pour porter les citoyens à mettre toute l'activité & toute l'intelligence possible dans leur travail, & elle concourroit évidemment à la multiplication des richesses & à l'avantage de la société".

¹⁰¹ On the reception of Physiocracy in Germany, see Tribe, 'Physiokratie', in *Governing Economy*, pp. 119-132.

¹⁰² [Isaak Iselin], *Versuch über die gesellige Ordnung* (1772), p. 63 ('Ueber die wirtschaftliche Ordnung'): "Der Vortheil der einen scheinet dem Nutzen der anderen gerade entgegen gesetzet zu seyn. Was für den einen Gewinnst ist, scheinet für den andern Verlust zu seyn. Indessen hat es die Vor-

tion is abolished, only a handful of people will gain without paying back what they owe to others. In a society characterized by a cycle of industriousness (*Kreislauf der Emsigkeit*), on the other hand, which from an economic point of view consists only of buyers and sellers and producers and consumers, gains and losses are somehow neutralized. To use Iselin's words, what one loses on one side will be regained on the other side, and what one takes from one neighbour will be given to another. Competition between greedy individuals from different classes simply is beneficial to society as a whole: it is a spur to industriousness, reduces costs and enhances the affluence of everyone.

Ferdinando Galiani

We now turn to Abbé Galiani, the later critic of the Physiocrats whose ideas on the abundance of necessities we have discussed in the previous chapter.¹⁰³ In *Della moneta*, at the beginning of his treatment of the principles of value, Galiani sketches his view of human nature. Man is depicted as a mixture of passions that move him with great force. Firstly, he holds in common with the beasts primary passions necessary for survival and self-preservation like the desire to eat, drink and sleep. Even stronger is his typically human desire to be esteemed, to distinguish himself from others, and to be superior to them. The existence of these secondary passions, which were highlighted by Augustinian thinkers like Nicole, Rochefoucauld and Mandeville before, explains why people not only attach utility and value to things required for the primary needs of life but also to things which bring them respect. According to Galiani, man is constituted so that after one of his desires is satisfied, resulting in pleasure and happiness, another springs up in its place. Hence people never reach full gratification of their passions and are characterized by a never-ending pursuit of happiness. However Epicurean this all sounds, the author prudently adds "I, being no Epicurean, do not even wish to seem one".¹⁰⁴ In the long run, the gratification of a passion that arouses another one, or produces pain in life after death, cannot be seen as a true pleasure.

At the end of the chapter, where Galiani discusses the interplay between supply, demand and value, he returns to the subject of passions. Our ideas about utility and value, he establishes, are based on needs and pleasures but this does not cause disorder in the level of prices. After all, thanks to the created order of nature "there is nothing arbitrary and accidental among us, but all is order, harmony and necessity".¹⁰⁵ Justice

sehung weislich so geordnet, daß aus dem Kampfe ihrer verschiedenen Vortheile ein allgemeines Wohl entstehet".

¹⁰³ On the context of Galiani's *Della moneta*, his relationship to Epicureanism, and influences from Giambattista Vico and Celestino Galiani (Ferdinando's uncle, who saw commercial development as unfolding of the plan of creation), see Stapelbroek, *Love, Self-Deceit, and Money* and Robertson, *The Case for the Enlightenment*, ch. 7 'The advent of Enlightenment: political economy in Naples and Scotland 1730-1760'.

¹⁰⁴ Ferdinando Galiani, *Della moneta* (1780), bk. I, ch. ii, pp. 28-29: "io non essendo Epicureo, non voglio neppure parerlo" (transl. from Monroe, *Early Economic Thought*).

¹⁰⁵ Galiani, *Della moneta*, bk. I, ch. ii, p. 45: "niuna cosa arbitraria, e casuale è fra noi, ma tutto è ordine, armonia e necessità".

and stability need not be enforced, as they (unintendedly) emanate from our ideas. Man's desire for gain, for example, is self-correcting. Once a situation occurs in which high profits can be obtained, other competitors will enter the scene, bringing back profits to their "just" level and resulting in a decrease of market prices. The "interrelation" between supply and demand, Galiani concludes, "produces the great and very useful effect of the equilibrium of the whole. And this equilibrium fits in wonderfully with the just abundance of the conveniences of life and earthly happiness, although it results, not from human prudence or virtue, but from the base incentive of sordid gain. Providence, out of infinite love for men, having so ordered the relations of things that even our base passions, as if in spite of us, are often arranged for the good of the whole".¹⁰⁶ It is likely that the latter observation was inspired by the anti-Epicurean philosopher Giambattista Vico, who influenced various Italian economic writers and saw a similar role for Providence.¹⁰⁷

The tendency towards equilibrium, which is not destroyed but propelled by the quest for gain, is an instance of the "moral gravity" that exists in society. Man's desire for private gain does not cause dispersion in the economy but rather binds all economic activity together for the common good. According to Galiani, "nothing corresponds more closely to the laws of gravity and of fluids than the laws of commerce. What gravity is in physics, the desire for gain or happiness is in man".¹⁰⁸ As our discussion of Pope made clear, the Italian economist was not the first to use the analogy of the physical universe to explain the role of private interests in society. Newton's three laws of motion and especially his theory of gravity, hailed as proof of intelligent design, from their discovery on had been used to demonstrate how selfish and social forces in the social world could be part of the same benevolent order.¹⁰⁹ Some writers such as Soame Jenyns had observed a similarity between the force of gravity and self-interest. Parallel to the planetary bodies, self-interest was thought to draw everything to the individual as well as to bind people together in societies. Others, including Hutcheson, had liked gravity to feelings of be-

¹⁰⁶ Galiani, *Della moneta*, bk. I, ch. ii, p. 50: "ed utilissimo effetto dell' equilibrio del tutto. E questo equilibrio alla giusta abbondanza de' commodi della vita, ed alla terrena felicità maravigliosamente consà, quantunque non dall' umana prudenza, o virtù, ma da vilissimo stimolo di sordido lucro derivi: avendo la Provvidenza, per lo suo infinito amore agli uomini, talmente congegnato l'ordine del tutto, che le vili passioni nostre spesso, quasi a nostro dispetto, al bene del tutto sono ordinate".

¹⁰⁷ Vico's *Scienza nuova prima* (1725): "Out of ferocity, avarice, and ambition, the three vices which lead all mankind astray, [legislation] creates national defence, commerce, and polities ...; out of these three great vices which would certainly destroy man on earth, society thus causes the civil happiness to emerge. This principle proves the existence of divine providence: through its intelligent laws the passions of men who are entirely occupied by the pursuit of their private utility are transformed into a civil order which permits men to live in society" (quoted in Stapelbroek, *Love, Self-Deceit, and Money*, p. 120).

¹⁰⁸ Galiani, *Della moneta*, bk. I, ch. ii, p. 52: "tanta esattezza corrispondono le leggi del commercio a quelle della gravità, e de' fluidi, che niente più. Quel che la gravità è nella fisica, è il desiderio di guadagnare o sia di viver felice nell' uomo".

¹⁰⁹ Myers, *The Soul of Modern Economic Man*, ch. 6 'Paxton, Hutcheson, Bolingbroke, and Jenyns. Self-interest as moral gravitation'. Another example not discussed by Myers is Henry Grove's essay in *The Spectator*, no. 588, September 1 (1714), pp. 177-184. As Keohane, *Philosophy and the State in France*, p. 302 shows, Nicole in the seventeenth century had already compared the conflicting interests of states and kingdoms to Cartesian whirlwinds.

nevolence, which as it were draw the bodies of self-interested humans together. Galiani clearly sided with the first group of writers, although he only touches upon the subject and does so in an ambiguous way. One of the economists to develop his Newtonian science of society further was Antonio Genovesi.¹¹⁰

Before addressing his next subject, Galiani opens the third chapter of his *Della moneta* with a short reflection on the foregoing discussion. Grateful to “l’Autore del tutto”, he blames other writers for calling themselves wise but confusing their own errors with the ordered dispositions of Providence. Believing that everything is ruled by disorder, they invented concepts like luck, fate and destiny. The author himself, in contrast, admires the “Suprema Mano”, which made and arranged everything for man’s utility. Justice and equality, he believes, can everywhere be observed in the works of God. Equally praiseworthy is the refined and automatic way in which value and price are put on everything, something that would be impossible for a single person to establish. Galiani’s reference to the supreme hand, which is reminiscent of Adam Smith’s invisible hand, is not explicitly made in connection to the problem of self-interest. Yet it immediately follows the discussion at the end of the second chapter on market equilibrium and the role in it of the desire for gain. Therefore it is not far-fetched to associate them and to understand the metaphor employed by Galiani as God’s invisible hand of the market.

Josiah Tucker

Also the ideas of the British sentimentalists found their way to the economic thought of the period. This is most evident in the work of Josiah Tucker, a Welsh churchman and prolific writer on economics.¹¹¹ Tucker for some time served as Butler’s domestic chaplain and basically was one of his friends.¹¹² Eventually encouraged to write about theological issues by the rise of Methodism, he later developed a keen interest in politics and especially economics. After his appointment as Dean of Gloucester, the Bishop is reported to have remarked of Tucker that “trade was his religion and his religion a trade”. The Welshman tried to refute this accusation of having neglected the duties of his parish and cathedral upon several occasions, but had to admit that trade and commerce were among his favourite subjects. As one of his sermons makes unequivocally clear, to Tucker the “system of universal commerce” fulfils the designs of Providence as much as true religion and good government. All three being parts of God’s “grand Machine in motion”, these systems have complementary ends and need not contradict each other. In a sense, religion, government and commerce in their own sphere try to regulate men’s passions and direct them to the right end of making mankind happy in the present and future life. Echoing Pope, Tucker writes that commerce rightly understood in reality “make[s] self-

¹¹⁰ Bellamy, ‘Da metafisico a mercantante’.

¹¹¹ Clark, *Josiah Tucker, Economist; Shelton, Dean Tucker and Eighteenth-Century Economic and Political Thought*.

¹¹² The place of Butler and Tucker in the history of British economic thought is discussed in Waterman, ‘Theology and the rise of political economy in Britain in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries’, pp. 102-103.

interest and social coincide".¹¹³ This harmony is only obtained when self-interest is properly regulated, both at an individual level with the help of reason and at a public level by means of economic policy.

The influence of Butler and his predecessors on Tucker's view of man is the clearest in *The Elements of Commerce and the Theory of Taxes*, a book that was never finished and several parts of which were printed for private circulation only. The preliminary discourse sets forth not only that there exists a natural disposition or instinctive inclination of mankind towards commerce but also that self-love is "the great mover in human nature". The latter is only one of man's passions among many others, though. Firstly, considered as mere animal, man is powerfully incited by an instinct to provide for his animal wants. More than any other creature, he is in need of food, cloths and dwelling and accordingly tries to preserve himself. Considered as a member of society, however, man is also actuated by a set of social and benevolent affections. Like some other animals, human beings herd together, but in contrast to them are capable of higher forms of communication, friendship and virtue. The fact that man naturally seeks society in order to gratify his social instincts results in mutual assistance, division of labour and commerce. Whereas society is the best means to supply for all animal or natural wants, it simultaneously creates a number of social or artificial needs, related to the enjoyment of wealth, power and honour. According to Tucker, it is in this respect that "self-love, the great mover of created beings" manifests itself most clearly by causing each individual to strive after these social goods.

Although potentially beneficial to man and society, the problem with self-love is that it is self-defeating. Without proper control, the "selfish monopolizing principle" would thwart its own ends because it tries to exclude competitors, while it is often dependent on the assistance and cooperation of others. Since benevolence as a social instinct is only a feeble check upon the strong passion of self-love, the assistance of reason is required. Their task is definitely not to extinguish or enfeeble it. In the end, self-love was not for nothing implanted in human nature. "The powers with which it hath pleased the munificent Creator to form mankind", read Tucker's opening words of the preliminary discourse, "are suited to such important ends, that ... a right use of such endowments is the source of all the enjoyments for which human nature was created".¹¹⁴ The challenge to reason, individually and understood as political wisdom, is therefore to give direction to inordinate self-love and make it subservient to the public good and interest. Like Galiani, Tucker concludes with an allusion to Newtonian physics. The cooperation between reason and social love or benevolence in the "circulation of commerce" in society is comparable to the centrifugal and centripetal powers in the planetary system. Yet an important difference is that the heavenly bodies interact with constancy and regularity thanks to the guidance and direction of an "unerring Wisdom", while the affairs of commerce are subject to irregularities due to the fallible wisdom of man.

¹¹³ Josiah Tucker, *Seventeen Sermon on some of the Most Important Points on Natural and Revealed Religion* (1776), serm. VII, p. 139.

¹¹⁴ Josiah Tucker, [The Elements of Commerce and the Theory of Taxes] (1755), p. 3.

It is clear that self-love serves as one of the axioms in Tucker's political economy. As he argues in the introduction to his *Elements*, legislative powers cannot create new powers or faculties in human nature or change them and therefore need to take man's natural disposition to commerce and strong passion of self-love as the foundation of further decisions. As regards the latter passion, "it must be taken hold of by some method or other; and so trained or guided by its operations, that its activity may never be mischievous, but always productive of the public welfare", which is defined as the increase, employment and virtuous behaviour of the state's subjects. Of the two methods to regulate self-love in society, to wit penal laws and judicious polity, the second is to be preferred since it encourages people by their free choice to virtuous industry. One of the means available to the legislator is taxes and on this subject Tucker, as neo-mercantilist, has a clear stance: "abolish every tax, and remove all impediments whatever, which might prevent self-love, the grand mover, from operating for the public good: but bar up with high taxes, duties, and impositions, all the avenues, and by-paths, which might make an opening for irregular, or corrupt self-love to decline from the great road of private virtue, and public happiness".¹¹⁵

Dean Tucker, who influenced various English economists as well as the Physiocrats, was an outspoken advocate of the regulation of self-love, simultaneously by man himself and from above. Although he certainly believed in the possibility of a harmony of public and private interests, it could not be seen as complete and self-realizing. Two years before writing the *Elements*, Tucker in the third edition of his *Essay on Trade* still stressed the social evils of unbridled self-interest. Yet, as we have seen, he did not regard self-love as such as an evil, but only the wrong employment of this passion implanted by the Creator. Human beings will only attain happiness if their self-love is supervised by reason and reflection and is, as it were, transformed into enlightened self-love. This explains why Tucker's view is consistent with the observation that is was "an absurdity ... in the author of *The Fable of the Bees*, to say that private vices are public benefits. It is virtue alone, which can make a nation flourish, and vice of every kind is, either immediately, or in its consequences, injurious to commerce".¹¹⁶ Man's pure self-love would be truly detrimental to the public interest, but with the aid of reason it becomes an industrious and cooperative force that is conducive to it.

Among the economic writers of the eighteenth century, Boisguilbert, the Physiocrats, Galiani and Tucker were most explicit about the role of God in regulating man's self-love. Others believing in the possibility of a harmony of interests may have had a similar belief in the providential nature of it, but at least did not entrust it to paper that way. That thanks to the Creator self-love and the social are inseparable and always one and the same probably needed no justification anymore as it was evident, as one writer expressed

¹¹⁵ Tucker, *Elements of Commerce*, pp. 169-170

¹¹⁶ Josiah Tucker, *A Brief Essay on the Advantages and Disadvantages Which respectively attend France and Great Britain, With Regard to Trade* (1753), p. 130n. The essay is better known after its shorter title, *An Essay on Trade*.

it, to “all the thinking part of mankind”.¹¹⁷ Before proceeding to the conclusions of this chapter, for the sake of completeness two lesser known examples in which the problem of self-interest was related to the working of Providence will be discussed.

In the first example, the idea of a providential reconciliation of private vices and public benefits is applied to an international affair. The essay in question, which received little to none attention in the secondary literature, is of special interest because it does so in response to the “witty wicked” writer Mandeville. Its anonymous British author is ultimately concerned with the clandestine exportation of unfinished wool out of Ireland to France, which ensures that Great Britain is bereft of its natural advantage. Of the product of wool, “Providence has poured upon [Britain] an abundance, with un unsparing hand; as if this best gift of heaven was conferred on a free people, as the reward of their virtue, in preserving their liberty by various mighty struggles”.¹¹⁸ The author establishes that various means to prevent the clandestine exportation of this “golden fleecy” have been proposed, but none of them was successful. One of the schemes that he himself proposes is to give Ireland a share of the profit made by the exportation of manufactured wool.

Only by making it every man’s private interest to prevent clandestine exportation will it really stop. “Thus”, the author argues, “the Wisdom of Providence operates on the affairs of mankind: for every private virtue contributes as well to the general good, as to the possessors! Even private vices, tho’ far from being the necessary means of public benefit, (as a witty wicked author has attempted to prove) yet are by the Wisdom of Providence converted, in a variety of instances, to that excellence purpose. Thus avarice doubles the diligence of some, and luxury whets the invention of others, to explore new arts, and refine manufactures, either ornamental, or convenient to life. As therefore the private interest of individuals generally terminates by the scheme of Providence in public good, so it is the perfection of the human to imitate the divine Wisdom, in making the private advantage of every man subservient as much as possible to the general good of society.”¹¹⁹ Through the wise art of policy, the same may be effected with respect to Ireland. By making it her interest not to export unfinished wool, the public good of Britain and Ireland will equally be served.

In the second example, the pursuit of self-interest is identified as the God-ordained origin of trade and commerce. As we have seen, other writers in this respect preferred to point to different endowments. The English free trader George Whatley, however, identifies the hope of gain and advantage as main spring of trade and commerce between individuals and nations. This desire for what is useful and comfortable was given to humans because God wanted to establish mutual dependence everywhere in His creation. While mortal man believes that everything exists solely for his own utility and interest, his pursuit of it contributes also to that of others. It is indisputable, Whatley writes in his foreword to his *Reflections on the Principle of Trade*, that “our wants,

¹¹⁷ Alexander Murray, *The True Interest of Great Britain, Ireland and our Plantations* (1740), p. 28.

¹¹⁸ ‘A merchant’, *An Essay On the Improvement of the Woollen Manufacture, and of Some other Branches of Trade depending thereon* (1741), p. 3.

¹¹⁹ *An Essay On the Improvement of the Woollen Manufacture*, pp. 6-7.

whether real or ideal; and the passions implanted in us by our all-wise Creator; are the springs of our actions, and serve as movers of the general intercourse, or trade of mankind".¹²⁰ Thus not only the incentive to obtain 'real' wants like food, drink and clothing is innate, but also the desire for 'ideal' wants of luxury. For without the latter, trade and commerce would come to an end once all necessities are supplied. To prevent this, "delight, and opinion, came in aid, to cause ... an ideal want: which want, our passions put into our make by the Almighty Hand that formed us, cause us to be almost as solicitous to provide for, and, to supply, as if such wants are real".¹²¹ The love of gain, whether real or ideal, is thus implanted in people to sustain their intercourse.

6.5 Concluding remarks

Even without having provided a complete overview of the debate, this chapter showed how during the early-modern period the dangers of self-interested behaviour in the domestic economy were more and more relativized. Moral philosophers began to focus on man as he really is and tried to demonstrate that human society is basically a reciprocal exchange of goods and services, driven by particular interests and motivated by self-love. If for them 'traffic' and 'commerce' still stood for human interaction in general, writers on economics applied this idea to the economic realm. Thanks to market competition, private interests may have public economic benefits and manifestations of excessive self-love will be neutralized. Only a handful of eighteenth-century texts on economics explicitly described these transformations in terms of providential activity. Others who expressed their faith in harmonies of interest in less exalted words may have presupposed a divine order that tempers the all-too strong self-love of man. As we have seen, the existence of such social and psychological mechanisms were among others defended by the French Jansenists and the British followers of Shaftesbury, two groups that demonstrably influenced the socio-economic theory of the period and helped to prepare for more systematic views of *laissez faire*.

The gradual affirmation of self-love and self-interest as described in this chapter was truly revolutionary. How much attitudes had shifted during the seventeenth and eighteenth century is clear from a contest organized in 1767 by the 'Hollandsche Maatschappye der Weetenschappen' (Dutch Society of Sciences).¹²² The three prizewinning essays all answer the question 'whether in our doings and dealings it is allowable to take advantage of the ignorance of our fellows' in the affirmative. In view of the moral

¹²⁰ [George Whatley], *Reflections on the Principle of Trade in General* (1769), p. iii. Note that this book was possibly co-authored by Whatley's friend Benjamin Franklin. The idea is repeated in the foreword and subsequent pages of Whatley's *Principles of Trade* (1774), which in one of its footnotes, a possible contribution by Franklin, first introduced the maxims "Laissez nous faire. Let us alone" and "Pas trop gouverner: Not to govern too strictly" in the English literature.

¹²¹ Whatley, *Reflections on the Principle of Trade in General*, p. 12. Interestingly, Whatley defines luxury in a Mandevillean sense as whatever is not strictly necessary for life.

¹²² See 'Antwoord op de vraag ...: is het geoorloofd in onzen handel en wandel, met de onkunde van onze medemenschen, ons voordeel te doen?', in *Verhandelingen, uitgegeeven door de Hollandsche Maatschappye der Weetenschappen, te Haarlem*, vol. X, part I (1768), pp. 1-458.

and economic theories discussed in this chapter this conclusion may no longer be surprising, were it not that the authors in question were all theologians, trained for the ministry. Instead of stressing the evils of self-love or pleading for charity, something a divine from a previous century was likely to have done, they expressly praise the pursuit of self-interest and do so by referring to the divine plan. The all-pervasive self-interest is seen not as a sin but as natural fact which somehow embodies a higher aim of the Creator.

Willem de Vos, minister of the Mennonite Church in Amsterdam, stresses that the desire for our own happiness and well-being is innate and therefore the pursuit of it is justified, provided that no one else is harmed. The fact that self-interested behaviour may increase economic inequality does not alter this conclusion. Each individual “is allowed to privately strive for a condition of abundance. To do so is not contrary to God’s purposes, but fully consistent with it”.¹²³ Paul Franck, minister at the Walloon Church in Zutphen, supposes that God furnished man with several passions so as to establish mutual wants and advantages. “Providence”, he claims, “implanted in our hearts an unconquerable inclination to augment the pleasures of life, and to make it bearable for mortals”.¹²⁴ Finally, Samuel Formey, theologian and author of the lemma ‘Religion, philosophie’ in the French *Encyclopédie*, expresses the belief that reason is a much too weak bulwark against the passionate force of self-interest. Actually there is no need to oppress it, since man is surrounded by gifts from Heaven which he may seize. “From above, from his immortal Throne, the supreme Dispensator pouring and scattering his gifts abundantly over mankind”, Formey writes, it is important “that they make sure to hasten to obtain them, and be quicker than others; by doing so, they do nothing else than fulfilling the purpose of the Judge, who promised the prize in the race to those who are the most able”.¹²⁵

Unlike the examples of economic divine providence discussed in the other chapters of this book, the central idea of this chapter, that God has a hand in the regulation of self-interest, is peculiar to the early-modern period. That is to say, instead of being derived from classical antiquity and applied to the new economic reality of post-medieval society, this idea seems to be first voiced in the period itself.¹²⁶ And understandably so,

¹²³ Willem de Vos, ‘Antwoord op de vraag’, p. 19: “Hy mag voor zich zelven streeven, om tot een staat van meerder overvloed te geraaken. Zulks te doen, strydt niet tegen de Goddelyke oogmerken, maar is daar mede ten vollen overeenkomstig”.

¹²⁴ P[aul] Franck, ‘Antwoord op de vraag’, p. 181: “De Voorzienigheid heeft in onze harten deeze onverwinnelyke neiging in geplant, om de geneugten des leevens te vermeerderen, en het zelve voor de stervelingen draaglyk te maken”.

¹²⁵ [Johann Heinrich] S[amuel] Formey, ‘Antwoord op de vraag’, p. 379: “Dus is, van boven uit zynen onsterflyken Troon, de opperste Zegenaar zyne gaven in volle mate uitstortende, en als uitstrooijende onder het menschdom: dat zy daar op passen, dat zy zich haasten, de zelven te verkrygen, dat zy andere voorkomen; met dit alles doen zy niets anders, dan aan het oogmerk beantwoorden van den Rechter, die den prys in de loopbaan gesteld heeft voor de genen, die de vaardigsten zyn”.

¹²⁶ According to Spiegel, *The Growth of Economic Thought*, p. 226 the “roots” of the idea that private interests might be made to serve the public interest “may be traced to the theological thought of earlier generations” and “may have evolved from the notion of a divine plan which the individual fulfils regardless of his intentions”. Unfortunately, except from an example from John Chrysostom, this claim is not supported by evidence.

related as it was to the legitimacy and benefits of self-interested behaviour, questions that were occasioned by the emergence of modern society. Be that as it may, also the idea of a providential transformation of self-interest built on earlier motives. The most important is probably that, although not the author of evil Himself, God is able to use the sin of men for some good end and to draw some good out of every evil, an idea espoused by Augustine, Aquinas, and many other theologians in the history of Christianity. Furthermore, the view of institutions like civil society and the market as a divine remedy for the consequences of sin goes back to the doctrine of common grace, popularized in Calvinist theology but eventually rooted in Scripture itself. Few ideas are truly original and the same applies to the providential arguments uttered in the debate on self-interest.

As promised I conclude with a few remarks on one of the most famous ideas from the history of economic thought, namely Adam Smith's invisible hand. Of the three times that this metaphor is used in his work, only two occur in an economic context. The first, from the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, is related to the issue of self-interest. The sole end of rich landowners in employing thousands of poor labourers, Smith argues, is "their own conveniency" and "the gratification of their own vain and insatiable desires". At the same time, they share with the poor the produce of the land and afford means to the multiplication of the species. The rich "are led by an invisible hand to make nearly the same distribution of the necessaries of life" as when the land was not unequally divided "and thus, without intending it, without knowing it, advance the interest of the society". This shows, he concludes, that when "providence" divided the earth among the rich, He did not forget the landless poor. The second occurrence, from the *Wealth of Nations*, is part of a discussion of how investors employ their capital. In some cases, Smith explains, it may be more profitable and secure for them to prefer the domestic industry to the foreign industry. This, however, also benefits the public good. While such an investor only intends his own gain, "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. ... By pursuing his own interest he frequently promotes that of the society more effectually than when he really intends to promote it".¹²⁷

On these two passages from Smith's work alone there exists a vast body of literature. It would therefore be presumptuous to draw quick conclusions. Among scholars there is serious disagreement, not so much about the message of these passages, but rather about the meaning of the invisible hand. Does this metaphor refer to the providence of God and, if so, is it meant seriously or ironically?¹²⁸ In response to this question two things are safe to say. The first is that the passages, despite having a different context, both deal with the relationship between self-interest or private gain and the interests of society at large. The second is that the metaphor of the 'divine' hand, which in

¹²⁷ Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), p. 350 and *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (1776), vol. II, p. 35.

¹²⁸ Gramp, 'What did Smith mean by the invisible hand?' already mentions nine different interpretations. A still plausible account is provided by Viner, 'Adam Smith and laissez faire'. For an example of a completely different reading, see Emma Rothschild, 'The bloody and invisible hand', in *Economic Sentiments*, pp. 116-156.

Smith's examples takes care of the unintended public benefits, had been used before to explain the role played by Providence in the transformation of self-interest.¹²⁹ Regardless of whether Smith attached much importance to it, it is therefore not far-fetched to interpret the image of the invisible hand in a providential way. The fact that the first occurrence is immediately followed by a remark on "providence" and the whole *Theory of Moral Sentiments* is embedded in a deistic framework only reinforce this presumption. What the current chapter anyhow shows is that serious discussions of the role of self-interest existed long before the *Wealth of Nations* was published.

¹²⁹ Harrison, 'Adam Smith and the history of the invisible hand'. See also Force, *Self-Interest before Adam Smith*, pp. 67-75 ('Providence and the invisible hand').

Poverty and inequality: rich and poor God-willed

7.1 Introduction

Despite all the economic optimism to which the previous chapters testify, poverty and economic inequality were the order of the day. Very symbolically, Adam Smith's *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, dealing with wealth, was preceded by a book titled *An Enquiry into the Causes of the Encrease and Miseries of the Poor of England* (1738) by a writer called Thomas Andrews. Widespread poverty in the early-modern period indeed was a matter of fact.¹ Paupers, beggars and vagrants were everywhere and dwelled amidst the better-off. Groups of hungry poor wandered from place to place, in search of food and work. Malnutrition, starvation and child labour were not exceptional but common phenomena in this otherwise progressive age. Some of the causes of these troubles, like recurring crop failures, epidemics and wars, were of all times. Others, such as the price revolution, the restructuring of industry and the rise of capitalism more general were peculiar to the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The period undoubtedly witnessed a substantial economic advance, but brought no change in the great economic inequality that it inherited from the late Middle Ages. Unemployment, impoverishment and vagabondage were structural problems that were aggravated rather than countered by the agrarian and commercial expansion of pre-Industrial Europe.

Precise figures on the extent of poverty are unavailable. Before the nineteenth century, demographic statistics were irregularly collected and highly unreliable. The first attempts in 'political arithmetic' suggest that the poor represented more than one third of the population.² In his 'Scheme of the income and expense of the several families of England calculated for the year 1688', Gregory King estimated that 2,575,000 out of 5,500,000 people in England either were beggars or unable to satisfy their elementary needs from their wages. According to Sébastien Le Prestre de Vauban in 1707, in France the number of beggars formed 10 per cent, while a third of the population was on the brink of poverty. Now, as then, the key question is how poverty should be defined. Being poor is a relative concept that is dependent on the living standard and social expectations

¹ For general introductions, see Gutton, *La société et les pauvres en Europe, XVI^e-XVIII^e siècles*; Lis & Soly, *Poverty and Capitalism in Pre-Industrial Europe*; Geremek, *Poverty*. A helpful yet somewhat dated bibliography is provided in Woolf, *The Poor in Western Europe in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries*.

² Geremek, *Poverty*, p. 119.

of a given society. Modern estimates based on taxation records show that in the period the number of have-nots, unable to pay any taxes, in urban communities could be up to 77.0 per cent (Verona, 1635) and in rural communities 41.5 (Brabant, 1750). Statistics on poor relief recipients which may be more representative suggest that the number of structurally poor households as percentage of the total population could be up to 24.8 per cent (Trier, 1623) in cities and 23.0 (Kenilworth, England, 1663-4) in the countryside.³ These, however, were only the registered cases.

It is therefore safe to say that poverty was the most pressing socio-economic issue of the period. Partially caused by population growth, swelling numbers of beggars and vagrants rendered ecclesiastical and private charity inadequate and necessitated public organization of poor relief. Secular concerns with the problem were not new but it was only in the sixteenth century that social policy aimed at the alleviation of poverty first emerged. Ordinances were issued to ban begging, compel the poor to work and to prevent migration of paupers. In some countries poor laws with compulsory poor rates were introduced to keep public support affordable. In the following centuries, all over Europe so-called workhouses, charity schools, *hôpitaux généraux*, *rasp- en spinhuizen* and *Zuchthäusern* were established for paupers and their children, intended as places of labour, discipline and religious instruction. The poor, and especially the idle and unwilling among them, needed to be supervised, since in the public perception they formed a continuous threat. Their laziness was thought to be a bad example for others, their dissatisfaction could easily degenerate into disturbances of public order, and their wandering was associated with the spread of infectious diseases. The exaltation of voluntary poverty, as once had existed in medieval times, belonged to the past and was being replaced by overall concern.

The fate of the poor not only alarmed the political authorities. Also intellectuals, typically to be found among the middle-classes, regarded poverty and its excesses as a problem that required public attention. As early as the sixteenth century, humanists and Protestant Reformers had pointed to the dangers of mass poverty. Later on, in the last decades of the eighteenth century, provincial academies in France offered prizes for essays dealing with vagrancy, begging and poor relief. In the intermediate period, various groups of writers contributed to what may be called a public debate on pauperism.⁴ Political thinkers, first of all, were concerned with peace and stability and discussed the state's responsibility to assist the poor. Theologians agitated against lending at interest to the needy and wrote on the respective duties of the rich and the poor. Clergymen, in turn, addressed the subject of poverty in their charity-sermons, and urged the wealthy members of their congregations to do works of charity.⁵ Economic writers, finally, discussed

³ Jütte, *Poverty and Deviance in Early Modern Europe*, ch. 4 'The extent of poverty'.

⁴ Geremek, *Poverty*, ch. 5 'Charitable polemics: local politics and reasons of state'; Norberg, 'Poverty'.

⁵ Andrew, 'On reading charity sermons'. A two-volume collection of late-seventeenth and eighteenth-century French charity sermon can be found in *Les Avocats Des Pauvres, ou Sermons ... Sur les Richesses, sur l'Avarice et sur l'Aumône* (1814). Various English sermons related to charity

the effectivity of poor laws and workhouses, and proposed highly diverse schemes for employing the poor. Generally speaking, utilitarian rather than humanitarian reasons to relieve poverty prevailed. The conviction that in some cases having poor people is not only preventable but also undesirable had to await the enlightened intellectual climate of the second half of the eighteenth century.

The language and images used to describe the poor were very diverse.⁶ More unanimity existed about the phenomenon of poverty as such. A controversial explanation, also among orthodox writers, was to suggest a general connection between misfortune and moral deficiency. Even though examples from Scripture and more recent history showed that in individual cases poverty could be interpreted as divine punishment imposed on sinners, this could not be raised to a universal truth. For on closer inspection the pious and the poor were partly overlapping groups. If there was an undeniable connection at all, then it was between prosperity and virtuousness. Yet far more common were providential interpretations of poverty and economic misfortune.⁷ More than ever before, it seems, in the early-modern period it was believed that riches and poverty are God-ordained categories. Or, to say it with the title of a contemporary sermon, that there is such a thing as a “providential division of men into rich and poor”.⁸ Ultimately a consequence of the Fall of man (to many still an undeniable historical fact), Providence for wise purposes could have decided to preserve economic inequality throughout the ages. Even if it was hard if not impossible to explain on an individual level why some persons are rich and others poor, there might be an underlying divine logic that sanctions such differences.

The providential interpretation of riches and poverty must have been fostered by the Protestant idea of different worldly callings, as discussed in chapter 4. Diversity of occupations after all implied diversity of economic conditions, and the emphasis of Calvinist and Puritan preachers at first was always on being content with one's God-given calling.⁹ Man's earthly state was allotted to him by God and came with specific duties and responsibilities. Calvin, like Luther and various other theologians before, believed that the unequal distribution of material goods was a special dispensation of divine providence. “Therefore, let us realize”, he reasons in one of his sermons, “when there are poor and rich people in this world, that God ordains it so, and that it comes from his provi-

schools are collected in *Twenty Five Sermons Preached at the Anniversary Meetings of the Children Educated in the Charity Schools* (1729).

⁶ Jütte, *Poverty and Deviance in Early Modern Europe*, ch. 2 ‘Images of poverty’.

⁷ Viner, ‘The providential origins of social inequality’, in *The Role of Providence in the Social Order*, pp. 86-113; Harvey, ‘English poverty and God's providence’.

⁸ Robert Moss, *The Providential Division of Men into Rich and Poor, and the respective duties thence arising, briefly consider'd in a Sermon* (1708). Cf. Johann Christian Rende, *Reiche und Arme, wie sie Gottes weise Fürsehung neben einander setzet* (1736); John Allen, *The Ends of Providence in appointing that the Poor we should have always with us, consider'd in a Sermon* (1741); and J. Richardson, *The Beauty of Providence in bringing together the Rich and the Poor. A Sermon* (1753).

⁹ Robertson, *Aspects of the Rise of Economic Individualism*, pp. 6-15.

dence".¹⁰ In the light of the divine riches, the existence on earth of poverty may seem paradoxical, but it would not exist unless it had spiritual advantages. For instance, wealth and poverty serve as tests of faith and love. The appeal to the rich is not to succumb to the temptations of money and to share their wealth with the poor, while the latter are demanded to be content with their lot and to put their hope in their Saviour. Still it remains mysterious why God chooses to make one man rich and leave the others in poverty. As the Dutch Reformed theologian Johannes Hoornbeek (or Hoornbeeck) observed in his *Theologiæ practicæ* (1663), there is a striking parallel here with the seemingly unjust predestination, i.e. the election of a limited number of souls to eternal salvation *vis-à-vis* the rejection of others.¹¹

On the one hand, the belief in a divinely sanctioned division into rich and poor was based on the metaphysical assumption that nothing in this world is accidental. Poverty had always existed and likely for good reasons. The Almighty, an English divine remarked, either through miracles or otherwise could easily have prevented poverty by making everyone rich. Apparently it is not part of social life by chance but by a deliberate choice of God. In addition, there were several verses from Scripture which hinted at such a division. Statements like "the Lord maketh poor, and maketh rich" (1 Samuel 2:7), "the rich and poor meet together: the Lord is the maker of them all" (Proverbs 22:2), and a text from the Book of Job saying that rich and poor "all are the work of his hands" (34:19), to give some examples, were eagerly reiterated by clergyman and secular writers alike. An infamous statement by none other than Christ, "ye have the poor with you always" (Mark 14:7), was taken as evidence for the unsolvable nature of poverty, although as Juan Luis Vives asserted in his treatise about poor relief, only by those "who would like to be thought of as theologians who cite a passage from the Gospel, without reference to the context in which it is located".¹² Building on a long Christian tradition, it naturally was acknowledged that in Scripture the poor hold a privileged position and numerous texts unreservedly call for works of charity. This however did not prevent early-modern writers from viewing economic inequality as such as providential.

In this chapter, the ways in which poverty and inequality were associated with higher purposes will be discussed in more detail. No attempt will be made to give an overview of thinking about poverty in general or of the development of poor policies and poor relief. The focus here is on providentialist explanations and justifications of the unequal distribution of wealth, a disparity that was still growing in our period of interest. In the next section (§ 7.2) some traditional, often ancient ideas about the hand of God in poverty will be considered. Since the subject was far from limited to writers on economics, it is mainly theologians and philosophers that pass in review here. The subsequent section (§ 7.3) zooms in on the economic literature of the period and its emphasis on the

¹⁰ Quoted in Hart, 'The teaching of Luther and Calvin about ordinary work: 2. John Calvin (1509-1564)', p. 124.

¹¹ Weber, 'Die protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus', p. 198n379.

¹² Joanni Lodovici Vivis, *De subventione pauperum* (1526), p. 60: "Sunt qui volunt theologi videri, idcirco aliquid ex Euangelio adducunt, nihil interest quam ad rem" (transl. from *On Assistance to the Poor*).

benefits of poverty and class stratification. In the section that follows (§ 7.4) it is examined whether, broadly speaking, the Enlightenment can be said to have caused a change of attitude towards questions of poverty and inequality. In the penultimate section (§ 7.5) the discussion will be broadened to an international perspective. Indeed, not only differences in wealth between members of the same society were subject of debate, but also differences between nations as a whole, and here also providentialist reasoning proved useful. The final section (§ 7.6) concludes our discussion.

7.2 God wills it: justifications from theology and philosophy

The increased stress in the period on God's benevolence did not mean that issues of poverty and inequality were ignored. The existence of poverty formed an age-old theological problem that recurred in the early-modern debate over providence, for example through the reintroduction of pagan concepts like fate and fortune. Traditionally, the problem had been levelled against believers in any form of divine care. Why, after all, is there such a thing as scarcity and material suffering if a perfectly good God cares for man? The contrast between the rich and the poor as objection to God's providence already figured as commonplace in the writings of the patristic authors. One of Theodoret's discourses on divine providence is precisely devoted to questions of wealth and poverty. For what reason, as the bishop summarizes the complaints of the sceptics, "has the Creator not given the gift of wealth to all men instead of allotting wealth to some and poverty to others, leaving life full of anomalies?".¹³ Equally pressing is the other question that he addresses, namely why the moral economy of life seems to fail. For, contrary to what one would reasonably expect, wicked people are wealthy while the virtuous live in poverty. The same puzzle, incidentally, was central to Seneca's *De providentia*, an influential dialogue on the providence of the gods, written from a Stoic point of view.

The objections to providence from poverty faced by the Church Fathers were just as challenging to the early-modern mind. They were addressed in sermons, physico-theological treatises and discourses on providence. As an example of the latter, William Sherlock in his *Discourse Concerning the Divine Providence* (1694) pays full attention to the problem, treating poverty as one of the evils and miseries of human life that can be objected against God's goodness. Stressing that it is largely a man-made phenomenon and that therefore the Creator cannot be held responsible for it, the clergyman paradoxically maintains that God uses economic distress for man's own good. Hence his conclusion that "whatever our state and condition be, or what extraordinary good or evil happens to us, we must receive all as from the hand of God. If we are poor, we must own this to be God's will and appointment that we should be poor".¹⁴ A son of a tradesman, Sherlock cannot resist adding that submission to Providence does not forbid someone to enrich himself. But until it is God's time to change his fortune and condition, the poor

¹³ Theodoret of Cyrus, *On Divine Providence*, disc. 6 'That wealth and poverty both have their uses in life'.

¹⁴ William Sherlock, *A Discourse Concerning the Divine Providence* (1694), p. 346.

man must stick to his station of life in all quietness and contentment. Against the unnamed “philosophers” who have left the path of revelation and attribute the inequality of conditions to “imaginary causes”, also Pluche in one of his physico-theological dialogues maintains that its true cause is supernatural. The diversity of conditions among the members of society was introduced by God himself.¹⁵

Another indication of the growing awareness of the theological difficulties surrounding poverty and inequality were the monographs on the subject that appeared. In early 1776, Christian Friedrich Engelmann(n) published *Armuth und Reichthum oder Betrachtungen über die Weisheit und Güte Gottes bey der ungleichen Austheilung zeitlicher Glücksgüter*. The visible inequality between people, he claims, can only be adequately accounted for in terms of higher divine government. In short, “[t]here are rich and poor in the world because God wills it”.¹⁶ As the German-Austrian pastor explains in the remaining fifty pages, the intelligent plan behind this division that is mysterious to some is nevertheless reasonable. The unequal division of temporal blessings yields several advantages (*Vortheile*) that would otherwise not have occurred. Were there no distinction between rich and poor (those who possess less than what they really need), then the total happiness of all human beings, which was the ultimate end of God in creating it, would be lower than is the case now. The apparent “disorder in the world, which emerges from the unequal division of temporal blessings, ... contributes everything to the preservation of the order of the whole, and therefore also to a greater perfection and happiness”.¹⁷

The problem of theodicy

The ‘optimistic’ argumentation displayed by Engelmann betrays his indebtedness to the eighteenth-century discourse on evil, to which also the phenomenon of poverty was reckoned. A matter of debate since the beginning of philosophy, the quest for the origin of evil gained new relevance in the light of early-modern philosophical developments.¹⁸ Openly challenged by Pierre Bayle who relied on *nota bene* Epicurus to illustrate the impossibility of a rational explanation of evil, many intellectuals of the time felt the need to account for its origin. Unwilling to accept the idea that existence is fundamentally evil or that evil is inherent in matter, many believed that the reality of suffering, pain and misfortune had to be reconciled with the doctrine of providence. Several thinkers, of

¹⁵ [Noël-Antoine Pluche], *Le spectacle de la nature*, vol. VI (1747), pp. 262-290 on ‘La diversité des conditions’.

¹⁶ Christian Friedrich Engelmann, *Armuth und Reichthum oder Betrachtungen über die Weisheit und Güte Gottes bey der ungleichen Austheilung zeitlicher Glücksgüter* (1776), p. 19: “Es sind Arme und Reiche in der Welt, weil Gott es will”.

¹⁷ Engelmann, *Armuth und Reichthum*, p. 36: “die [scheinbare] Unordnung in der Welt, welche aus der ungleichen Austheilung zeitlicher Glücksgüter entsteht, ... grade alles zur Erhaltung der Ordnung des Ganzen, mithin auch zu mehrerer Vollkommenheit und Glückseligkeit beytrage”.

¹⁸ In addition to the literature mentioned in chapter 2, footnote 49, see Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought*, pp. 18-35 (‘God’s advocates: Leibniz and Pope’); Lloyd, *Providence Lost*, ch. 7 ‘Designer worlds’.

whom William King and Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz are best remembered, devised elaborated theodicies to vindicate God's omnipotence, goodness and justice in the face of the existence of evil. Though still defended by more orthodox writers, especially in the Pietistic tradition, traditional explanations in terms of original sin and divine punishment were deemed less satisfactory. In most cases, they were tacitly absorbed into optimistic systems of thought that stressed the preponderance of good over evil. The existence of evil in the world could not be denied, but was less problematic for the belief in God's care and benevolence as had sometimes been suggested.

In the debate that was revived at the turn of the century and eventually resulted in the collapse of rational theodicy, age-old and mostly Augustinian-Thomistic ideas and distinctions proved useful. Depending on the purpose, evil could for example be presented in different ways: as something essentially negative (evil as a deprivation of good), relative (evil as gradual phenomenon) or imaginary (evil as apparent disorder and imperfection). In addition, a helpful tripartition could be made between evils of different kinds: physical evil (suffering, either due to natural processes or arising from human behaviour) had to be distinguished from moral evil (the consequences of sin and vice, resulting from man's free will) and metaphysical evil (the inevitable imperfection caused by the limitations of finite created things). God, in turn, was rarely called the author of evil, but rather the one who in creating the world minimized it and in the course of history still permits or uses it. Building on seventeenth-century French precursors, various writers portrayed the world as the best possible one (*mundus optimus*), involving a minimum and inevitable amount of evil. Combining these and other ideas, the theodicists could maintain that the happiness of man was the principal part of the design of this world.

The question of poverty and inequality in their writings was mainly implicit, often grouped under the unpreventable natural evils.¹⁹ Leibniz, for example, in his *Essais de theodicée* wasted only a few sentences on it. "One does not", he writes somewhere in the third part on suffering, "include among the disorders inequality of conditions, & Mr. Jacquelot is justified to ask those who would like everything to be equally perfect, why rocks are not crowned with leaves & flowers? why ants are not peacocks? And if there must be equality everywhere, the poor man would serve notice of appeal against the rich, the servant against the master. The pipes of an organ must not be of equal size".²⁰ More elaborate was Soame Jenyns's discussion. Two years after being appointed one of the commissioners of trade and plantations, the English author and politician in his *Free Inquiry into the Nature and Origin of Evil* declared that poverty is something "the world

¹⁹ A background is provided in Waterman, *Revolution, Economics & Religion*, pp. 62-82 ('Theodicy and eighteenth-century social theory').

²⁰ Gottfried Leibniz, *Essais de theodicée sur la bonté de Dieu, la liberté de l'homme et l'origine du mal* (1714²), prt. 3, § 246, pp. 426-427: "On ne compte point parmi les désordres l'inégalité des conditions, & M. Jacquelot a raison de demander à ceux qui voudroient que tout fût également parfait, pourquoi les roches ne sont pas couronnées de feuilles & de fleurs? pourquoi les fourmis ne sont pas de paons? Et s'il fallait de l'égalité par tout, le pauvre présenteroit requête contre le riche, le valet contre le maître. Il ne faut pas que les tuyaux d'un jeu d'orgues soient égaux". The remark by the Huguenot theologian Isaac Jacquelot can be found in his *Conformité de la foi avec la raison* (1705), a book written in opposition to Pierre Bayle.

could not subsist without".²¹ Rather than under the evils of imperfection, which in the end are not evils at all, poverty in the book is classified under the "real" natural evils. The "want of riches", as Jenyns pejoratively defines the phenomenon, is a necessary consequence of human nature. Like other natural evils such as labour, pain and death, it could not have been prevented even by the Almighty. If economic inequality had been omitted from the creation, a greater evil would have been introduced, resulting in a significant reduction of universal happiness. Poverty, therefore, is an inevitable aspect of the best possible world we live in.

Traditional arguments

Though controversial, the underlying approach of the theodicists that stressed the benevolence of God received much acclaim in the period. It was in stark contrast with the stance of more conservative writers who tended to call the working of Providence in the social order mysterious.²² While the latter admitted that the existence of poverty could not be mere chance, the reason why it was inevitable was thought to be incomprehensible to human understanding. The downside to this view was that it destroyed any link between moral conduct and material reward and, still more problematic, rendered the divine plan irrational. The theodicists and writers on providence like Sherlock and Engelman, however, believed that the deeper meaning of poverty and economic inequality could be revealed. If God's governance in the face of these natural evils was not entirely clear, at least some plausible explanations could be provided. Interestingly, most of them were derived from pre-modern thought and applied in the context of early-modern debates. In the following pages, the three main strategies will be discussed.

Firstly, inequalities with respect to wealth could be accounted for in aesthetic terms. According to a metaphysical idea of Platonic origins, there is beauty in variety and gradation. To some, the different states and classes in human society were just one manifestation of the differences that are perceivable anywhere around us. Stones, plants and animals, for example, are not alike but diversified in an infinite way. Also in the upper world inequality is a fact. Scripture says there exists a heavenly hierarchy of archangels, cherubim and seraphim. All these differences, celestial as well as terrestrial, can be seen as an end in itself, making up the aesthetics of God's creation. In the words of an English divine, the "variety, distinction, subordination, which are visible every where, and prevail all over creation ... are sure to promote the beauty of nature, and the perfection of the universe".²³ Centuries before, Thomas Aquinas in his *Summa theologiæ* had taken the gradations of lifeless and living beings as proof for the existence of God. Given that some things are more and some less good, true and noble, there must be something that is truest, best and noblest, and this being we call God.

²¹ [Soame Jenyns], *A Free Inquiry into the Nature and Origin of Evil* (1757), p. 50.

²² See, for example, Harvey, 'English poverty and God's providence', pp. 503-504.

²³ John Balguy, 'A second letter to a Deist', p. 326, quoted in Viner, *The Role of Providence*, p. 90.

That economic inequality could be seen as a subclass of inequality in general is even clearer in view of the so-called ‘great chain of being’-idea.²⁴ According to this conception of the universe, which can be traced all the way back to Greek philosophy and in the early-modern period was accepted by most educated men, God’s creation is so perfect that it comprises a full and continuous range of all possible species, beings and things. Whether or not out of metaphysical necessity, everything conceivable to the unparalleled creativity of the Creator had to be realized in the actual world. Together with the Aristotelian conception of continuity (which imagined a continuous series of qualitatively different things), this Platonist principle of plenitude or fullness allowed for the idea of a chain of things and beings in nature. Ranking them from the most inferior to the most perfect forms in an ascending sequence, such diverse things as minerals, plants, trees, animals, humans and angels could all be assigned their own place in the ladder or scale of nature (*scala naturæ*). Whereas the lowest links in the chain were said to be material, possessing only existence, the highest ones existed completely in spiritual form. In between were the living things, including man who resided halfway the chain and is characterized by material as well as spiritual features.

From the idea of a hierarchy of creatures, politico-economic conclusions in favour of the unequal status quo could easily be drawn.²⁵ Leibniz, perhaps the most enthusiastic advocate of the idea of the great chain of being in his times, already claimed it follows that the world is most perfect, not only in a metaphysical or physical sense but also from a moral point of view. Besides being a stunning mechanism, in other words, the world is the “best republic” that confers the greatest possible measure of happiness upon its subjects. By implication the scale of nature needed to be reflected within each of its links, and so too in the microcosm of man. It required that also in society, a hierarchy within a hierarchy, all ranks from beggar to king be filled up. Jenyns, whose *Free Inquiry* provides a full statement of the “scale of beings” as well, reasons along these lines. The essence of a system like the universe, we are told, consists in subordination of parts. In forming it, God was therefore forced to bestow various degrees of strength, beauty and perfection on members of the *same* species. In society, as in nature, no link can be broken, so man’s duty is to keep his place. As members of the same “well-regulated family”, the prince, the philosopher, the labourer and the peasant have to accept that they are all required for the perfection of the whole.

Secondly, the existence of poverty and economic inequality could be explained in terms of their beneficial consequences. Many defenders of God’s goodness and providence indeed were at pains to show that economic inequality is necessary for some higher good that otherwise could not be obtained. Virtuousness was a good candidate. Engelmann, the author of *Armuth und Reichthum*, for example, considered it a universal truth that moral perfections can be advanced through physical imperfections. With the

²⁴ The classic account is Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being*. For a short introduction, see Formigari, ‘Chain of being’.

²⁵ Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being*, pp. 205-207; Willey, *The Eighteenth Century Background*, ch. 3 ‘Cosmic Toryism’; Hodgen, *Early Anthropology in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, ch. 10 ‘The place of the savage in the chain of being’, esp. pp. 396-404.

unequal distribution of temporal goods, he argues, a higher amount of moral good (*moralisches Gute*) was introduced in the world. If everyone were equally rich, moral categories such as highness and humility, superiority and oppression, contempt and pity, and pride and beneficence, which are so important to social intercourse, would be unknown to mankind. What is more, man would rely less on God's paternal care and be less grateful for His blessings. Even more important, morally speaking, is that poverty allows for a mutual exercise of virtues between the rich and the poor. The rich, in their regular encounter with the less fortunate, have an opportunity to practice compassion and charity. By dispensing a share of their wealth to the poor, they imitate no one less than the heavenly Benefactor. To the poor, poverty is a test in submissiveness and gratitude towards their earthly benefactors.

The idea of a moral reciprocity of the rich and the poor in pre-modern Christian thought was a true commonplace.²⁶ Though disagreeing about whether God originally created inequality, there was broad consensus among patristic and medieval writers that He wanted to use it, once it had emerged, to train the rich in liberality and the poor in thankfulness. Poverty was associated with reciprocity, not only because the poor could not live without financial support of the rich but also because the rich needed the poor. Around the twelfth century, it was common to conceive of the poor as intermediaries between God and the faithful on earth. Almsgiving was believed to contribute to the benefactor's salvation, either directly or through the prayers of the poor in return for their benevolence. According to an ancient saying "God could have made all men rich, but he wanted poor men in this world so that the rich might have an opportunity to redeem their sins".²⁷ Oftentimes charity was presented as an indirect form of divine providence along secondary causes. Instead of redistributing the earth's resources Himself, it was argued, God charged the rich with the responsibility to relieve the destitute. They were God's stewards, who had to account for their liberality at the Day of Judgment.

By far the most important benefit associated with economic inequality, reiterated by political writers throughout the ages, was that of order and peace.²⁸ Different levels of wealth, including its extremes in abundant riches and sheer poverty, were deemed indispensable for a well-regulated society. "It has pleased Providence, for wise purposes", an eminent philosopher like Adam Ferguson could write, "to place men in different stations, and to bestow upon them different degrees of wealth. Without this circumstance there could be no subordination, no government, no order, no industry. Every person does good, and promotes the happiness of society, by living agreeable to the rank in which Providence has placed him".²⁹ The question why exactly political order required economic inequality was rarely addressed - most of the time it was simply re-

²⁶ Wood, *Medieval Economic Thought*, ch. 2 'Wealth, beggary, and sufficiency'. Cf. Cusato, 'Poverty' and Mäkinen, 'Poverty'.

²⁷ This statement is usually ascribed to St. Eligius of Noyon. I found an earlier expression in Saint Caesarius of Arles. See *Sermons*, vol. I, p. 148.

²⁸ As Waterman, 'The grand scheme of subordination' shows, this however did not require a belief in natural inequality.

²⁹ [Adam Ferguson], *The Morality of Stage-Plays Seriously Considered* (1757), p. 24.

peated as truism. Without the hierarchy and subordination entailed by differences in wealth, social unrest and anarchy would inevitably follow. A minister in one of his charity-sermons remarked that if all men had been made equal in fortune and condition, an internal dispute about who should obey and who should govern would arise. The poor accordingly were summoned to remain faithful to their rank and station, assigned to them by God. Did not St. Paul say “let every man abide in the same calling wherein he was called” (1 Corinthians 7:20)?

Finally, there was a justification around that more or less explained the problem of poverty away. Echoing an ancient observation made by Plato and others, some observed that inequality of wealth should not be equated with inequality of happiness. Howsoever unequal the distribution of earthly goods may be, happiness is more equally provided for by the Creator. God, with a word from the book of Job, regards not the rich more than the poor since they are both the work of His hands (Job 34:19). That the poor need not be less happy than the rich appeared, on the one hand, from the downsides to wealth. In practice riches and the accompanying responsibilities are often a burden on the possessor. The rich are constantly vexed with the question how to spend and invest their fortunes in a proper way. Living a life of softness and luxury, they are moreover vulnerable to diseases. On the other hand, a state of poverty has its advantages. The less fortunate are not encumbered with the more complicated cares of life, while their hard work ensures a good health. Hunger and thirst cause the little food that they consume to taste as good as the abundance at the rich man’s table. Last but not least, as a rule the poor are more pious. Poverty makes heaven, a “state of just recompense and compleat happiness”, more desirable.

Soame Jenyns, once again, pursued a similar line of reasoning. Whereas later in his book poverty is grouped under natural evils, initially it is presented as one of the evils of imperfection - evils which are “in truth no evils at all”. The Almighty has so contrived the order of things, he argues, that in order to repay misery, which is necessarily divided unequally, happiness seeks equality. Like fluids, it continuously tends towards an equilibrium. Poverty is “generally compensated by having more hopes, and fewer fears, by a greater share of health, and a more exquisite relish of the smallest enjoyments, than those who possess them are usually bless’d with”. Another remarkable instance of intelligent design is the fact that, due to their small education, the poor lack knowledge. Far from being a disadvantage, this helps them to bear their fate. “Ignorance”, Jenyns claims in a much-criticized sentence, “is the only opiate capable of infusing that insensibility which can enable them to endure the miseries of the one, and the fatigues of the other”. It is a “cordial” of which the poor should never be deprived by giving them an education above their station.³⁰

³⁰ Jenyns, *Free Inquiry into the Nature and Origin of Evil*, pp. 33-34. According to Stephen, *History of English Thought in the Eighteenth Century*, p. 388, the author derived this thought from Mandeville.

Most of the above ideas on poverty and inequality were characteristically summarized by Alexander Pope in his *Essay on Man*, a poem of deistic tendencies that won him wide admiration far beyond England's borders. In Jenyns's *Free Inquiry*, parts of which were called "little more than a paraphrase of Pope's Epistles, or yet less ... a mere translation of poetry into prose",³¹ the poem was approvingly quoted twice. As intellectual portrait of the era, meant as part of a system of ethics as well as to "vindicate the ways of God to man", the poem makes clear how common these views were in the course of the eighteenth century. Pope, the son of a Catholic wholesale linen merchant, presents his take on riches and fortune in the fourth epistle on happiness, "our being's end and aim". In view of this highest good, inequality with respect to external goods would be both necessary and beneficial:

Order is heaven's first law; and this contest,
Some are, and must be, greater than the rest,
More rich, more wise: but who infers from hence
That such are happier, shocks all common sense.
Heav'n to mankind impartial we confess
If all are equal in their happiness:
But mutual wants this happiness increase,
All nature's diff'rence keeps all nature's peace.
Condition, circumstance, is not the thing:
Bliss is the same in subject or in king;
In who obtain defence or who defend;
In him who is or him who finds a friend.
Heav'n breathes thro' ev'ry member of the whole
One common blessing, as one common soul:
But fortune's gifts, if each alike possest,
And each were equal, must not all contest?
If then to all men happiness was meant,
God in externals could not place content.
Fortune her gifts may variously dispose,
And these be call'd unhappy, happy those;
But heaven's just balance equal will appear,
While those are plac'd in hope, and these in fear:
Not present good or ill, the joy or curse,
But future views, of better, or of worse.³²

³¹ Samuel Johnson, 'Review of a Free Enquiry into the Nature and Origin of Evil', in *The Works of Samuel Johnson*, vol. VIII (1792), p. 25.

³² Alexander Pope, *An Essay on Man, Being the First Book of Ethic Principles* (1734), pp. 57-58. See also Pope's poem 'Of the use of riches' with its moral that Providence was justified in giving wealth to those who squander it.

In the last line of the first epistle, which presents the author's interpretation of the great chain of being, Pope already notoriously concluded that "whatever is, is right" or, as contemporary French translators rendered it, *tout est bien*.³³ We, as God's creatures, ought to be satisfied with the existing state of things, since aiming at man's happiness the Creator chose the best of all possible systems. Some of its aspects may appear evil to the careless observer, but in fact are but parts of one harmonious and stupendous whole.

7.3 For the happiness of men: economic writers about the poor

Needless to say, poverty was a concern for early-modern writers on economics *par excellence*. Aggravated by the gradual breakdown of the medieval 'moral economy', the process of enclosure and the subsequent agricultural revolutions, the problem soon became a subject of public economic debate.³⁴ Starting with the late scholastics, who emphasized both the role of charity and the right to beg, the discussion was taken over by mercantilist pamphleteers and consultant administrators in virtually all Western European countries. The question of poverty was not an isolated one - it linked together discussions about employment, prices and wages, and the balance of trade. In most cases writers on economics were not so much concerned with the poor and their distressing circumstances as such. Of course, many of them insisted on caring for the poor as a biblical obligation. The well-known economist Josiah Child, for example, stressed that it is "our duty to God and nature, so to provide for, and employ the poor", not the least because "by so doing one of the great sins, for which this land ought to mourn, would be removed".³⁵ Yet not seldom the underclass was a matter of debate only because of the rising costs of poor relief or the role the poor could play in the economic advance of the nation.

When it came to the assessment of poverty, economic writers were in close agreement with their contemporaries.³⁶ The widely held belief that riches and poverty are providentially disposed was equally prevalent in the economic discourse of the period. In some cases the justifications provided were just copies of the ones put forward by theologians and philosophers. Particularly popular was the idea that economic inequality brings about virtuousness and political stability. As to the first, the London merchant Thomas Nash in his *Plea for the Poor* claimed that economic inequality "seems to have

³³ On the origin and reception of this phrase, see Hellwig, *Alles ist gut*.

³⁴ Schumpeter, *History of Economic Analysis*, pp. 270-275 ('Unemployment and the 'state of the poor'); Viner, 'Man's economic status'; Coats, 'The relief of poverty, attitudes to labour, and economic exchange in England, 1660-1782'; Dean, *The Constitution of Poverty*, ch. 1 'The discourse of the poor'. Most literature referred to in this section concerns English economic thought. The same issues were discussed in other countries, though. On France, see for instance Cole, *French Mercantilist Doctrines before Colbert*, pp. 27-30, 82-82, 119-120 and 172-173.

³⁵ Josiah Child, *A New Discourse of Trade* (1693), p. 56.

³⁶ According to Viner, *The Role of Providence*, p. 96, in the period there was "almost complete unity of expression with respect to general social policy bearing on such matters as class-stratification, the rights and duties of the poor, the proper location of political power, the functions and limitations of public alms and private charity". See also Johnson, *American Economic Thought in the Seventeenth Century*, ch. 12 'The condemnation of communism'.

been intended by Providence for wise and excellent ends, viz. to give the rich an opportunity of exercising the virtues of condescension, benevolence, charity and humanity: and the poor, occasions for practicing those of meekness, humility, patience, and resignation".³⁷ The second benefit of poverty was voiced by Jacob Vanderlint among others. Although he proposed a wider diffusion of property among all ranks of people, it needed be limited to such a degree that every man in his providential state might comfortably support himself. Then, and only then, would the differences in circumstances, conditions and ranks be such "as the Author of Nature designed, and such as are inseparable connected with civil government, in which there must necessarily be high and low, as long as government subsists".³⁸

Justifications in metaphysical or aesthetic terms were less common. Daniel Defoe somewhere remarks that the harmony between rich and poor and their dependence upon one another "makes up the beauty and glory of God's creation",³⁹ but does so without referring to some pre-established order in nature. Allusions to the great chain of being were even scarcer. The idea can be found in the pages of such great names as William Petty (who left us an unfinished manuscript titled 'The scale of creatures') and John Locke, yet not in their writings on political economy. One writer on economics who did employ the idea in a socio-economic context was Josiah Tucker. As the Dean establishes in one of his sermons, there is no reason for people placed in lower ranks or stations to complain about their position. It was Providence itself that called into being this "beautiful and infinite variety of creatures one above another in the scale of life", the variety of which extends over the different species as well as their subdivisions. God was therefore right, if not forced, to assign people different places in the social hierarchy as well. Has not the potter power over the clay of the same lump, Tucker argues with the text of the sermon (Romans 9:21), to make one vessel unto honour and another unto dishonour?⁴⁰

With its adoption of providential explanations of poverty, which naturally was not always made explicit, early-modern economic thought made an undeniable break with the past. It is true that various patristic writers and scholastic theologians came to a similar appraisal of wealth and poverty.⁴¹ For example, Theodoret and Chrysostom once argued that economic inequality was a proof of rather than a problem for the goodness of divine providence.⁴² These, however, were scattered voices. Viewing poverty as an outrageous consequence of human sin, most early theologians writing on social issues fervently denied that there existed a providential division of people into rich and poor. Economic inequality was not created in the beginning, but introduced through the injustice and excessive accumulation of evildoers. The will of God was rather that poverty be

³⁷ [Thomas Nash], *A Plea for the Poor* (1759), p. 29.

³⁸ Jacob Vanderlint, *Money answers all Things* (1734), p. 102. See also p. 15 on making the labouring man's wages "suitably to his low rank and station".

³⁹ [Daniel Defoe], *A General History of Trade* (June 1713), p. 29.

⁴⁰ Josiah Tucker, *Six Sermons on Important Subjects* (1772), p. 13.

⁴¹ Viner, 'The economic doctrines of the Christian Fathers', p. 21 and 'The economic doctrines of the Scholastics', pp. 76-77; Odd Langholm, 'Scholastic economics', p. 118.

⁴² On Chrysostom, see Mayer, 'John Chrysostom on poverty', p. 86.

eradicated in the development of social life. Under present circumstances the rich as stewards and dispensers of the Almighty face the divine duty to let the poor share in their wealth.

The utility of poverty

One of the reasons for seventeenth and eighteenth-century theorists to see things in a much more favourable light was that poverty had economic benefits. Whether or not using theological language, a great majority of writers on economics shamelessly stressed the economic utility of poverty.⁴³ Somewhat counter-intuitively, they did not conceive of the idea of a wealthy nation as being incompatible with the poverty of a large number of its inhabitants, but on the contrary established that the national interest demanded it. Poor people (which, in the terminology of the age, included not only paupers but the lower, unskilled working class in general) were deemed indispensable because they supplied the nation with cheap labour. Modern trading nations required their hands to produce food and manufactures for home consumption as well as for exportation to foreign countries. The latter was considered of vital importance since, according to the prevailing economic wisdom, it was the only way in which a country could be truly enriched. More poor people, in short, meant a larger supply of labour, lower wages and consequently cheaper products for exportation. Hence Mandeville's harsh yet widely shared conclusion, in an essay against charity schools, that "in a free nation where slaves are not allow'd of, the surest wealth consists in a multitude of laborious poor; ... To make the society happy and people easy under the meanest circumstances, it is requisite that great numbers of them should be ignorant as well as poor".⁴⁴

The key word in Mandeville's remark of course is 'laborious'. A multitude of poor could only be beneficial to a nation if the people concerned were properly employed. Able-bodied but idle workers who merely relied on poor relief or earned their income by illegal means were a burden on the national interest and needed to be put to work. As a matter of fact, unemployment in the post-medieval period was a serious problem in most European countries and consequently attracted the attention of many economic writers.⁴⁵ A flood of schemes for employing the poor, varying from workhouses and the establishment of national fisheries to putting the poor to work in plantations, were committed to paper. Frequently the primary aim was not to relieve the distress of the poor but to prevent them from begging and stealing, and to exploit their labour to make the nation rich. Idleness and indolence, on the other hand, had to be prevented at all costs. Here the same poor conditions proved useful. According to a commonly held view, it is precisely hard times that compel labourers to work harder and longer. With high wages

⁴³ Furniss, *The Position of the Laborer in a System of Nationalism*, esp. ch. 6 'The doctrine of the utility of poverty'; Appleby, *Economic Thought and Ideology in Seventeenth-Century England*, ch. 6 'The poor as a productive resource'.

⁴⁴ [Bernard Mandeville], 'An essay on charity and charity-schools', in *The Fable of the Bees* (1723), pp. 287-288.

⁴⁵ Gregory, 'The economics of employment in England, 1660-1713'.

and cheap provisions, there after all is no incentive for the poor to increase their industry and number of labour hours. Accordingly, various tracts and pamphlets of the period paradoxically observed that a higher purchasing power tends to reduce the amount of labour provided by the working classes. For the prosperity of the nation, wages therefore needed to be kept low and prices of provisions high.

Judging by public opinion, work was a duty and idleness a crime. People, the author of the *Providential Division of Men into Rich and Poor* argued, “must not give themselves up to idleness, nor take to the wretched and wicked trade of begging; which is indeed to rob their wealthier neighbours and the publick of the useful help of those hand, which were made for labour, and ought to be so employ’d”.⁴⁶ Like medieval writers, early-modern political economists made a sharp distinction between impotent poor such as widows, orphans and the aged, who needed to be supported, and those who could avoid poverty by working but were unwilling to do so. The latter group that included tramps and vagrants had to be punished and set to work in workhouses of all kinds. Incidentally, enthusiasm for these measures to prevent unemployment was not shared by everyone. The belief in the social utility of hard times made some sceptical of organized measures of poor relief. Against systems of poor laws, it was proposed to reintroduce voluntary charity, which would make poor labourers less dependent on external support. Workhouses were similarly criticized because they did not train the poor to be financially self-supporting. Looking upon the poor mainly as a factor in production, methods of relief happened to be evaluated in terms of their effect on the supply of labour. Relief should aim at the deserving poor, but in the eyes of contemporary commentators too often withdrew able-bodied workers from the labour market.

Prodigious inequalities

Taken together, the economic doctrine of the utility of poverty and the providentialist interpretation were a powerful combination.⁴⁷ Echoing Theodoret, who had argued that without having poor people no one could enjoy the necessities of life, an anonymous pamphleteer claimed that thanks to the “wisdom of the great Creator” people are unequally endowed with riches and the faculties of reason so as to spur on the poor to be industrious. If everyone were born to some employment, it would be ridiculous for the less fortunate to pretend they have nothing to do. “A numerous poor”, he reminds his readers, “is ever a convenience and advantage to a trading country, where those poor are employ’d as they ought, in profitable manufactures: but where there is a negligence in the employment of them; they are encouraged in idleness and beggary, not in industry”.⁴⁸ Since poor people without employment are but a “useless part of the creation, and a burden to others” ways must be sought to put them to work. For example, more laws could be devised that compel everyone to work. A century before, the author of the oft-

⁴⁶ Moss, *The Providential Division of Men into Rich and Poor*, p. 17.

⁴⁷ Baugh, ‘Poverty, Protestantism, and political economy’.

⁴⁸ Anonymous, *An Essay on Publick Industry: or a Scheme Humbly offered for ... Providing for the Poor of this Kingdom without Burdening of Parishes* (1724), pp. 1-2.

reprinted *VVorth of a Peny* had used the age-old bodily metaphor to show that the poor are indispensable because of their labour. “There must”, he writes, “by the Divine Providence, in the body of a common-wealth, be as well poor as rich, even as an humane body cannot subsist without hands and feet to labour, and walk to provide for other members, the rich being the belly, which devour all, yet do no part of the work”.⁴⁹

Less cruel was the frequently repeated observation that the rich and poor stand in a mutual dependence. They need each other, it was argued, because the propertied class cannot do without the labour and produce of the poor, while the underclass derives its income from the rich. This interdependence could be one of the reasons for God to create inequality, just as He divided up his resources and talents. Believing in a harmony of interests of the various economic classes, Pierre Boisguilbert established that “Providence willed that in France the rich and the poor would be mutually necessary for their subsistence”.⁵⁰ The first group, he explains, would perish with all its possessions in land if the poor did not lend their assistance to cultivate it. The sole source of income for the second group, on the other hand, is the employment that they owe to the landed proprietors. Thus it is in the interest of both classes to be in a perpetual trade. The same reciprocity, another French author reported, can be observed in the household services performed by domestic workers. While the master wants the services of his servants, the latter are in employment. It is simply “for the happiness of men, that God wanted all of them to be subordinated to each other: it is his providence that has established inequality of conditions; so that some are born to command, & others to obey”.⁵¹

As several eighteenth-century writers somewhat amazedly noted, thanks to divine intelligence this mutual dependence could not even be destroyed by the avarice of the rich. Hinting at the invisible hand that makes self-interest work for the common good, the German philosopher Von Loën in one of his Cameralistic writings expresses the belief that the greedy rich in their ignorance provide for the poor. After having explained that thanks to the “marvelous Providence of God” people in society sustain each other, the rich by keeping the poor alive and the poor by multiplying the revenues of the rich, he concludes that the “vanity and avarice of the rich always necessitate them to collect more treasures; and they do not know that if they in such a way care for the preservation and multiplication of their goods, they voluntarily take it upon themselves to become the common stewards and housekeepers of human society”.⁵² According to Charles Rollin, a

⁴⁹ H[enry] P[eacham], *The VVorth of a Peny: or, A Caution to keep Money* (1641), p. 9.

⁵⁰ Pierre le Pesant de Boisguilbert, *Traité de la nature, culture, commerce et intérêt des grains* (1704), p. 358. “La Providence a voulu qu'en France les riches et les pauvres se fussent mutuellement nécessaires pour subsister”. Note that Boisguilbert nevertheless regarded economic inequality in general as a result of human corruption and argued against extremes of wealth and poverty. See Van Dyke Roberts, *Boisguilbert, Economist of the Reign of Louis XIV*, pp. 168-171.

⁵¹ [Éléonor] Froger, *Instructions de morale, d'agriculture, et d'économie, pour les habitans de la campagne* (1769), p. 248: “C'est pour le bonheur des hommes, que Dieu a voulu qu'ils fussent tous subordonnés les uns aux autres: c'est sa providence qui a établi l'inégalité des conditions; ensorte que les uns sont nés pour commander, & les autres pour obéir”.

⁵² Johann Michael von Loën, *Entwurf einer Staats-Kunst* (1751), p. 54: “Es ist eine rechte wunderbare Vorsehung Gottes, welche dieses so weißlich zum Besten der menschlichen Gesellschaft hat

historian and writer on economics influenced by Jansenist ideas,⁵³ this transformation of self-interest is an act peculiar to the Creator. “God”, he writes, using the language of theodicy, “to whom only it belongs to produce good from evil itself, makes use of the covetousness of some for the benefit of others. It is with this in view that providence has established so wonderful a diversity of conditions amongst us, and has distributed the goods of life with so prodigious an inequality”.⁵⁴ The avarice of the rich ensures that the poor get a share of their fortunes and the poverty of the poor incites them to perform all necessary tasks.

The relationship between rich and poor could also be seen as a form of division of labour. This division not only emerged from different innate talents but also from different levels of wealth. According to the German Physiocrat Iselin, God divided his arts and goods in such a way among human beings that they could enjoy the greatest possible happiness. Far from being a partial father, the Creator had to allot each class in society a peculiar form of happiness in order to optimize the happiness of all. That some people have to perform hard labour while others can fill their time with learning and polite arts is thus no defect in the divine ordering of society but a manifestation of God’s care for every single individual. In conclusion, it was the “general prosperity of the City of God, the well-being of everyone and of each of its citizens, [which] requires this apparent inequality”.⁵⁵ Different levels of wealth alone however were not sufficient. As George Whatley observed in his *Reflections on the Principles of Trade*, the mutual dependence between rich and poor also requires endless greed and scarcity respectively. When the rich constrain their desires and the poor meet their wants in half the time, then their intercourse will be less intense. Hence his conclusion that “Providence has wisely ordain’d that there shou’d be diff[er]ent ranks and degre[e]s amongst men, and that the rich and poor shou’d be actuated by different wants, whether real or ideal”.⁵⁶

eingerichtet, daß immer ein Mensch dem andern Unterhalt und Nahrung verschaffen muß. Einer braucht immer des andern Hülfe. Der Reiche macht den Armen leben, und viele Armen dienen wiederum dem Reichen, zur Vermehrung seiner Einkünften. Die Eitelkeit und Habsucht der Reichen, nöthiget sie immer noch mehr Schätze zu sammeln; und sie wissen nicht, daß, indem sie solchergestalt für die Erhaltung und Vermehrung ihrer Güter sorgen, sie freywillig die Last sich auf den Hals laden, die gemeine Schaffner und Haushälter der menschlichen Gesellschaft zu werden”.

⁵³ Orain, ‘The second Jansenism and the rise of French eighteenth-century political economy’.

⁵⁴ [Charles] Rollin, *Histoire ancienne des Egyptiens, des Carthaginois, des Assyriens, des Babyloniens, des Medes et des Perses, des Macédoniens, des Grecs*, vol. X (1736), p. 361: “Dieu, à qui seul il appartient de bien user du mal même, se sert de la cupidité des uns, pour faire du bien aux autres. C'est dans cette vûe qu la Providence a établi parmi nous une si étonnante diversité de conditions, & qu'elle a partagé les biens avec une si prodigieuse inégalité” (transl. from first English 1736-edition). An English rendering of this quotation was included almost verbatim in [Richard] Rolt, *A New Dictionary of Trade and Commerce* (1756), lemma ‘Duty’ (unpaginated), a book “compiled from ... the works of the best writers on commercial subjects”.

⁵⁵ [Isaak Iselin], *Träume eines Menschenfreundes*, vol. I (1776), ‘Die wirtschaftliche Ordnung’, p. 69: “Der allgemeine Wohlstand der Stadt Gottes, das Wohlseyen aller und jeder ihrer Bürger, erforderte diese scheinbare Ungleichheit”.

⁵⁶ ‘A well-wisher to his king and country’ [George Whatley], *Principles of Trade* (1774), p. 16.

7.4 Monstrous differences: enlightenment, progress and inequality

Except for some dissenting voices, generally speaking early-modern economic writers did not attach great importance to the elimination of poverty and inequality. On the contrary, there was a widely held belief that the national interest was served best by having more poor labourers, lower wages and higher prices of provisions. Nonetheless during the second half of the eighteenth century a more sympathetic attitude to the labouring class, and poor labourers in particular, was to emerge gradually.⁵⁷ A growing number of writers began to advocate an improvement of living standards for the poor, increasingly but not necessarily as an end in itself. An important turning point was provided in Adam Smith's remark, and the underlying analysis, that "no society can surely be flourishing or happy, of which the far greater part of the members are poor and miserable".⁵⁸ In the few decades preceding the publication of his *Wealth of Nations*, a handful of authors already pointed at the merits of higher wages. Rather than being a check to industriousness, a rise in real wages was now thought to encourage an increase in effort by the labourers. Other perceived benefits included an increased spending by the lower classes and the improved quality and skill of the labour performed. Concerned as they were with the dangers of growing disparities in wealth to social and political stability, some even dared to argue for a fairer distribution of wealth and wider diffusion of property.

The sources of this new sympathy towards the poor were partly philosophical.⁵⁹ Assuming an instinct for benevolence or an inward faculty of moral sensibility, some writers on the poverty question were clearly inspired by the British sentimentalists, who had defended the existence of such inclinations in the debate on self-interest. Shaftesbury and his followers had a considerable influence on the moral and social thought of the period, an influence which through Hutcheson and Smith directly entered the economic discourse. On a more general level, the climate of the Enlightenment must have been conducive to a changing attitude towards poverty. Progress, equality and happiness, three of its leading ideals, all pointed to this direction. Though primarily an intellectual movement, the Enlightenment's advance of reason pertained to economic conditions as well. The amelioration of mankind, or the desire to better man's condition, as Smith called it, came to be seen as an actual possibility. In the commercialization of society, the distress of the great majority of people did not need to be accepted as fact of life. This conviction was strengthened by the idea, shared by deists and theists alike, that progress is God-ordained. Gradual improvements in the socio-economic sphere could be seen as manifestations of the providential plan, unrolling itself through seemingly ordinary processes rather than miraculous interventions.

⁵⁷ Coats, 'Changing attitudes to labour in the mid-eighteenth century'; Ashcraft, 'Lockean ideas, poverty, and the development of liberal political theory'.

⁵⁸ Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (1776), vol. I, p. 96. In-depth accounts of Smith's views of poverty, inequality and ranks can be found in Hont & Ignatieff, 'Needs and justice in the Wealth of Nations' and Winch, *Riches and Poverty*, prt. I.

⁵⁹ Coats, 'Economic thought and poor law policy in the eighteenth century'; Himmelfarb, *The Idea of Poverty*, pp. 35-37.

The elimination of poverty became a sign of civilization, something to which also the philosophers of the eighteenth century applied themselves.⁶⁰ Searching the causes and remedies for poverty in the politico-economic reality itself, the discussion was increasingly detached from religious considerations. Most contributions to the debate assumed that assistance of the poor was most effective under supervision of the state. More than once, however, this boiled down to technical proposals to make poor relief or the fight against begging more efficient, not to a humanitarian criticism of economic distress *per se*.⁶¹ In order to denounce economic inequality, it was sufficient to show that poverty produces discontent, crime and violence, and therefore that it was in everyone's interest to eliminate it. What is more, in line with Montesquieu's observation that "a man is not poor because he has nothing, but because he does not work",⁶² labour was preferred over charity as the most appropriate form of relief. Like the economic pamphleteers, several philosophers of name regarded begging as a plague that could be destroyed only by means of forced labour.

As a matter of fact, the elimination of economic inequality as such in the Age of Enlightenment seems to have had low priority.⁶³ Insofar as it was a problem at all, worries were largely confined to excessive imbalances in wealth. Characteristic in this respect is the following statement by Gabriel Bonnot de Mably (who sympathized with the idea of a community of goods): "I do not deny that nature has distributed her gifts unequally among us, but surely not with a disproportion equal to the monstrous differences we see in the fortunes of men".⁶⁴ Alongside the Christian suspicion of wealth, concerns like Mably's were prompted by the classical republican tradition that again came to the fore in the Renaissance.⁶⁵ Building on Plato and Machiavelli, modern 'civic' republicans favoured redistribution of property as a means of political stability and harmony. Gross economic inequalities were considered a threat since in political communities they tend to corrupt the rich and alienate the poor. Extreme wealth, on the one hand, would lead the individual away from a life of virtue and enable him to buy political power and influence. The state of poverty, on the other hand, could result in servitude and thus was inconsistent with the idea of a community of free citizens aiming for the common good. Hence in order to prevent social fragmentation and political corruption, the extreme gaps between rich and poor had to be narrowed. Rather than being morally wrong or inhumane, economic inequalities needed to be limited for their disruptive political effects.

⁶⁰ Payne, 'Pauvreté, misère, and the aims of enlightened economics'.

⁶¹ Norberg, 'Poverty', pp. 350-351.

⁶² [Charles-Louis de Secondat, Baron de La Brède et de Montesquieu], *De l'esprit des loix* (1748), vol. II, bk. xxiii, ch. 29 'Des hôpitaux', p. 169: "Une home n'est pas pauvre parce qu'il n'a rien, mais parce qu'il ne travaille pas".

⁶³ Goulemot, 'Égalité et inégalité'; Israel, *A Revolution of the Mind*, ch. 3 'The problem of equality and inequality: the rise of economics'. See also Porter, *The Creation of the Modern World*, pp. 374-382.

⁶⁴ Quoted in Wright, *A Classical Republican in Eighteenth-Century France*, p. 97.

⁶⁵ Thompson, *The Politics of Inequality*, ch. 1 'The critique of economic inequality in Western political thought'.

Even the minority of radical writers who had championed economic egalitarianism from the second half of the seventeenth century on,⁶⁶ were cautious not to overplay their hand. Instead of striving for full economic equality, something even they regarded as dangerous and unjust, the radicals chiefly attacked the system of aristocracy, nobility and social hierarchy. To a certain degree, also among them differences in wealth were generally accepted. A dreaded materialist, Paul-Henri Thiry d'Holbach in his discourse on government maintained that inequality of conditions is indispensable for the happiness of all members of society. "Society, similar to nature, establishes a necessary inequality between its members. This inequality is just, because it is founded on the invariable aim of society, that is to say its conservation and happiness". Nature, d'Holbach explains, introduced among human beings a similar inequality as elsewhere in her works by giving them different talents and passions. And wisely so, for if everyone was similarly endowed, then mankind would be in a perpetual state of struggle and discord. It is inequality that binds people in societies and forces them to share their labour, goods and wealth. In this way, the different conditions of men contribute to the conservation and happiness of society as a whole.⁶⁷

Actually, though it took a prominent place among the Enlightenment's ideals, equality was seldom projected onto economic disparities in society. At most one fought for a greater equality of the sexes, equalization of political rights and duties, and the abolition of racism, not for the levelling of wealth.⁶⁸ Some were willing to admit that there had once existed a natural equality of human beings in a pre-political state of nature, but this could not but cease with the advent of more advanced societies.⁶⁹ Within God's order of nature, it was claimed, civilization and progress required as well as promoted an unequal distribution of authority, status and wealth. As the author of the lemma *égalité naturelle* in the French *Encyclopédie* reminded his readers, natural or moral equality should not be confused with practical equality in daily life. Principally speaking, people are equal by virtue of their natural constitution, but not so in the ideal republic. "I know too well", the author remarks, "the necessity of different ranks, grades, honours, distinctions, prerogatives, subordinations that must prevail in all governments".⁷⁰ Born as equals, the emergence of civil society caused humans to grow apart.

⁶⁶ See, for example, Vereker, *Eighteenth-Century Optimism*, chs. 8 and 10 (on Meslier and Mably) and Israel, *Radical Enlightenment*, pp. 175ff (on Van den Enden and Plockhoy) and pp. 272-274 (on Radicati and Rousseau).

⁶⁷ [Paul-Henri Thiry d'Holbach], *La politique naturelle* (1773), vol. I, disc. x, § 10 'Origine de l'inégalité entre les hommes'. The quote is from p. 44: "La société, de même que la nature, établit une inégalité nécessaire et légitime entre ses membres. Cette inégalité est juste, parce qu'elle est fondée sur le but invariable de la société, je veux dire sur sa conservation et son bonheur".

⁶⁸ Israel, *Enlightenment Contested*, ch. 21 'The problem of equality'; Chisick, 'The ambivalence of the idea of equality in the French Enlightenment'.

⁶⁹ Some seventeenth-century forerunners of this view are discussed in Saastamoinen, 'Hobbes and Pufendorf on natural equality and civil sovereignty'.

⁷⁰ Louis de Jaucourt, 'Égalité naturelle', in Diderot & D'Alembert (eds.), *Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers*, vol. V (1755), p. 415: "je connois trop la nécessité des conditions différentes, des grades, des honneurs, des distinctions, des prerogatives, des subordinations, qui doivent regner dans tous les gouvernemens".

Laws to reintroduce equality were often greeted with great aversion. As Montesquieu already observed, for this reason it is foolish in a republic to try to introduce regulations for the equalization of wealth.

When it came to enlightened attitudes towards economic inequality, an exceptional position was taken by Jean-Jacques Rousseau.⁷¹ Not so contentious was his claim from the *Encyclopédie*-article on political economy that one of the central aims of government is to prevent extreme inequalities of wealth. This, as said, was a common concern among eighteenth-century thinkers, especially those standing in the classical republican or civic humanist tradition. More absurd in the eyes of his contemporaries was the claim that political and economic inequalities are unnatural, or better: contrary to nature. As Rousseau explained in his discourse on the origin of inequality, written in 1754 in response to a French prize competition, there once in a natural state existed only accidental physical inequalities of strength and cunning which did not yet result in man's dependence on and submission to others. In the course of time, the appropriation of land, the division of labour and the rise of civil society, among other forms of alleged progress, introduced unnatural bonds of servitude. Rousseau grants that his account of the emergence of artificial inequality is merely hypothetical. "Religion commands us to believe", he writes in the introduction, that men are "unequal only because it is [God's] will they should be so". At the same time, he maintains that the evolution of society was at odds with the requirements of the *loi de nature*. In whatever definition, it cannot but be contrary to the law of nature that a "handful of people gorge themselves with superfluities, while the starving multitude lacks the necessary".⁷²

Apart from Rousseau, who is difficult to pigeonhole into one of the Enlightenment's subgroups, the revolutionary idea that economic inequality can and should be eliminated by governmental or private initiatives was largely reserved to radical thinkers. To the great majority it was a utopian chimera. "It is impossible in our unhappy world", Voltaire writes in his *Dictionnaire*-article *égalité*, "for men living in society not to be divided into two classes, the rich that command, and the poor that serve ... The human race, such as it is, cannot subsist unless there is an infinity of useful men who possess nothing at all".⁷³ The poor, in Voltaire's opinion, still had one ray of hope: they too could be happy. The ancient platitude of the happy poor versus the unhappy rich man indeed continued to be popular, also among enlightened writers. The numerous eighteenth-century texts dealing with the subject of happiness above all stressed that felicity is a

⁷¹ Viroli, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau and the 'Well-Ordered Society'*, ch. 3 'Disorder and inequality'.

⁷² Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discours sur l'origine & les fondements de l'inégalité parmi les hommes* (1755), p. 9: "La religion nous ordonne de croire que, Dieu lui-même ayant tiré les hommes de l'état de nature, ils sont inégaux parce qu'il a voulu qu'ils le fussent" and p. 197: "qu'une poignée de gens regorge de superfluités, tandis que la multitude affamée manqué du nécessaire".

⁷³ [Voltaire], *Dictionnaire philosophique, portatif* (1765), pp. 158-159: "Il est impossible dans notre malheureux globe que les hommes vivant en société ne soient pas divisés en deux classes, l'une des riches qui commandent, l'autre des pauvres qui servent ... Le genre humain, tel qu'il est, ne peut subsister à moins qu'il n'y ait une infinité d'hommes utiles qui ne possèdent rien du tout". Note that the first edition of the book did not speak of a rich and a poor class, but of a class that oppresses and the one that is oppressed.

subjective aptitude of the heart, unrelated to one's condition and state. The rich and poor could be happy in their own way, provided of course that the latter's most basic needs were satisfied. Happiness, to some no less than a common human right, in short did not require equality of wealth and property. In the providential plan, economic differences were even necessary for the happiness of all.⁷⁴

In marked contrast with economic inequality, it was fashionable in the eighteenth century to write about the importance of having different conditions, states and ranks in society.⁷⁵ Varieties in wealth and circumstances were seen as something positive because they were identified as the foundation of society and the division of labour. Without inborn and accidental inequalities, there would be no incentive for people to group together and to specialize in specific economic operations. As we have seen, inequality was moreover believed to contribute to political stability and peace. Especially for this reason, moderate writers tended to distrust revolutionary programs of reform which insisted on abrupt changes in the social hierarchy. Anarchy was to be avoided at all costs, and subordination had proved an efficient weapon against it. For a reasonable person there was therefore little reason to oppose the status quo. In fact, the providential view of progress central to the mainstream Enlightenment left little room to do so. The assumption of a divine plan at work in society after all implied that the prevailing socio-economic relationships and institutions were somehow an outgrowth of God's will. Of course, progress too was associated with divine intent, but mainly in the form of gradual improvement within the existing structures of society.

The cautious belief in an incremental advance under supervision of divine providence was typical for the Scottish Enlightenment, the late eighteenth-century current of thought that was so important for the rise of economics as a science.⁷⁶ Unlike its more radical French counterpart, the Scottish Enlightenment was liberal Calvinistic and deistic in nature, and opposed grand schemes of change in the realm of politics and political economy. The possibility and desirability of progress was not denied but had to be placed in historical perspective. Conceiving of society as evolving through different stages under the influence of the steering "finger of God", the Scots believed that with the recent emergence of commercial society the most important economic improvements lay largely in the past, so that future man-made revolutions were unnecessary. Seeing subordination as the basis of society, government and industry, the formation of a complex hierarchy of ranks accompanying the evolution of society was understood as a sign of civility rather than backwardness. Above we quoted a statement by Ferguson on the God-given nature of different stations in society and it is not difficult to find similar views in the works of his Scottish contemporaries. Although their conservatism did not prevent them from advocating further poverty alleviation, this had only little priority. The same Smith who believed that a flourishing society is incompatible with a majority of poor people in his

⁷⁴ Mauzi, *L'idée du bonheur dans la littérature et la pensée Françaises au XVIII^e siècle*, pp. 149-157.

⁷⁵ Chisick, *The Limits of Reform in the Enlightenment*, pp. 266-270.

⁷⁶ Israel, *Democratic Enlightenment*, ch. 9 'Scottish Enlightenment and man's progress'.

other book claimed that the “peace and order of society, is of more importance than even the relief of the miserable”.⁷⁷

Before passing on to our next subject, it is important to observe that also the leading philosopher-economists of the third quarter of the eighteenth century seem to have been only lukewarmly interested in the problem of economic inequality.⁷⁸ The general impression one gets from the works of the Scots, German Cameralists and French *économistes* is that pauperism can and has to be reduced, while disparities of wealth more generally are beneficial and inextricably linked to societies featuring private property.⁷⁹ As to the latter, François Quesnay as genuine theodicist argued that the great inequality with respect to the enjoyment of the necessities and superfluities of life, caused by differences in bodily and intellectual faculties, is neither just nor unjust. However incomprehensible the intentions of the Supreme Being may seem, if we examine the order of nature “carefully we shall at least see that the physical causes of physical evil are themselves the causes of physical good”.⁸⁰ Generally speaking, it seems that to most economists economic welfare for all could be achieved without overthrowing the existing structures of rank and aristocracy in society. All that was needed was to let the forces of the market do their work and to free them from the bulk of unnecessary restrictions and subsidies. To the same market mechanism for reducing the gap between rich and poor were ascribed egalitarian effects.

Of the philosopher-economists, the champion of economic inequality was likely Turgot, the later controller general of finances of France who sympathized with the Physiocrats.⁸¹ Attacking the egalitarian fantasies of Rousseau and Helvétius, right from the beginning of his *Réflexions sur la formation et la distribution des richesses* (1766) Turgot underlines the importance of an unequal division of land for proper cultivation, circulation of labour and commerce. Earlier, in a letter from 1751, he had claimed that a distribution of conditions is necessary and beneficial alike. It is necessary, first of all, because it is the foundation of society. Thanks to Nature (or, more precisely, “by the wise providence of the Supreme Being”, as he later adds) humans are not born equal but with different strengths, spirits and passions. These differences make for interdependency and compliance with laws devised to maintain order. If everyone were equal, people would moreover be reduced to a miserable life. In the long run, subsistence can only be assured by the sharing of resources and cooperation, in which some necessarily lend their strength to others in return for a wage. As such, economic inequality is also beneficial. It

⁷⁷ Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1790), p. 89.

⁷⁸ Israel, *A Revolution of the Mind*, p. 106 goes as far to claim that “the radical writers’ discourse of equality was countered by an impressive new science that was simultaneously a potent ideological weapon, and recourse to which proved the strongest possible reply to talk of inequality: economics”.

⁷⁹ More research needs to be done here. On the Physiocrats, see Weulersse, *Le mouvement Physiocratique en France (de 1756 à 1770)*, vol. 2, bk. 3, ch. 1, § 4 ‘L’inégalité’.

⁸⁰ [François Quesnay], ‘Observations sur le droit naturel des hommes réunis en société’, in *Journal de l’agriculture, du commerce et des finances* (September 1765), bk. II, prt. I, p. 16: “si on examine ces règles avec attention, on appercevra au moins que les causes physiques du mal physique sont elles-mêmes les causes des biens physiques”.

⁸¹ Sonenscher, *Before the Deluge*, pp. 281ff.

stands at the base of the division of labour, which ensures that all useful employments are fulfilled and the produce of foreign countries is enjoyed even by humble peasants. All in all inequality “is not an evil; it is a blessing to men”.⁸²

7.5 Invincible bars: the wealth and poverty of nations

Early-modern thinking about poverty and inequality was not limited to the national level. At a certain point, economic writers as well began to wonder how the growth of international trade affects the economic relations between richer and poorer nations. As we have seen in chapter 3, economic inequality on an international level was simply accepted as truth. Though all countries were believed to have been endowed with products or resources that are lacking elsewhere, it was not ruled out that some of them received greater blessings than others. Various mercantilist writers patriotically claimed that their nation, thanks to its history and religious background, was a ‘second Israel’, predestined to become the most flourishing nation in the world. A remark like the one addressed at King Louis XIII, that “God has so & abundantly poured his sacred blessings on your kingdom, that it appears he has designated it to have authority & command over all others in the universe”,⁸³ certainly was not exceptional. Yet writers on economics were not as pronounced on the role of Providence in the wealth and poverty of nations as they were on economic inequality between individuals. This was to change in the second half of the eighteenth century.

The so-called ‘rich country-poor country’ debate was ignited in Great Britain in 1750, blew over to France and at both sides of the Canal lasted until the beginning of the next century.⁸⁴ Of demonstrable importance for the rise of classical political economy, it broadly dealt with the dilemma of whether international trade would cause a further impoverishment of poor nations by the commercial nations, or whether, vice versa, the competition of poor nations would check the enrichment of the affluent ones. While the first outcome must have been more intuitive, the second was suggested by a wage differential argument dating back to seventeenth-century Anglo-Irish mercantilism. It was thought that, under a regime of free trade, poor countries with lower wages could possibly undersell richer, high-wage countries and usurp their trades and industries. For England this prospect was particularly alarming, since it was believed to be surrounded by low-wage countries like Scotland, Ireland and France. In the early eighteenth century, economic writers had already assessed in this light the Union of England and Scotland,

⁸² ‘Lettre a Madame de Graffigny’, in *Œuvres de Mr. Turgot, minister d'état*, vol. IX (1810), p. 263: “l'inégalité ... n'est point un mal; elle est un bonheur pour les hommes”. Cf. his ‘Sur la géographie politique’, in *Œuvres de Turgot*, vol. I (1913), p. 439 on Providence, inequality and happiness.

⁸³ M. de la Gomberdiere, *Nouveau Règlement Général, Sur toutes sortes des Marchandises & Manufactures* (1634), pp. 3-4: “Dieu a tellement & abondamment versé ses saintes bénédictrices sur votre royaume, qu'il semble qu'il l'aye désigné pour avoir de l'autorité & du commandement sur tous les autres de l'vniers”.

⁸⁴ Recent secondary literature includes Hont, ‘The “rich country-poor country” debate in Scottish classical political economy’; Irwin, *Against the Tide*, pp. 154-160; Hont, *Jealousy of Trade*, pp. 63-77; Hont, ‘The “rich country-poor country” debate revisited’.

which granted the latter country more freedom of trade and consequently a benefit arising from its low wages.

In the 1750s, the debate was revitalized by David Hume's 'Of money', one of his widely read essays on political economy. In no more than a single paragraph, the Scottish philosopher in almost theological language pointed to a "happy concurrence of causes in human affairs, which check the growth of trade and riches, and hinder them from being confin'd entirely to one people".⁸⁵ It is true, he elucidates, that once one nation has established a certain trade or industry it is very hard for another to take over a share of the market successfully. Having superior skills and industry and larger stocks than the backward competitor, the richer nation can simply produce at a lower price level. Under normal circumstances, however, trades and industries will gradually relocate from high-wage to low-wage countries in order to keep their profits up to the mark. As soon as the wages in the poorer country rise to a similar, high level, the migration process to a different country will start again. In other words, it is wage differentials (or differences in dearness in general, as Hume adds) that make sure that a balance is maintained in the wealth of nations. The disadvantage of high costs, Hume concludes, in the end will enable poorer nations to undersell richer ones in international markets and to draw away their trade.

Hume's view on the future of rich and poor countries was embarrassing since it involved a negative prospect for commercial nations like England, the country where he kept his residence. Against the wish of English hegemony in international trade, his few lines on the subject and several hints elsewhere in the *Political Discourses* expressed the cosmopolitan hope that economic progress would spread over the entire world, not in the last place to his poor homeland Scotland, which had the advantage of low wages. The essay 'On money' provoked a lively debate, with contributions by Josiah Tucker, Robert Wallace and Lord Kames, among others. Some accused him of discouraging fellow citizens from working harder for the national prosperity. Economic reasoning, aimed in particular at Hume's wage differential idea, of course had the upper hand. Most of the critique can be summarized in the observation that the advantages of some rich nations are so profound that they need not fear their poor competitors. There was no reason to suppose that poor countries would remain poor forever, but neither that the rich ones could not retain their lead indefinitely.

Interestingly, several writers in support of their positions also employed providentialist arguments.⁸⁶ In the first of his *Four Tracts*, originally written in 1758, Tucker disputes the then "universally received" notion "that trade and manufactures, if left at full liberty, will always descend from a richer to a poorer state". This would imply, Tucker argues, that poor countries become the natural enemies of rich ones. For when Hume's train of reasoning is correct, rich countries with their high prices will no longer be able to sell their products and manufactures to poor ones. Furthermore, the prospect that in the

⁸⁵ David Hume, 'Of money', in *Political Discourses* (1752), p. 43.

⁸⁶ Dickey, 'Doux-commerce and humanitarian values', pp. 300-309. Unfortunately I did not have access to Urquhart, 'David Hume and Josiah Tucker'.

end all trades and industries will fall into the hands of the poor competitors will almost oblige rich countries to make war against them out of self-interest and self-defence. This absurd conclusion alone, Tucker believes, is sufficient to reject Hume's argument *a priori*. "Can you suppose", he asks the reader, "that Divine Providence has really constituted the order of things in such a sort, as to make the rule of national self-preservation to be inconsistent with the fundamental principle of universal benevolence, and the doing as we would be done by?". From a theological point of view, it is simply inconceivable that an "all-wise, just and benevolent Being" would burden humankind with two contradictory obligations. Within the plan of Providence, the nation's moral duty to exercise universal benevolence cannot but coincide with its economic interests.⁸⁷

Hume responded to Tucker's "metaphysical" objection in an earlier letter (which referred to "Mr. Tucker's papers" in which he apparently first developed these ideas) to their common friend Kames. Hume is willing to admit that a commercial nation has many economic advantages over poorer nations but wonders whether its trades can expand *in infinitum*. When this expansion were not be checked by accompanying disadvantages like expensive provisions and labour, "one spot of the globe would engross the art and industry of the whole". Tucker, as Hume notes not without irony, "conformable to the character both of a divine and a philosopher, draws an argument from the goodness of Providence; but I think it may be turned against him. It was never surely the intention of Providence, that any one nation should be a monopolizer of wealth". Just as the growth of all bodies natural and artificial is put to a stop by internal causes, also the expansion of great commercial empires will be checked, "not from accidental events, but necessary principles".⁸⁸ Tucker's reply that came a few months later wisely ignored Hume's theological ingenuity.

That Tucker attached importance to his own *a priori* argument from Providence appears from the fact that he reproduced it in *Four Tracts*. Later on in the first tract, the author again makes an appeal to divine intent. After having discussed two cases and seven technical arguments why a rich country can readily compete with a poor country, Tucker concludes that what really makes the difference in securing a trade or industry is a nation's diligence and frugality. With an allusion to Proverbs 10:4, it is said to be an "eternal law of Providence that the hand of the diligent alone can make rich". A trading nation like England can therefore only be ruined by itself due to a lack of industry and morality. What is more, it is a nearly universal rule that an industrious nation can never be hurt by the increasing industry of a poor country. For "it is so wisely contrived by Divine Providence, that all people should have a strong bias towards the produce and manufactures of others". From this it follows that the industry of two competing nations enables them to be "better customers [of each other], to improve in a friendly inter-

⁸⁷ Josiah Tucker, *Four Tracts, Together With Two Sermons on Political and Commercial Subjects* (1774), tr. 1, p. 12.

⁸⁸ 'Hume to Lord Kames, 4 March 1758', in *Writings on Economics*, pp. 200 and 201. Hont, 'The 'rich country-poor country' debate', p. 288n suggests that Hume's notion of 'necessary principles' may derive from one of his early memoranda on the fall of Rome, which speaks of the existence of a "natural course of things, which brings on the destruction of great empires".

course, and to be a mutual benefit to each other".⁸⁹ This precisely, as Tucker earlier explained in the second edition of his *Brief Essay On ... Trade* (1750), was the intent of God with foreign trade. Besides the fact that is almost impossible for any civilized nation to be independent of others, it is a natural thing for people to develop a desire for products or manufactures from abroad.

The belief in the God-given possibility of a simultaneous enrichment of competing countries, expressed by Tucker at multiple occasions, was also professed by Kames. Himself a Scotsman, Kames did not simply acclaim Hume's wage differential argument as a favourable prospect for Scotland. "It appears the intention of Providence", he stresses in a sketch on the origin and progress of commerce, "that all nations should benefit by commerce as by sunshine". Things are therefore so ordered that an "invincible bar" prevents an excess of commerce in a rich nation and in a sense makes it a means of its own destruction. An all-too favourable balance of trade, in which the value of imports exceeds that of exports, will drain a country of money and put an end to its prevalence. The fact that an unequal balance of trade between nations is detrimental no less for the winners than for the losers, Kames observes, is "one remarkable instance, among many, of providential wisdom in conducting human affairs". Thanks to the "hand of Providence", he continues, this balance will never be allowed to fall too much to the side of the commercial nations to make sure that all join the comforts of life. It is as much the duty as the interest of all nations to preserve equality in the balance of trade.⁹⁰

As said, after a while the rich country-poor country debate crossed to France. Though reacting to earlier native writings as well, French political economists and philosophers certainly also responded to Hume. In the 1750s and 1760s no less than three different French translations of the *Political Discourses* saw the light. To some it was mainly some other views of Hume, like his opposition to public debt and paper money, that called for attention. Others were indeed surprised, or rather puzzled, by his observation of a "heureuse concurrence des causes dans les affaires humaines". On the one hand, it was welcomed as evidence for the assumption that England's economic hegemony could not last forever. Apparently, there was a chance for poor countries to benefit from the economic expansion of others. On the other hand, it implied that the next country to take over the lead in international commerce would face the same fate. François Véron Duverger de Forbonnais, a patriotic political economist who disliked economic cosmopolitanism, in a memorandum to the ministry explained what it meant for future policies of France: "[it] amounts to saying that one might, in this respect, abandon everything to Providence whose wisdom restores everything in turn to a general and immutable order which it has established and that it has been something of a mistake for the various states to have gone to such lengths to acquire an advantage in the balance of trade because, for all their care, that same advantage will, sooner or later, revert to the other side".⁹¹

⁸⁹ Tucker, *Four Tracts*, tr. 1, pp. 33 and 35.

⁹⁰[Henry Home, Lord Kames], 'Origin and progress of commerce', in *Sketches of the History of Man* (1774), vol. I, pp. 81 and 82.

⁹¹ Quoted in Hont, "The 'rich country-poor country' debate revisited", p. 273.

Other French writers were less disappointed. A fierce opponent of the envy and jealousy between Europe's trading nations, the philosopher Étienne Bonnot, Abbé de Condillac regarded the self-cancelling nature of having an economic lead as a positive thing. The tendency of manufacturing industries to leave those countries which they have already enriched and to "fly", as Hume had it, to others with lower costs of production meant that economic inequality on an international level was to disappear gradually. According to Condillac, the most important requirement for this mechanism to yield its beneficial consequences, of protecting some nations against poverty and checking others in the endless increase in wealth, is to give trade complete freedom. Only by *faire & laissez faire* of competing merchants, he repeatedly stresses in his *Le commerce et le gouvernement*, international trade will contribute to the happiness of all. What is more, the removal of customs, taxes and privileges is completely in line with how international trade was originally intended, namely as reciprocal exchange between complementary economies. It was "the author of nature, in whose eyes all the peoples, despite the prejudices that divide them, are as one republic, or rather as just a single family, [who] has established needs amongst them; these needs are a result of the difference in climates, which causes one people to lack things in which the other abounds, & which gives each of them different kinds of industries".⁹²

We finally return to Hume. The controversy aroused by the infamous section in his essay on money, and some of its unfortunate phrases in particular, did not tempt Hume to revise it in later editions. Nevertheless, in a new essay 'On the jealousy of trade', added after the first criticism had been publicly expressed, Hume made clear that the future of rich countries did not need to be as dark as he first suggested. It is not necessary for trading nations to view the progress of their rivals with a suspicious eye, since as a rule the enrichment of one nation promotes the riches of all its neighbours. After all international trade is a mutual affair in which countries exchange the fruits of their industry. The enrichment of neighbouring countries thus allows them to export more domestic products and manufactures. Freedom of trade may cause rich countries to lose some of the trades and industries, but the fear that competing countries will develop skills in all types of productions is unjustified. "Nature", Hume claims with an argument with is now so familiar to us, "by giving a diversity of geniuses, climates, and soils to different nations, has secured their mutual intercourse and commerce, as long as they all remain industrious and civilized".⁹³

⁹² M. l'Abbé de Condillac, *Le commerce et le gouvernement, Considérés relativement l'un à l'autre* (1776), pp. 534-535: "L'auteur de la nature, aux yeux duquel tous les peuples, malgré les préjugés qui les divisent, sont comme une seule république, ou plutôt comme une seule famille, a établi des besoins entre eux; ces besoins sont une suite de la différence des climats, qui fait qu'un peuple manque des choses dont un autre surabonde, & qui leur donne à chacun différents genres d'industrie". Note that Condillac's book was published one month before Smith's *Wealth of Nations*.

⁹³ David Hume, 'On the jealousy of trade', in *Essays and Treatises on Several Subjects* (1758), p. 188.

7.6 Concluding remarks

This chapter discussed ways in which the problem of poverty and economic inequality was related to God's providence, both at a national and international level. It turned out to be far from exceptional to observe the hand of God in an unequal division of wealth. As we have seen earlier in this book, at the beginning of the period the influential *Heidelberg Katechismus* went as far as to include it in the definition of divine providence. An aspect of the *Fürsehung Gottes* is that God governs heaven and earth such "that herbs and grass, rain and drought, fruitful and barren years, meat and drink, health and sickness, riches and poverty, yea, all things, come not by chance, but by his fatherly hand".⁹⁴ Even though pre-modern writers were inclined to ascribe economic inequality to original sin, the belief in a providential division of men and countries into rich and poor built on a longstanding tradition in Christian theology that stressed the unintended spiritual benefits of inequality. It was strengthened by the supposed economic advantages of poverty as stressed by seventeenth- and eighteenth-century writers on economics. Added to this, hierarchical structures of class and status in society were considered indispensable for political order and stability. Theological and politico-economic arguments thus went hand in hand, and left little room to see things otherwise.

Although it received less attention here, during the period there of course were dissenting voices. Next to Rousseau, Mably and Étienne-Gabriel Morelly, author of the book *Code de la nature* (1755) that attacked private property by authority of the same Nature and Providence, there were older egalitarianism movements critical of all forms of economic inequality.⁹⁵ Modelled on the 'communism' of the first Christians in the Book of Acts, such diverse groups as the Anabaptists in sixteenth-century Münster, 'Diggers' and 'True Levellers' during the English Civil War, and Shakers in colonial America preached radical equalization and community of property. Inspired by Plato's idea of communal goods for the ruling classes, utopian writings in the spirit of Thomas More's *Utopia* and Tommaso Campanella's *Civitas Solis* advocated common ownership too. In the eighteenth century, theodician constructs like the idea that we live in the best of all possible worlds were ridiculed by Hume and Voltaire, and Jenyns's belittling assessment of poverty was famously criticized by Dr. Samuel Johnson in his review of the book. It was the same century that witnessed a proliferation of philanthropic initiatives, the reason why it earned the name 'Age of Benevolence'.⁹⁶ So in reality the idea that men were assigned by Providence to different stations of life and different levels of wealth began to erode slowly in the early-modern period.

Yet not all motives for wanting to eradicate poverty were equally noble. Rather than to denounce it on humanitarian grounds, more than once widespread poverty was feared for its negative side effects. Common wisdom held that poverty had to be kept

⁹⁴ [Zacharias Ursinus et al.], *Catechismus, oder Christlicher Underricht, wie der in Kirchen und Schulen der Churfürstlichen Pfalz getrieben wirdt* (1563), pp. 26-27.

⁹⁵ Gray, *The Socialist Tradition*, chs. 1-3; Fleischacker, *A Short History of Distributive Justice*, pp. 40-48.

⁹⁶ Garrioch, 'Making a better world'.

within bounds because it bred disease and crime. Also, a commitment to the poor could coexist with the conviction that they owed their station to Providence. The belief in a God-ordained social hierarchy was so deeply rooted that even social reformers adhered to it. In defence of charity schools and in opposition to the “censures cast upon them by the author of the *Fable of the Bees*”, Isaac Watts for example took it as his first proposition that “God has wisely ordained in the course of his Providence in all ages, that among mankind there should be some rich, and some poor: and the same Providence hath allotted to the poor the meaner services and hath given to the rich the superior and more honourable business of life”.⁹⁷ According to the dissenting minister, in the present course of nature it is impossible to alter this “constitution of things”. For this reason it is unwise to try to prepare the children of the poor for a higher station through education. An exception had to be made for the children of those parents who formerly enjoyed wealth but by the same Providence of God were temporarily reduced to poverty.

The fairly general agreement about the divine origin of economic inequality shows how widespread providentialism in the post-medieval period was. In many cases the defences of socio-economic hierarchies may have been self-interested, as it was often the better-off who voiced these ideas, but this does not satisfactorily explain why so many commentators took them as self-evident. The reluctance to interpret the status quo differently than as willed by God is better accounted for in terms of the doctrine of providence as such. With the exception of those influenced by Epicurean ideas, early-modern writers found it hard not to see the hand of God at work in nature and society. So rather than being troubled by an unequal division of wealth, their first reflex was to search for the deeper meaning behind it. Forms of economic inequality that had existed in society for centuries could not be accidental and, as the *Heidelberger Katechismus* suggested, could not be attributed to chance. Eventually the providential interpretation of riches and poverty was to disappear largely from Western society, but in our period it was still very much alive.

⁹⁷ I. Watts, *An Essay Towards the Encouragement of Charity Schools* (1728), p. 14.

8

Conclusions

8.1 God and the economy

The doctrine of divine providence is part of the world we, or at least most of us, have lost. Today the idea is no longer publicly defended, seldom preached, and seemingly of little influence on most people's lives. In this respect, as in many others, the twenty-first century stands in marked contrast to the period that we have studied. The age of Descartes, Newton, Leibniz and so many other intellectual heavyweights saw the emergence of the first systematic critique of Christian doctrine but simultaneously was at pains to defend it. The denial of God's government and care, visible even in the minutest details, amounted to outright atheism. God either directly or indirectly controlled everything in the world, or did not exist at all. Questioning providence meant choosing the side of the ancient Epicureans against the preponderance of Platonists and Stoics, who had paved the way for the Christian worldview of an omnipotent and omnipresent Creator-God. The relatively small number of openly pantheistic Spinozists, non-providential deists and other radical deniers of the doctrine (who, because of their unusualness, get most attention in the secondary literature) in the period was overshadowed by numerous more and less successful attempts to reaffirm, demonstrate and vindicate the providence of God.

Even though the later study of political economy may have been based on Epicurean assumptions about human nature,¹ writers on economics too were unwilling to give up this classical-Christian legacy. Admittedly, a lot of the tracts and treatises that they produced were silent about matters divine, and unsurprisingly so. Oftentimes the questions or problems at issue were highly practical and concrete, and did not invite to all sorts of theological speculations. Certain areas such as finance and taxation anyway eschewed higher thoughts, others such as lotteries and plans to raise public money presumably were too delicate to be related to the Supreme Being. All the more striking to a modern reader accustomed to a 'value-free' economic science are the innumerable references to the providence of God or Nature that we do find in early-modern economic texts, and of which only a selection has been disclosed in the previous chapters. They are easiest to find in discussions in economic areas with a clear bearing on human nature or nature more general, like agriculture, trade and labour. Until well into the eighteenth century (and beyond), nature was still widely looked upon as the product of an act of

¹ Robertson, *The Case for the Enlightenment*, ch. 7 'The advent of Enlightenment: political economy in Naples and Scotland 1730-1760'.

creation and therefore could not but bear the imprint of its Creator. Economic states of affairs, potential or developments enabled by the creation somehow had to be the outcome of God's will and indeed were regarded as sources of divine intentions.

This book discussed the five most common and, as far as I could ascertain, only ways in which the divine Being and the economy were associated. Of course, economic thought before Adam Smith was not immune to other theological influences, such as biblical ideas and precepts of the Church, but these were only indirectly related to the providence of God and did not come with conceptions of the divine order of nature and society. As we saw, the finger of God was observed in international trade (which was said to owe its existence to a divine distribution of natural resources), the social division of labour (which would be based on innate differences with respect to talents and dispositions), the formation of value and prices (and, more specifically, the fact that necessary goods are abundant), the interplay of self-interested individuals in society (the negative consequences of which would be transformed by providence), and poverty and inequality (which both were justified in terms of a higher divine plan). Perhaps with the exception of the idea about self-interest that resounds in present-day thinking about markets, most of these examples of economic providence strike us moderns as naive. For instead of offering rational explanations contributing to an advancement of knowledge, they obscure discussions with unnecessary theological concepts and terminology. This, however, was how writers of the time tended to argue, the great names that we encountered not excepted.

The widespread application of arguments from providence in economic texts and texts of economic interest teaches us several important lessons. In the first place, it shows how prevalent the idea of divine influence in this world still was. As we have seen, many 'economists' unreservedly referred to alleged providential orderings and gave voice to a shared worldview full of divine purposes and intentions. Observations of God's hand in everyday reality - economic affairs in this case - thus were not limited to patristic and medieval times but continued to play a role in early-modern discussions. Rather than losing ground in an age of rationalism, these observations gained in importance and popularity, certainly within the context of political economy. In the second place, it shows that early-modern economic thought was still inspired by theological motives. Partly a new discourse independent of existing academic disciplines and partly a derivative of theology and law, the emerging 'science of political economy' as it was later named clearly involved beliefs about God, His relationship to nature, and man's place in the divine plan. The writers involved employed providential arguments to strengthen their theories and thus either took them seriously themselves or thought their readers would.

Viner, the first and basically last historian of economics to study the subject extensively, thought that economic providentialism was not shared by writers, either Protestant (Calvinists) or Catholic (Jansenists), in the Augustinian tradition. "For them the doctrines of the Fall of Man, the curse of Adam, the second Fall of Man and the Flood, were insurmountable barriers to acceptance of optimistic pictures of the destiny of

man while on this earth".² Although discussions about private religious backgrounds and orientations have been deliberately omitted from this book, it does contain evidence that in this Viner was wrong. Exponents of the "optimistic strain" in Christian thought, as he termed it, no doubt stood in front in discerning divine schemes and arrangements for the economy, but they stood not alone. As I have shown, the Jansenists and other neo-Augustinians in the debate on self-love succeeded in combining pessimistic views on human nature with providential accounts of civil society.³ Several orthodox Calvinist and Lutheran authors, among whom the contra-Remonstrant Udemans is a fine example,⁴ fully embraced the universal economy-doctrine. The argument about a God-willed social division of labour, voiced by the Calvinist Althusius among others, found support in the traditional Protestant conception of different worldly callings. The sole exception may have been the highly optimistic belief in a divine abundance of necessities, of which I managed to find some vague traces in Jansenist writings only.

8.2 The role of divine providence

The appearance of providentialism in writings about money, labour and trade calls into question the secularization of the economic thought of this period as introduced in the first chapter. The different ways in which the idea of providence was associated with the economy - or rather the other way around, and the great number of exponents we have met in the previous chapters could be used to relativize or even downplay the purported lessening of theological influence. Apparently, one could argue, the importance of moral considerations dictated by the Christian-Aristotelian framework of scholastic economics was less and less recognized, while providentialist reasoning which largely stemmed from the same tradition retained its persuasiveness. Yet such a line of argument, however true this conclusion may be, assumes a static and well-defined doctrine of providence, unaffected by contemporary debates. The question is all about what exactly was the meaning of the term 'divine providence' in the economic discourse that we have discussed. Naturally, a reference to God's dispensations in, say, a pamphlet written in support of the Dutch East India trade had an altogether different context and background than an argument from providence in an early Stoic dialogue or one of Augustine's sermons.

As I see it, the economic providentialism of the period can be analysed on three levels. The first aspect to look at is its *function*. Interestingly, most of the providential ideas that we discovered had pre-modern origins and were derived from theological contexts, or from classical-philosophical contexts that had been incorporated into the Christian tradition. Their application in new, non-theological debates alone can be understood as a sign of secularization, especially since it also changed the role of these

² Viner, *The Role of Providence in the Social Order*, p. 25.

³ Force, *Self-Interest before Adam Smith*, pp. 86-90.

⁴ Godefridus Udemans, *Geestelick Compas* (1637), ch. 1, p. 11-12 and *T Geestelyck Roer van't Coopmans Schip* (1640²), bk. I, ch. 4, p. 13.

ideas.⁵ Whereas pre-modern theologians used examples of providence as non-revealed evidence for the existence of God or the truth of the Christian faith, writers on economics from the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth century arguably had less pious intentions. Generally speaking, arguments from providence in their texts either served to explain economic phenomena or to strengthen political-economic views. We have seen that divine providence was called upon to justify international trade, to account for the existence of different occupations, to explain why luxury goods are scarce and expensive, to legitimize the pursuit of self-interest, and to defend the gap between rich and poor. Although similar lines of reasoning could be found in patristic and medieval writings, in the new context they were detached from earlier doctrinal themes and associations.

A second aspect that demands our attention is the *language* or *style* of the arguments. What is striking is that hardly any author that we encountered sought to ground his beliefs about God in Scripture or the writings of one of the canonized Doctors of the Church. Apart from the idea of a divine hand in riches and poverty, the Holy Books in fact gave little reason for doing so. As we have observed several times before, economic providentialism was rather a matter of *theologia naturalis*, knowledge about the nature and will of God based on empirical facts and the light of reason. As expressions like 'God and Nature' or 'Nature and Providence' suggested, the Creator, the creation and the unfolding divine plan were strongly associated. Nature and history were books, which just like the Bible could be consulted for knowledge about God's will. As was typical of the early-modern period more generally, the names for God became increasingly impersonal, ultimately lacking a connection to the God of Christianity.⁶ In late-seventeenth and eighteenth-century writings on economics, more common expressions like 'Creator' or 'Author of Nature' at times were replaced by such abstract labels as 'Eternal Being', 'Most High' or 'Supreme Intelligence'. The divine providence at work here was an impersonal force, not that of the caring and governing Father of mankind.

Finally, we must evaluate the (theological) *content* of the ideas. An observation of major importance is that all examples of divine providence in early-modern texts on economics illustrate one or more of the transformations of the doctrine as discussed in chapter 2. *Firstly*, the divine government and care at stake here is not an active one in which God continually participates but a providence that is inherent in the order of nature and society. Perhaps with the exception of the role of God in reconciling private interests, which at least is presented as if the Creator is in charge of supervision, the other chapters discussed examples of divine planning and control that existed from the beginning, at least potentially. International trade, specialization, a providential abundance of necessities and a division of people into rich and poor either are part of, or may result from, the order of creation and do not require any preservation from above.

⁵ Fergusson, 'Divine providence'. Note that Fergusson discusses theories about imperial expansion and market economics as two illustrations of providence's "refraction in more secular contexts", but unfortunately only starts with William Robertson's *History of America* (1777) and Smith's *Wealth of Nations*.

⁶ Becker, *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth-Century Philosophers*, ch. 2 'The laws of nature and of nature's God'.

Clearly, the emphasis here is on God's admirable foresight, wisdom and goodness in designing the world, rather than on His permanent ruling of it.

Secondly, these forms of providence are not supernatural or miraculous but brought about by purely natural processes, and comprehensible to human reason. International trade is based on differences in climate and soil, division of labour builds on the variety of innate talents and aptitudes, the great supply of essentials is given in nature, the self-interested passions that check each other or are counterbalanced by benevolent ones are part of man's mental makeup, and one's economic position is based on natural abilities or past choices. The providential aspect of these phenomena is not to be sought in some interruption of the natural order, as if God cannot do without miracles. To early-modern writers, they have to be the product of higher intelligence because they involve a degree of design that cannot be accidental. For instance, the wondrous distribution of natural resources across different countries which is highly beneficial to international commerce, cannot be the product of chance, but indirectly betrays the hand of the Creator. If examples like these were called magical or mysterious, then it was because they aroused awe and wonder in the spectator, not because they were contrary to nature.

Thirdly, economic providentialism was optimistic. God's plans for the economy are the outflow of divine benevolence, have positive effects only, and do not show any defects. Apart from some Augustinian writers, they were hardly ever related to man's sin, as if God had changed His mind after the Fall. *Fourthly*, and closely related to the previous point, the providential arrangements in the economic domain were anthropocentric and focused on man's happiness in the here and now. The order of nature and society literally was an 'economy' that happily sustains self-preservation, cooperation and friendship. As we have seen, foreign trade, the division of labour, the surplus of necessities, the pursuit of self-interest, and class differences all were frequently associated with 'convenience', 'well-being' and 'happiness'. Actually, the spreading of the gospel through international trade and the exercise of virtues through economic inequality were the only transcendent purposes that we found in the sources. Providence, as one of the Physiocrats summarized it, has arranged everything for the happiness of men. The love of God is not aimed at spiritual salvation, not even indirectly, but addresses our material well-being and enables human flourishing.

Finally, the previous chapters gave some clear examples of latent providence - forms of divine care which in a sense are dependent on human recognition and realization. International trade and the division of labour, for instance, did not exist from the beginning but needed to be developed in the course of history, after people began to recognise their benefits. To some, differences with respect to natural resources and human talents were mainly indications that trade and cooperation are beneficial. Other providential arrangements like the interplay between private and public interests and the economic stratification of society do underlie the natural order of things but can be disturbed through unnecessary (government) intervention. A term often used by the writers that we studied is 'design'. Things were designed such, we are told, that human beings can reap the benefits of them. Providence thus is no overruling power that actively regulates economic affairs but rather the name of a set of potentialities in the socio-economic world that can either be encouraged or frustrated by human interference.

As we have seen in the introduction of this book, whether early-modern writers on economics contributed to a secularization of economic thought depends on the precise meaning of the term. For more than a hundred years now, much of the debate on the secularization thesis circled around this question. In his *Secular Age*, Taylor distinguished between three “families of candidate” for its characterization: the first focusing on the retreat of religion from public life, the second on the decline of belief and practice, and the third on the changing conditions of belief. In comparison, it is interesting to see where Viner stood. In his works on economics and religion we find the following descriptions of secularization. For one thing, it is a “lessening of the influence on ethical and economic thought of ecclesiastical authority and traditional church creeds”. Put another way, secularization stands for the “process, or tendency, which may or may not culminate in full substitution of temporal for transcendental considerations”, for example when appeals to theological dogmas are replaced by arguments based on economic rationality or expediency. For another thing, it manifests itself through the “emergence of differentiated intellectual disciplines” in which “human reason … gained a large measure of autonomy from theology and the effective exercise of ecclesiastical authority”. From the Renaissance on, the Church lost its virtual monopoly on learning and faced an increasing awareness of the power of reason at the expense of revelation and faith.⁷ These definitions closely correspond to, or at least are among the causes of, Taylor’s secularity 1 and 2.

Though belonging to the new political-economic discourse, the relative independence of which drew economic thought away from theology, economic providentialism itself does not easily fit into the definitions proposed by Viner and Taylor. For instead of desecrating the economic domain and freeing it from higher meanings, it more than ever before granted God a role in it. Nevertheless, the way in which this was done testifies to a process of transformation. The traditional idea of divine providence was gradually emptied of content and became synonymous with the beneficent order of nature and society. It served as transcendental support for established economic structures or new economic developments, without paying attention to broader theological questions. The observations of God’s hand in economic affairs basically were an instance of early-modern ‘secular theology’, conceived usually by laymen for laymen and orientated toward this world.⁸ This too, the appropriation of theological doctrines and language by “worldly philosophers” (as Robert Heilbroner tellingly denoted the later classical economists),⁹ is a sign of secularization. This process in no way was deliberately atheistic or irreligious. Writers on economics employed the idea of a governing and caring God for explanatory and strategic reasons, and by doing so helped to move it in new ‘enlightened’ directions. In the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries, the doctrine of providence did not disappear but was merely transformed.

⁷ See Viner’s *The Role of Providence in the Social Order*, p. 55 and ‘Secularizing tendencies in Catholic social thought from the Renaissance to the Jansenist-Jesuit controversy’, pp. 114-118.

⁸ Funkenstein, *Theology and the Scientific Imagination from the Middle Ages to the Seventeenth Century*, ch. 1 A. ‘A secular theology’.

⁹ Heilbroner, *The Worldly Philosophers*.

8.3 Suggestions for further research

The findings of this book in multiple ways invite scholars to further research. First of all, there are several relevant questions that could not be addressed here explicitly. The most obvious one probably is how the providentialist ideas discussed here related to other economic explanations. What, in other words, were the alternative, non-theological theories of international trade, division of labour, poverty, and so on, and how much support did these enjoy? As I have tried to show, arguments from providence were widespread, but they certainly were not the only way in which economic phenomena could be accounted for. A related point is how important providentialist explanations were from the perspective of the history of economic theory. After all, the fact that theological metaphors and images were present in early-modern economic theories is not to say that technically speaking they could not be dispensed with. More research should also be done on the theological orientation of the authors that were reviewed. Needless to say, economic providentialism was not necessarily ‘Christian’ but built on various intellectual traditions. Some political economists evidently adhered to neo-Stoic ideas, others to neo-Platonic ones, and this must have coloured their understanding of how God, or a First Cause, relates to this world. All economic writers discussed here held some faith in a divine providence, but their interpretation of it may have been very different.

Two other suggestions, even further beyond the scope of this book, concern the influence of early-modern economic thought on the later science of economics. In the first place, it would be interesting to examine to what extent the idea of a divine order for the economic domain was transmitted to the classical economists, both in Great Britain and France.¹⁰ As said in the introduction, Veblen believed that basically all economic theories from the days of the scholastics to his own time shared a preconception of normality of a spiritual kind, which might be traced from “primitive animism down through the elaborate discipline of faith and metaphysics, overruling Providence, order of nature, natural rights, natural law, underlying principles”.¹¹ Having access to some early, immature secondary literature only, Veblen himself sought to prove this thesis in three consecutive articles on the Physiocrats, Adam Smith and the later classical economists. His focus on the firm belief in economic laws and tendencies in these schools is a valuable starting point for further research. At the end of the eighteenth century, Edmund Burke aptly spoke of the “laws of commerce, which are the laws of nature, and consequently the laws of God”,¹² and applications of the same idea of divine laws to the economy can be

¹⁰ In this area, important research has already been done by Gilbert Faccarello (see, for example, his ‘Religion and political economy in early-nineteenth-century France’), Boyd Hilton (*The Age of Atonement*), Paul Oslington (‘Natural theology as an integrative framework for economics and theology’), Salim Rashid (‘Richard Whately and Christian political economy at Oxford and Dublin’), and Anthony Waterman (*Revolution, Economics & Religion* and *Political Economy and Christian Theology Since the Enlightenment*) among others. In addition, see the literature mentioned in footnote 36 of chapter 1.

¹¹ Veblen, ‘Why is economics not an evolutionary science?’, p. 379.

¹² Edmund Burke, *Thoughts and Details on Scarcity* (1800), p. 32.

found in texts from our period. The dependence of classical economic thought on the earlier providentialism therefore deserves more attention.¹³

A final question of interest is if early-modern theories about God's providence regarding the economy do live on, in one way or another, in contemporary economic thought. "Economics", according to Viner, once more, "of course, is a stepchild of other disciplines; the direct line of descent is from the moral theology of the late middle ages through the deistic moral philosophy of the 18th century, to the secularized utilitarian ethics of the 19th century. Economics still carries the stamp of its origins".¹⁴ If the latter is true, traces of belief in a providential order, or at least a reliance on self-regulating processes and unintended benefits, might still be seen in modern mainstream economics. To describe such a lasting influence is not the same as arguing that twentieth-century economics is a theology or religion itself, full of holy books, sacred doctrines, and authoritative preachers.¹⁵ Rather the point is whether contemporary theories of international trade, value and price, free markets, and other areas covered here still have aspects reminiscent of their initial theological embedding. Far from unexpectedly, a cursory glance at modern economic textbooks shows that references to the religious and supernatural sphere have disappeared completely. However, this does not rule out the possibility that secularized versions of old providential ideas are still present.¹⁶

¹³ A similar wish is expressed in Friedman, 'Economics: a moral inquiry with religious origins'.

¹⁴ Viner, 'Fashion in economic thought', in *Essays on the Intellectual History of Economics*, p. 193.

¹⁵ This, precisely, is the thought-provoking point of Nelson's *Reaching for Heaven on Earth and Economics as Religion*, and partly also of the more recent Sedlacek, *Economics of Good and Evil*.

¹⁶ Possible starting points are Klay & Lunn, 'The relationship of God's providence to market economies and economic theory'; Dempsey, 'What bearing, if any, does the Christian doctrine of providence have upon the operation of the market economy?'; and Aydinonat, *The Invisible Hand in Economics*.

Appendix A

Defoe on 'divinity in the original of trade'

The most fervent advocate of the idea of a divine origin of international trade (as discussed in chapter 3 of this book) at the beginning of the eighteenth century was definitely Daniel Defoe, an English merchant, writer and journalist who is best known for his novel *Robinson Crusoe*. Throughout his many economic writings, Defoe managed to combine nationalism and universalism, moderate free trade views and protectionist sentiments, and for this and other reasons is usually counted among the British neo-mercantilists.¹ What is striking is his enthusiasm for and global perspective on trade. He frequently praises the merchant for contributing to geographical and technological inventions and establishing links between different peoples and learned communities. The world is presented as an immense body of "fraternities and societies" in which trade circulates like blood in the veins. Then there was his firm belief in divine providence. As will be clear to every attentive reader of *The Life and Strange Surprizing Adventures of Robinson Crusoe of York, Mariner* (1719) alone, the Protestant Dissenter Defoe had a strong faith in God's rule, both in its general and special manifestations. He saw the hand of God at work in political events, historical developments, geographical discoveries, scientific progress, and virtually everywhere else in the world.²

Both convictions naturally blended together in the universal economy doctrine, the spread of which Defoe seemed to have regarded as a sacred duty. Besides more incidental observations in his later writings, he extensively discussed the subject in three episodes of his own periodical *A Review of the State of the English Nation* (culminating in the apology "I know such things are tiresome to you") and in two parts of his monthly *A General History of Trade*.³ More than any other exponent in the early-modern age, Defoe elaborated on the foundations and meaning of the doctrine. Basically all motives discussed in chapter 3, such as the impossibility of self-sufficiency, the conception of foreign trade as an exchange of superfluities, and commerce as a means to propagate civilization, come together in his work. To Defoe, international trade and commerce were

¹ Aravamudan, 'Defoe, commerce, and empire'.

² Defoe's providentialism is a central theme in Clark, *Daniel Defoe*.

³ It concerns the following texts: [Daniel Defoe], 'Of trade in general', in *A Review of the State of the English Nation*, vol. II, no. 2 (Thursday, January 3. 1706), pp. 5-8; (untitled) *Review*, vol. I [i.e. IX], no. 54 (Saturday, February 3. 1713), pp. 107-108; (untitled) *Review*, vol. I [i.e. IX], no. 55 (Thursday, February 5. 1713), pp. 109-110; [Daniel Defoe], *A General History of Trade, and Especially Consider'd as it Respects the British Commerce* ([June] 1713), pp. 3-45 and idem (July 1713), pp. 3-48. In this appendix I will only provide references for the longer quotations.

the key to the material and moral advance of mankind, and this of course was foreseen by the Creator. The fact that the different parts of the world possessed different natural resources betrayed a higher, providential logic accessible to human understanding.

As Defoe tried to impress upon the readers of his periodicals, trade and commerce are far from accidental aspects of human life. To the good observer they are part of an all-encompassing divine plan worthy of all our wonder and gratitude. “It is very much my opinion”, he remarks in this context, “that due observations of the wisdom, foreknowledge, and omnipotence of God, should run through all our discourses of civil affairs, and be the constant application of every branch, as well of our writings as conversation. This is not only our debt to the glory of the Creator, and a natural duty in all people to do; but it is the most profitable and useful way of conveying sacred knowledge, and improving both ourselves and others”.⁴ That trade and commerce are the product of the wisdom and foreknowledge of God is crystal clear from the way in which they bind together peoples and nations. On closer observation, the common business of the world is again subservient to another aspect of God’s “glorious design”, to wit, that it enables to spread the gospel into the darkest corners of the earth. Without the help of international trade and navigation, the worldwide dissemination of Christianity was only possible “by the help of miracle and supernatural operation”.

To the Englishman, it seems to have been beyond doubt that, as he himself expressed it, there is a “kind of divinity in the original of trade”. Actually, the observation that God’s gifts are unevenly divided over the earth is but one reason to suppose this. Inequality with respect to economic resources after all is a necessary but insufficient condition for international exchange. According to Defoe, the world in general would be altogether unsuitable for trade if the divine hand had not prepared it for. Luckily, as things stand, “Providence has adapted nature to trade, and made it subservient in all its parts, to the several necessary operations of commerce”. Or, as it can be read elsewhere, “the wise Creator has most evidently shewn to us, that he has design’d the world for commerce, from the measures in forming the globe, in appointing seasons, varying the productions according to the difference of climate, the soil, and the position of the parts”.⁵ These grandiose words are explained step by step in the first two parts of the *General History of Trade*, starting with the first principles upon which trade and commerce are founded.

Rather than the reasons that necessitate people to trade, the *first principles of trade* in Defoe’s eyes are the exchangeable products themselves. The very foundation of trade, he argues, is made up by the diversity of available “materials furnish’d by Him that furnish’d all the materials of the creation”. Food like corn, cattle, fish and fruits, ‘physick’ like herbals and drugs, ‘apparel’ like wool, silk, hair, cotton, flax, hemp, bark, skins and feathers, ‘furniture’ like timber, iron, steel, brass, lead, minerals, sulphur and salt-peter, and ‘ornaments’ like gold, silver, jewels, glass, shells, furs and perfumes are all available

⁴ Defoe, *A General History of Trade*, June 1713, pp. 24-25.

⁵ Defoe, *Review*, Saturday, February 3. 1713, p. 107; Defoe, *A General History of Trade*, June 1713, p. 10.

as gifts in the creation, ready to be harvested, processed and exchanged by man. Without these different kinds of resources there would be no production and manufacturing at all, let alone any economic progress in it. Spinning, weaving and knitting, for example, would be impossible, or even inconceivable in man's mind, had not wool first been furnished by the Author of Nature. Could man, Defoe wonders, without ever having seen a sheep, have formed an image of wool growing on the back of a creature? It is the materials of God's creation, in other words, upon which manufacturing, arts and trade are founded.

Even though for this reason a "just veneration due to original nature" is appropriate, the first principles of manufacturing and trade do not automatically lead to trade. In order to extract them from nature and process them into finished products, man first had to acquire the appropriate skills. Some products like precious metals needed to be discovered, often in the most inaccessible parts of nature, deep in the bowels of the earth or on tops of the highest mountains. As to other products like herbs man had to discover their useful physical properties first. What is more, for the production of virtually all goods appropriate tools and crafts were necessary, which all had to be devised and taught. According to Defoe, in all these discoveries, developments and improvements the providence of God can be observed. As one of the episodes of his *Review* summarized it, "Providence concurs in, and seems to have prepared the world for commerce; assists us in the diligent pursuit of needful improvement, and seems expect trade should be preserved, encouraged, and extended by all honest and prudent methods, as a stated provision, made for the support and maintenance, employement and improvement of his creatures".⁶

The core of Defoe's argument consists of a description of the *reason and nature of trade*. Trade is defined as the exchange of the necessaries and utensils of life, namely in those cases where trading partners can assist each other in their mutual shortages and needs. If all climates and soils brought forth the same products, and all nations enjoyed for themselves all the necessities and conveniences of life, there probably would be no correspondence and exchange. In this hypothetical situation, individuals and peoples would be self-sufficient, independent and lacking a reason for trade. God, however, fore-saw this state of independence and hence introduced unequal endowments. As Defoe phrases the divine plan, "the originals of manufacture, the essentials of life, or of the conveniences of life, such as physical plants, drugs, spices, metals, &c. were by the wisdom of the First Disposer, dispers'd thro' his whole creation, so as to make every part of the world useful, nay, I may say, necessary to some, other of it; which diversity is the occasion of the communication of necessaries and conveniences one to another, and correspondence with one another; from whence is raised this useful thing call'd trade".⁷ So although international trade often serves the convenience of man, initially it was born out of necessity.

It appears from the *Review* that Defoe was fully aware that the different endowments of countries could be related to their climates and soils. Nevertheless, the

⁶ Defoe, *Review*, Saturday, February 3. 1713, p. 108.

⁷ Defoe, *A General History of Trade*, July 1713, pp. 3-4.

existence of different natural conditions which bring forth a great variety of products is a result of “the wisdom and direction of *Nature Natureing*, which I”, Defoe hastens to add to this Spinozistic phrase, “call God”. In addition to a variety in natural products there is an artificial one. Whether or not this is due to different climatological conditions, peoples of different nations have various geniuses, resulting in different wants, customs and, consequently, manufactures. Together the natural and artificial differences between nations make sure that none of them can be self-sufficient. However blessed and abundant a country may be, there is always a product lacking which can only be obtained through foreign trade. At the same time, there is no country so barren, unprofitable, and unprovided for that it does not have something valuable which other parts of the world lack and want to exchange for something else. Every country thus has something valuable in abundance which can be exported and something that is lacking and must be imported. Where the first part of this providential rule seems to fail, it may be that the “secret wealth” of that part of the world has not yet been fully discovered.

In Defoe’s own words, one of the aims of his work is to “honour the wisdom of Providence, in describing how wonderfully the blessings of the creation are disperst up and down, and how duly proportion’d for the benefit of the whole; how assistant to one another, how happily proportion’d to the advantages and to the disadvantages of the people who inhabit the respective parts”.⁸ This promise is only partly fulfilled, though. What Defoe provides are some general observations on why God has chosen this actual distribution of products across the earth. Firstly, it happens that the most fertile and fruitful countries lack precisely those products that are found in the most barren and desolate parts of the world. Rich and poor countries therefore are naturally interdependent. Secondly, it seems that the most useful products are positioned furthest away from each other, “in the remotest distance that the globe can allow”. Thirdly, the author thinks it almost impossible for a country to produce manufactures of any considerable value without relying on a natural product of a foreign country. “This”, Defoe argues, “is eminent in our cloathing trade of England, which we cannot work without the oil of Spain; or dye in some colours, without the cochineel of Mexico, the indico of Jamaica, the logwood of Campeche, the woad of Germany, the galls of Turkey; and the like”.⁹

In the second part of his *General History of Trade*, our author elaborates on the *present state of trade in the world*. In an attempt to prove the universal economy-doctrine, he presents a “map or scheme in miniature of the whole world of trade”. One of the aims of this periodical was indeed to show with respect to the God-given products “where, and how, the wisdom of Providence has lodg’d them in the world; in what particular climates, provinces and parts; how distant; how divided from one another; and why so divided”.¹⁰ What follow are lists of products that naturally occur in Africa (“the least in debt to Nature”), America, India, Asia and Turkey. Another table shows the “principles or originals” of the commerce of Europe. “Thus”, Defoe concludes his overview, “the Wise

⁸ Defoe, *A General History of Trade*, June 1713, p. 24.

⁹ Defoe, *A General History of Trade*, June 1713, p. 35

¹⁰ Defoe, *A General History of Trade*, June 1713, p. 9.

Disposer, has separated all those valuable things, by vast oceans, unknown gulphs, and almost impassable seas, that he might joyn them all again, and make them common to one another, by the industry of men, and thereby propagated navigation, plantation, correspondence, and commerce to the universal benefit of every part of the world".¹¹

Finally, Defoe makes an excursion to a theme that he addressed earlier in the *Review*, namely that God provided the natural conditions for navigation. Shipping and navigation, indispensable elements of the international trade of his days, were widely seen as excellent means to establish and preserve community and friendship between remote nations. Just like the physico-theologians, Defoe believes that in order to make them passable, God deliberately liquidized the waters that separate the different parts of the earth. Thanks to their "inherent gravity", the waters moreover were made suitable to carry heavy vessels. Fortunately, "obedient nature" remains faithful to her laws. If changing natural conditions suddenly increased the force of gravity, merchant ships would no longer "swim" on the surface of the water but sink to the bottom, bringing navigation to an abruptly end. If, in contrast, the force of gravity suddenly decreased or even ceased to exist, the waves of the sea, forced by storms and winds, would become insurmountable mountains and chasms, making navigation practically impossible. Therefore the divine order of nature, which causes water to fill cavities and voids immediately, to flow to all the corners of the earth, and to carry ships on its waves, deserves our full gratitude.

Incidentally, not only water but also the land was made subservient to navigation. Rejecting the notion of universal degeneration, Defoe argues that the world was geographically divided from the beginning and that God originally furnished coastal lands with coves, bays and estuaries. The seeming irregularity of the earth's surface is not a consequence of the Deluge, as Thomas Burnet claimed in his *Telluris Theoria Sacra* (1681) or *Sacred Theory of the Earth*,¹² but a product of design. The broken coastlines are very suitable as natural harbours and thus encourage human correspondence, discovery and commerce. Of course, if coasts always consisted of high rocks and cliffs or vast sand banks, it would not make sense to build large ships since it would be impossible to launch them. Another proof of God's providential design is that countries in possession of the "chief magazines of nature" have also been blessed with the best harbours, creeks, and rivers for navigation. Whereas Africa with its immense size but scant resources has hardly any natural harbours and rivers, the coasts of Britain, Holland and France as well as those of the East-Indies and China are very accessible to ships. This fortunate situation, our author concludes, allows them to give other nations a share in their rich gifts.

¹¹ Defoe, *A General History of Trade*, July 1713, pp. 25-26.

¹² Rossi, *The Dark Abyss of Time*, ch. 7 'The sacred theory of the earth'.

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Summary (Dutch)

Het politiek-economische discours van de vroegmoderne periode (grotweg 1500 tot 1800) wordt wel verantwoordelijk gehouden voor de secularisering van het economisch denken. Het debat over het fenomeen ‘secularisatie’, dat meer dan honderd jaar geleden werd aangezwengeld door sociologen als Max Weber en Emile Durkheim, heeft nooit geleid tot een alomvattende betekenis of definitie. Recent nog maakte Charles Taylor in zijn *A Secular Age* (2007) onderscheid tussen drie vormen van secularisering: een eerste waarbij de publieke ruimte wordt ontdaan van verwijzingen naar God en religie een privaangelegenheid wordt, een tweede waarbij religieuze participatie en publieke uitingen van geloof onder druk van alternatieve overtuigingen afnemen en een derde waarbij het geloof in God een mogelijkheid is geworden temidden van vele andere levensbeschouwingen. Waar de derde vorm van secularisering in de vroegmoderne periode nog niet aan de orde was, zien we de aanzetten tot de eerste twee vormen terug in het economisch denken van deze periode. Het mercantilisme, de eerste na-middeleeuwse economische denkstroming, was als product van intellectuele differentiatie onafhankelijk van de theologie (een aspect van Taylors secularisering type 1). vergeleken met het scholastieke denken over economie bekommerde het zich weinig om ethisch-theologische kwesties: economische vraagstukken werden steeds vaker beoordeeld in termen van doelmatigheid of nut, niet langer op basis van religieuze of morele toelaatbaarheid (een aspect van secularisering type 2).

Het is echter de vraag of theologische invloed zich niet op andere manieren dan via ethische maatstaven kon vertalen in het economisch denken. Een potentiële kandidaat die al sinds de late oudheid een brug vormde tussen de theologie en het denken over economie was de doctrine van de goddelijke voorzienigheid: de gedachte dat God zorg draagt voor, en regeert over deze werkelijkheid. De eerste en feitelijk laatste historicus die de betekenis van deze doctrine voor het vroegmoderne economische denken heeft bestudeerd, was Jacob Viner. Eén van de conclusies van zijn serie lezingen over dit onderwerp (postuum gepubliceerd onder de titel *The Role of Providence in the Social Order*, 1972) was dat voorzienigheidsideeën frequent werden toegepast in economische teksten, niet in de laatste plaats om het economisch beleid te beïnvloeden. Mijn doel in dit boek is om het economisch voorzienigheidsdenken van de periode uitgebreider in kaart te brengen. De centrale onderzoeksvraag is, ten eerste, wat de inhoud van deze economisch-theologische ideeën was, ten tweede, op welke wijze deze ideeën werden vertolkt en, ten derde, welke functie deze ideeën hadden. Een secundaire vraag die pas in het slothoofdstuk weer aan bod komt is wat dit alles betekent voor de vermeende ‘ontkersting’ van het economisch denken. Is er vanuit het oogpunt van het economisch voor-

zienigheidsdenken eveneens sprake van secularisering, en zo ja, hoe moet deze term dan worden gedefinieerd?

Alvorens in te gaan op een vijftal manieren waarop God en economie in de vroegmoderne periode met elkaar in verband werden gebracht, wordt in hoofdstuk 2 eerst een algemene inleiding op het leerstuk van de voorzienigheid geboden. Een verhelderende typering vinden we bij de Reformator Johannes Calvijn, die benadrukte dat de goddelijke voorzienigheid niet alleen betrekking heeft op Gods ogen maar ook op Diens handen. Het draait met andere woorden om Gods handelen, of meer specifiek Zijn actieve zorg voor de schepping, alsmede om Zijn voorkennis (vooruit-zien) die hierbij van node is. De Griekse en Latijnse term voor voorzienigheid, respectievelijk *πρόνοια* en *providentia*, hebben dezelfde tweeledige connotatie. Een blik op de geschiedenis van het voorzienigheidsgeloof leert dat de intellectuele wortels ervan tot ver voorbij het christendom reiken. Reeds in 45 na Christus merkt de Romeinse schrijver Cicero in de inleiding van zijn *De natura deorum* op dat er over de vraag óf en hoe de goden zich mengen in het bestuur van de wereld grote onenigheid bestaat, daarmee suggererend dat het hier ging om een veelbesproken onderwerp. Uitgebreide beschouwingen over de voorzienigheid treffen we inderdaad al aan bij Plato en de Stoïcijnen. Syntheses tussen het klassiek-filosofische en Bijbelse denken over God werden tot stand gebracht door de kerkvaders. De laatmiddeleeuwse theologie, tot slot, bracht allerlei technische onderscheidingen aan binnen het voorzienigheidsidee, bijvoorbeeld tussen een algemene, bijzondere en buiten gewone voorzienigheid.

De traditionele opvatting van de voorzienigheid, die er in ieder geval vanuit ging dat God alles in de wereld tot aan de kleinste dingen toe bestuurt en onderhoudt, zo nodig door wonderbaarlijk in te grijpen, kwam in de vroegmoderne periode steeds meer onder druk te staan. Een brede waaier aan ontwikkelingen, met inbegrip van de Renaissance, de wetenschappelijke revolutie en de opkomst van het deïsme, zaaide twijfel over de juiste interpretatie en de houdbaarheid van de ‘christelijke’ doctrine. De grote meerderheid van de geleerde wereld ging qua ideeënvorming weliswaar tot het uiterste om te kunnen blijven spreken over Gods zorg en regering, maar kon niet voorkomen dat deze begrippen steeds verder werden uitgehond. Hoewel het geloof in de voorzienigheid niet verdween, vond er wel een onmiskenbare transformatie plaats. Meer dan ooit tevoren werd de goddelijke voorzienigheid i) gelijkgesteld aan de orde der natuur zelf, ii) ontdaan van haar wonderbaarlijke aspecten, iii) beschouwd als het product van een alwijze en goedbedoelende God, iv) geassocieerd met het menselijk geluk en v) vertaald als het ontwikkelings- en vooruitgangspotentieel dat sluimerend in de schepping aanwezig is. Het populaire voorzienigheidsgeloof dat Gods hand overal in de alledaagse werkelijkheid aan het werk zag, bleef evenwel onder brede lagen van de bevolking gangbaar. Dit verklaart waarom ook economische interpretaties gemakkelijk ingang vonden.

Hoofdstuk 3 handelt over de doctrine van de ‘universele economie’. Volgens deze gedachte, die we frequent aantreffen in vroegmoderne teksten over economie, hebben we de wereldwijde koophandel te danken aan de Schepper. Om landen en volken aan te zetten tot uitwisseling en vriendschap zou God hun grondgebieden bij de schepping ongelijk met grondstoffen en producten hebben bedeeld. Door deze ongelijkheid kan geen enkel land zelfvoorzienend zijn en is elk volk te allen tijde aangewezen op wat de

aarde elders voortbrengt. Hoewel pas in de zestiende en zeventiende eeuw van een echte wereldwijde handel sprake was, stamt deze verklaring en rechtvaardiging van internationale handel uit de oudheid. In haar volledige vorm werd de doctrine voor het eerst geformuleerd in de vierde eeuw door de Griekse retoricus Libanius van Antiochië, die op zijn beurt voortbouwde op oudere, in het bijzonder Stoïcijnse motieven. De gedachte van een goddelijke bedoeling achter internationale handel bereikte de vroegmoderne periode via zowel het middeleeuwse denken als herontdekkingen van Renaissance-schrijvers en ontwikkelde zich tot een heuse gemeenplaats. De doctrine van de universele economie duikt in de periode op in sterk uiteenlopende contexten en bij een breed scala aan schrijvers uit alle denkbare economische stromingen.

Anders dan bij bijvoorbeeld de kerkvaders, waar we het voorzienigheidsidee aantreffen als voorbeeld van de goedheid en wijsheid van God, kreeg het in de politiek-economische literatuur in toenemende mate een functionele betekenis. Zo brachten Franse politieke filosofen als Jean Bodin het in stelling tegen landgenoten die autarkie voorstonden en het land wilden ontdoen van buitenlandse kooplieden, haalden natuurrechtsfilosofen als Hugo de Groot het idee aan om te pleiten voor vrijheid van internationale handel en navigatie en komen we het bij diverse verlichtingsdenkers tegen in hun pleidooien voor vrede en verdraagzaamheid. Mercantilistische pamflettisten wisten duidelijk minder goed raad met de doctrine van de universele economie. Sommigen van hen gebruikten varianten ervan om te pleiten voor protectionisme en zelfvoorzienendheid. Niettemin werd de gedachte van een voorzienige verdeling van grondstoffen vanaf de late zeventiende eeuw door zogenaamde 'liberale' of 'neo-mercantilisten' gebruikt als argument voor vrijhandel. De nationale verscheidenheid aan bodemschatten en specialiteiten zou een goddelijke indicatie zijn dat deze producten zonder restricties en heffingen verhandeld mogen worden. Door elkaar middels handel te laten delen in ieders overvloed, aldus de Franse fysiocraten, ontstaat een God-welgevallige broederschap der volkeren.

In hoofdstuk 4 wordt een voorzienigheidsidee besproken dat vanouds in één adem genoemd werd met het vorige, namelijk de gedachte dat de talenten door God ongelijk verdeeld zijn onder de mensen. Mensen worden niet eerder geboren, maar zijn - al dan niet onder invloed van natuurlijke factoren - begiftigd met verschillende talenten, kwaliteiten en dispositions. Net als bij de verspreiding van grondstoffen en producten op wereldschaal zou het hogere doel zijn om mensen aan te zetten tot samenwerking en gemeenschap. Doordat elke persoon een aanleg heeft voor één of hooguit enkele economische activiteiten en niet alle noodzakelijke arbeid zelf kan verrichten, is zelfvoorzienendheid op individueel niveau onmogelijk. Mensen zijn voor hun levensonderhoud simpelweg aangewezen op de uitwisseling van goederen en diensten met anderen. De goddelijke verdeling van talenten biedt daarmee een verklaring en rechtvaardiging voor maatschappelijke arbeidsdeling. Aangeboren of natuurlijke ongelijkheid maakt dat het loont om de verschillende soorten arbeid in de samenleving te verdelen en een ieder zich verder te laten specialiseren in die beroepen waar men een aanleg voor heeft. Deze handelwijze, zo merkte Plato 400 jaar voor Christus reeds op in zijn werk *De staat*, leidt tot meer en kwalitatief betere producten en diensten en uiteindelijk tot grotere welvaart voor de hele gemeenschap.

In tegenstelling tot de andere voorzienigheden die worden besproken in dit boek vond het idee van een goddelijke verdeling van talenten niet alleen steun bij de klassieken maar ook in de Heilige Schrift. Paulus' vergelijking van de christelijke gemeente met een lichaam met verschillende ledematen die allen een andersoortige taak hebben, werd dan ook graag aangehaald door de kerkvaders, scholastieke theologen en reformatoren om het bestaan van verschillende beroepen (of 'roepingen') te legitimeren. Het economisch denken van de vroegmoderne periode bouwde op deze traditie voort. Misschien wel juist omdat de maatschappelijke arbeidsdeling in deze tijd steeds verder werd doorgevoerd, werd door diverse schrijvers gewezen op het wonderbaarlijke fenomeen van de aangeboren menselijke ongelijkheid. Deze ogenschijnlijke imperfectie in het goddelijk ontwerp werd in verband gebracht met allerhande voordeelen zoals samenwerking, economische ontwikkeling en het hoogst denkbare geluk voor allen. Enkele auteurs, waarvan Bodin de bekendste is, legden een verband tussen de specifieke wetenschappen en kunsten van bepaalde regio's en de van hogerhand aangebrachte verschillen in geografie en klimaat. Kritiek op het idee dat de maatschappelijke arbeidsdeling is terug te voeren op ingeschapen verschillen was schaars en werd pas geuit in de tweede helft van de achttiende eeuw, onder meer door Adam Smith.

Een minder voor de hand liggende observatie van Gods hand in het economisch domein komt aan bod in hoofdstuk 5. Het is de wederom eeuwenoude gedachte dat de Schepper zorg draagt voor een overvloed aan noodzakelijkheden. Goederen van levensbelang zoals water, graan en hout zijn onder normale omstandigheden in grote hoeveelheden vorhanden en hebben daarom geen of nauwelijks een prijs. Triviale handelswaar als goud, diamanten en parels daarentegen zijn zeer schaars en duur. Dat het nuttige en noodzakelijke dankzij God overvloedig zijn, vormt een deel van de oplossing van de beruchte waardeparadox - de context waarin het voorzienigheidsidee traditioneel kon worden aangetroffen. Is het niet vreemd, zo stelt de paradox, dat ten diepste nutteloze goederen als edelmetalen en -stenen voor exorbitante bedragen over de toonbank gaan, terwijl iets onmisbaars als water vrijwel niets kost? Vertolken prijzen nog wel de reële waarde van dingen? Wat bepaalt eigenlijk de prijs van iets? Des te gelukkiger is het te midden van deze verwarring dat nuttigheid en schaarste binnen Gods orde der natuur in de regel niet samenvallen. Als immers niet luxegoederen maar noodzakelijkheden schaars waren geweest, zou de mens de laatste niet of slechts tegen zeer hoge prijzen kunnen bemachtigen, met alle gevolgen dien.

Zowel de waardeparadox als het idee van een goddelijke overvloed aan noodzakelijke goederen gaan terug op de klassieke oudheid. Het laatste idee is bijvoorbeeld afkomstig uit het werk van Vitruvius, die het op zijn beurt ontleend kan hebben aan Epicurus. Opvallend is dat het voorzienigheidsidee bij sommige klassieke auteurs en zeker bij de kerkvaders in een moralistische context stond die bij de meeste vroegmoderne auteurs over economie ontbreekt. Terwijl veel noodzakelijkheden voor het oprapen liggen of met weinig moeite kunnen worden geproduceerd, zou God luxegoederen die slechts aanzetten tot hebzucht en trots bewust diep in de aarde en zee hebben weggestopt om deze uit de buurt van mensen te houden. Deze interpretatie vindt in de zeventiende en achttiende eeuw geen navolging - opmerkingen van Samuel Pufendorf en Francis Hutcheson daargelaten - en wordt zelfs expliciet bekritiseerd. In verreweg de meeste

natuurrechtsverhandelingen en economische traktaten waar het thema van een door God beschikte overvloed voorkomt, gaat het om een technische bespreking van thema's als waarde en prijs en wordt het idee slechts in het voorbijgaan genoemd ter illustratie van de rol van schaarste of arbeid. Wat het laatste betreft waren het inderdaad zowel aanhangers van een subjectieve waardeleer als van een arbeidswaardetheorie die het voorzienigheidsidee de revue lieten passeren.

Hoofdstuk 6 gaat in op de kwestie van het eigenbelang: is het schadelijk als mensen exclusief zijn gericht op hun eigen economische belangen? Eigenlijk de hele oudheid en middeleeuwen door werd deze vraag positief beantwoord. Het overmatig streven naar eigenbelang vormde niet alleen een bedreiging voor de stabiliteit van lokale gemeenschappen, maar werd bovendien opgevat als een teken van morele of religieuze corruptie. In de vroegmoderne periode zouden beide associaties langzaamaan verdwijnen. In de eeuw van de Verlichting werden aan materieel egoïsme zelfs allerlei bijkomende maatschappelijke voordelen toegedicht die indamming ervan vrijwel overbodig maakte. De legitimiteit van eigenbelang was echter veel meer dan een economische kwestie. De termen 'eigenbelang' en 'eigenliefde', die in de periode door elkaar heen gebruikt werden, stamden uit veel oudere juridische en theologische discoursen en waren onderdeel geworden van een levendig debat over 'de passies en de belangen'. De meest verontrustende bijdrages aan de vroegmoderne pennenstrijd werden geleverd door Thomas Hobbes en Bernard Mandeville. Beiden hanteerden een in de ogen van hun tijdgenoten naargeestig mensbeeld. De mens zou in materieel en psychologisch opzicht door en door egoïstisch zijn en ten diepste alleen willen samenleven en -werken met anderen omdat dit in diens eigenbelang is. Een sterke overheid is nodig om de vrede te bewaren en de kwaadaardige passies van mensen om te smeden tot publieke voordelen.

De vanuit economisch oogpunt meest interessante kritieken op Hobbes en Mandeville kwamen van de Franse jansenisten en Britse sentimentalisten. Naast dat deze groeperingen een directe invloed uitoefenden op een aantal belangrijke schrijvers over economie, moet het denken van deze theologen en filosofen in meer algemene zin hebben bijgedragen aan het *laissez faire*-denkklimaat van de achttiende eeuw. De laatzeventiende-eeuwse aanhangers van Cornelius Jansenius presenteerden de burgerlijke samenleving als goddelijke remedie voor de diepgaande menselijke eigenliefde. Onder beschaafde omstandigheden zou menselijk egoïsme transformeren in een streven naar verlicht eigenbelang, met alle bijkomende economische voordelen van dien. De sentimentalisten rond Lord Shaftesbury beweerden veeleer dat mensen van hogerhand zijn begiftigd met een veelheid aan affecties en sentimenten die met de eigenliefde concurrenten om aandacht. Waar de mens onder invloed van opvoeding en oefening toe moet komen is een 'economie' van de passies, die voordelig blijkt voor zowel het individu als de gemeenschap. Diverse economische auteurs namen dit soort ideeën over en voegden daarbij de zegeningen van de markt. Dankzij de ordeningen van de voorzienigheid zou het najagen van eigenbelang in competitieve situaties als vanzelf bijdragen aan het algemeen belang. Actieve inmenging van de overheid werd daarom onwenselijk geacht. Eigenbelang binnen marktsituaties is dankzij de goddelijke hand van de markt zelfcorrigerend.

Een laatste voorbeeld van economische voorzienigheid, dat wordt besproken in hoofdstuk 7, heeft betrekking op armoede en economische ongelijkheid. Deze verschijnselen werden zoals verwacht niet beschouwd als een gebrek in het goddelijk plan, maar moesten zo door de Voorzienigheid zijn beschikt. Aan het feit dat sommige mensen rijk zijn en andere arm lagen volgens vroegmoderne commentatoren dan ook diepere redenen ten grondslag. Veel van deze redenen werden direct of indirect ontleend aan de lange theologische en filosofische traditie. Economische ongelijkheid zou onder meer bijdragen aan de schoonheid van Gods schepping (die immers overal verscheidenheid en hiërarchie vertoont), zorg dragen voor een grotere mate van deugdzaamheid (in de vorm van nederigheid en dankbaarheid bij de armen en compassie en vrijgevigheid bij de rijken) en een garantie vormen voor orde en vrede in de samenleving. Aantonen dat schrijnende armoede en ongelijkheid weliswaar vormen van (ogenschijnlijk) kwaad zijn maar niets afdoen aan de goedheid en rechtvaardigheid van de Schepper was een uitdaging die werd aangegaan door verschillende ‘theodicisten’. Soame Jenyns argumenteerde bijvoorbeeld dat verschillen in rijkdom zelfs niet konden zijn voorkomen door de Almachtige, omdat weglatting van ongelijkheid uit het scheppingsplan zou hebben geresulteerd in een significante daling van ieders geluk.

Bij de economische schrijvers van de zeventiende en achttiende eeuw treffen we soortgelijke ‘optimistische’ ideeën aan. Velen van hen stemden in met de gedachte dat er zoets is als een door God gewilde verdeling van mensen in groepen van armen en rijken, want ook economisch gezien hadden arm en rijk elkaar nodig, bijvoorbeeld als aanbieders en afnemers van arbeid. Deze theologische gedachte ging hand in hand met de wijdverbreide overtuiging dat armoede voor een land als geheel economische voordelen heeft. Zeker voor een moderne handelsnatie vormde een arme onderklasse een reservoir van goedkope arbeidskracht waaruit kon worden geput om de natie verder verrijken. Allerhande maatregelen om de armen financieel te steunen en gesubsidieerd aan het werk te stellen in armenhuizen dienden om die reden te worden bestreden. Gods hand in rijkdom en armoede werd overigens niet alleen aan het werk gezien op nationaal maar ook op internationaal niveau. Een opmerking van David Hume in één van zijn essays over politieke economie dat een gelukkige samenloop van omstandigheden voorkomt dat handelsnaties een monopolie op rijkdom kunnen ontwikkelen, leidde tot een ware polemiek waarin diverse voorzienigheidsargumenten in stelling werden gebracht. Hoewel de meesten uiteindelijk instemden met Hume’s observatie werden door hen nadrukkelijker de bedoelingen van de Auteur van de Natuur opgevoerd als garantie dat alle landen tezamen konden profiteren van economische groei.

De overkoepelende boodschap van dit boek is dat het economisch voorzienigheidsdenken in de vroegmoderne periode een grote mate van populariteit genoot. Schrijvers over economie waren net als velen van hun tijdgenoten niet bereid om het geloof in de voorzienigheid prijs te geven aan nieuwe ontwikkelingen in de theologie, filosofie en natuurwetenschap. De werkelijkheid werd opgevat als ‘schepping’ en moest dus wel verwijzingen bevatten naar Gods plannen en bedoelingen, ook aangaande de economie. De hand van God werd, zoals we zagen, waargenomen in de internationale handel, arbeidsdeling, waarde en prijzen, het samenspel van privébelangen, en in armoede en ongelijkheid. Dergelijke observaties waren blijkbaar niet voorbehouden aan het antieke en mid-

deleeuwse economische denken, maar even gangbaar in de nieuwe tijd. Het feit dat de ‘wetenschap der politieke economie’ van de zestiende, zeventiende en achttiende eeuw zich onafhankelijk ontwikkelde van de theologie neemt dus niet weg dat theologische motieven een rol bleven spelen. De vermeende secularisering van het economisch denken komt hiermee in een ander licht te staan: het economisch domein werd niet ontwijd, maar juist meer dan ooit tevoren theologisch geduid.

Tegelijkertijd, zo is mijn conclusie, was er wel degelijk sprake van een transformatie van de voorzienigheidsdoctrine naar functie, vorm en inhoud. Zo werd niet gewezen op voorzienigheden in de economie als argument voor het bestaan van God of om het intelligente ontwerp van de Schepper te prijzen, maar om economische verschijnselen te verklaren of om economische argumenten kracht bij te zetten. De doctrine kreeg dus een praktische invulling. Wat haar vorm en stijl betreft had het economisch providentialisme veel weg van de natuurlijke theologie. De voorbeelden van Gods hand in de economie werden niet ontleend aan de Heilige Schrift, maar direct aan de orde der natuur. Doordat God, de Natuur en de Voorzienigheid min of meer als synoniemen werden gebruikt, kreeg de voorzienigheid in toenemende mate een onpersoonlijk karakter. Meer dan op de God van de Bijbel leek de God van de economen inderdaad op de goddelijke machinemaker van de zeventiende en achttiende-eeuwse deïsten. Inhoudelijk, tot slot, sloten de voorbeelden van economische voorzienigheid nauw aan bij de vijf transformaties zoals beschreven in hoofdstuk 2. Gods voorzienigheid voor het economisch domein was i) passief, ii) niet-miraculeus, iii) optimistisch, iv) antropocentrisch en v) latent. Met deze typisch vroegmoderne interpretatie van de zorg en regering Gods hebben ook de economische schrijvers van de periode bijgedragen aan een veranderende opvatting en uiteindelijk - in latere eeuwen - het uit beeld verdwijnen van dit theologisch concept.

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2007 - 2010	Master Economics and Informatics (<i>cum laude</i>) Erasmus School of Economics, EUR
2006 - 2009	Bachelor Wijsbegeerte Faculty of Philosophy, EUR
2005 - 2008	Bachelor Filosofie van de economie Faculty of Philosophy, EUR
2003 - 2007	Bachelor Economie en Informatica Erasmus School of Economics, EUR

Positions and activities

2014 - 2015	Staff member university council, EUR
2014 - 2015	Member scientific committee ISECS 2015 - The Fourteenth Congress of the International Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies
2012 - 2015	Student member KNAW-beoordelingscommissie onderzoeksmasters geesteswetenschappen / Nederlands-Vlaamse Accreditatieorganisatie (NVAO)
2012 - 2015	Editor for <i>Erasmus Journal of Philosophy and Economics</i>
2011 - 2015	Editor for <i>Radix</i> (quarterly journal on faith and science)
2008 - 2009	Student-assistant of prof.dr. R. Kuiper Faculty of Philosophy, EUR
2008 - 2015	Student-assistant of prof.dr. J.J. Vromen Faculty of Philosophy, EUR

Publications

‘De wortel van alle kwaad. Leibniz’ *Theodicée* goedgelovigologie?’,
Radix, vol. 41, no. 4 (2015) - forthcoming

‘Van zondaar tot zegen’ [on the merchant/banker in sixteenth-century painting],
Sophie, vol. 5, no. 2 (2015), pp. 4-11

‘In pursuit of the rarest of birds: an interview with Gilbert Faccarello’ (with Thomas Wells), *Erasmus Journal for Philosophy and Economics*, vol. 7, no. 1 (2014), pp. 86-108

‘The reformation of economic thought. Dutch Calvinist economics, 1880-1948’,
Philosophia Reformata, vol. 78, no. 2 (2013), pp. 124-143

‘Ongelijkheid als grondslag van de economie: een historische beschouwing’,
Christen Democratische Verkenningen, jaargang 2013, no. 4, pp. 49-55

‘Sola scriptura?’ (review of A.J. Kunz, *Als een prachtig boek*),
Radix, vol. 39, no. 3 (2013), pp. 228-230

‘Dooyeweerd’s philosophy of economics’,
Journal of Markets & Morality, vol. 15, no. 2 (2012), pp. 415-429

‘Recensie van Tomáš Sedláček’s De economie van goed en kwaad’,
Economisch Statistische Berichten, vol. 97, no. 4649 & 4650 (2012), p. 771

‘Dooyeweerd’s filosofie van de economie’, *Radix*, vol. 37, no. 3 (2011), pp. 191-201

‘Review of Johan J. Graafland’s The Market, Happiness, and Solidarity: A Christian Perspective’, *Erasmus Journal of Philosophy and Economics*, vol. 4, no. 1 (2011), pp. 114-118

Teaching experience

2013/2014/2015 Course ‘Archeologie van het economisch denken. De relatie tussen economie en filosofie’ (together with dr. H. Krop)
 Bachelor Philosophy, EUR

Sep. 2014/2015 Lecture ‘Adam Smith en de Schotse verlichting’
 Minor Philosophy ‘Grote denkers’, EUR

May 2014 Lecture ‘Blaise Pascal’
 Course ‘Zeventiende eeuw’ of prof.dr. H. van Ruler
 Bachelor Philosophy, EUR

Mar. - Apr. 2014 Two guest lectures
 Course ‘Economie van het genoeg. Capita selecta levensbeschouwing en economie’ of prof.dr. R. Kuiper
 Bachelor Philosophy, EUR

Oct. 2013 Guest lecture ‘Dooyeweerd’s filosofie van de economie’
 Course ‘Inleiding christelijke filosofie’ of prof.dr. R. Kuiper,
 Bachelor Philosophy, EUR

Oct. 2013 Lecture ‘Hugo Grotius en de vrijheid van handel’
 Course ‘Capita selecta’ of dr. P. Schuurman
 Minor Philosophy, EUR

Oct. 2012	Lecture ‘Schotse Verlichting’ Course ‘Achttiende eeuw’ of prof.dr. L. van Bunge Bachelor Philosophy, EUR
May - Jun. 2012	Four tutorials Course ‘Philosophy of economics’ of dr. J. Reiss Bachelor Economics, EUR
Nov. 2010	Guest lecture ‘Christelijke filosofie van de economie’ Course ‘Inleiding christelijke filosofie’ of prof.dr. R. Kuiper, Bachelor Philosophy, EUR

Presentations

Jan. 2015	‘Van zondaar tot zegen. Een geïllustreerde geschiedenis van de koopman in de christelijke traditie’ (Workshop), Studieconferentie Stichting voor Christelijke Filosofie, Utrecht
Dec. 2014	‘The reformation of economic thought’, 3 rd ‘Théologie et économie politique’ Workshop, Triangle / University of Lyon
Jun. 2014	‘Bernard Man-devil?’, Lunchtime Seminar, EUR
Jun. 2014	‘Mandeville as theologian. Theological aspects of Mandeville’s theory of society’, Conference ‘300 years Mandeville’s Fable of the Bees’, EUR
Nov. 2013	‘De bevestiging van het gewone leven’, Colloquium ‘Europa’s hoogste goed’, EUR
Nov. 2013	‘Aristotelianism in early-mercantilism: the debate between Maly-nes and Misselden’, EIPE PhD Seminar, EUR
Nov. 2013	‘Aristotelianism in early-mercantilism: the debate between Maly-nes and Misselden’, OZSW Conference in Philosophy, EUR
Mar. 2013	‘Providentialism in early-modern economic thought, 1600-1776’, Research Methods in History and Philosophy of Science Series, Ghent University
Jan. 2013	‘Religie, kapitalisme en economie: een historisch perspectief (Workshop), Studieconferentie Stichting voor Christelijke Filosofie, Utrecht
Jan. 2013	‘Providentialism in early-modern economic thought, 1600-1776’, Historical and Philosophical Perspectives on Economics Seminar, London School of Economics
Jan. 2013	‘The reformation of economic thought’, Conference ‘Economics, Christianity & The Crisis: Towards a New Architectonic Critique’, 1 st Amsterdam Kuyper Seminar, VU University Amsterdam
May 2012	‘Divine oeconomy. Economic providentialism and the commercialization of life’, EIPE PhD Seminar, EUR
May 2012	‘Divine oeconomy. Economic providentialism and the commercialization of life’, Econ & Culture Seminar, EUR

Mar. 2012

'The role of divine providence in early-modern economic thought, 1600-1776', Erasmus Graduate Conference in Philosophy of Science, Rotterdam

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