



Adam Smith’s Beholderism Redux¹

Daniel B. Klein² and Jeffrey T. Young³

[LINK TO ABSTRACT](#)

Melchior Palyi (1928, 225) said that Adam Smith’s work is like the Gospel in that it is written in a way so as “to permit...widely different interpretations to be taken.” Smith likes to see theists and non-theists come together in his text. He likes to see Easterners and Westerners, economists and sociologists, progressives and classical liberals come together in his texts.

One disagreement is over the meanings of “impartial spectator” and how they fit together. In the prior issue of this Journal, we, along with coauthor Nicholas Swanson, explicated what we called Smith’s beholderism (Klein, Swanson, and Young 2025). We criticized twelve authors for flattening “impartial spectator” such that its meanings rise no higher than the conscience; the Journal invited those living today to write replies for publication, and one did so, Professor Jack Russell Weinstein. His response appears concurrently in this issue and is titled “Adam Smith’s Impartial Spectator Is Neither Divine Nor an Ideal Observer.” We respond to Weinstein and take the opportunity to further elaborate our interpretation, including a new diagram. In addressing the reader, we assume familiarity with our 2025 article.

Weinstein fails to see the distinction between beholderism and theism

In our article, we ascribed to Smith what we call “beholderism.” To restate things, “beholderism” holds that what is good corresponds to what would be good in the eyes of a universally benevolent beholder of the universe. In its highest

¹ Acknowledgments: We thank John Stephens for creating the image shown as Figure 1.

² George Mason University, Fairfax, VA 22030.

³ Gordon College, Wenham, MA 01984.

sense, Smith's "impartial spectator" is a kind of beholder—whether that's God or an allegorical beholder.

The overarching structure of Weinstein's reply is as follows:

1. Weinstein maintains that ascribing beholderism to Smith is tantamount to ascribing theism to Smith.
2. He proceeds to argue that Smith was not a theist.
3. He judges that, since beholderism is tantamount to theism and Smith was not a theist, Smith was not a beholderist.

A problem with Weinstein's reply is item 1. Ascribing beholderism to Smith is not tantamount to ascribing theism to Smith. It's true that a theism (or, at least, a theism patterned after Christianity and other major religions) is necessarily beholderist, but it is not true that beholderism is necessarily theistic. It could even be atheistic. Thus, Smith might not have been a theist—we do not take a position on whether Smith was a theist.

We distinguished a type of beholder called God and a type called Joy. We wrote:

Some readers, above all theists, will naturally find the concept of God far more attractive and logically-consistent than the concept of Joy. Joy is an allegory after all—an allegory for God, some sort of God-like being, or for goodness and virtue—but Joy nevertheless does not exist in the way God exists. (Klein, Swanson, and Young 2025, 299)

Thus, there is a basic asymmetry between God and Joy as concerns existence.

We explicated six attributes of God and said that only two of those attributes, namely, super-knowledge and universal benevolence, are necessarily shared by Joy. We wrote:

Like God, Joy's facets include super-knowledge and universal benevolence.... The facets numbered 3, 4, 5, and 6, are trickier in relation to Joy. There is a way to avail ourselves of them without simply positing them as facets of Joy. (Klein, Swanson, and Young 2025, 299)

The four other attributes are, in brief: communication between God and man, divine providence, *Imago Dei*, and eternity/the hereafter. Weinstein writes:

[A] reason I disregard the distinction between Joy and God is that Joy amounts to smuggling in a Christian god under a different name. A supernatural creature, even an allegorical one, that has even some measure of communicative ability with humans, is omnibenevolent, has control over divine providence, participates in divine Justice, and stands outside of time, is for all intents and purposes a Christian God. (Weinstein 2026, 178)

But communicative ability, divine providence, divine justice, and standing outside of time are not posited attributes of Joy. We say repeatedly that Joy is an allegory. Weinstein is mistaken when he writes that objections to “a theistic interpretation [of Smith] will apply to Joy as well.” When we write “God/Joy,” we mean “God and/or Joy.”

We used the following words in describing attributes of Joy: “well-beyond-human, but not necessarily to the same extent we associate with God.” Weinstein reproduces those words as though we said them about the six attributes of God. But we said those words about two attributes only: super-knowledge and universal benevolence. Contrary to what Weinstein says, we did not attribute the four other attributes to Joy.

Something about those other four attributes that we should have made more explicit is that they imply that God exists, which is to say, God, as a concept that is part of a theistic interpretation of life, is a reality. In a theistic interpretation of life, God is not an allegory; God does not depend on allegorizing by human beings; reality could exist without human beings and yet with God; God exists independently of human beings.

Since at least some of the four other attributes are essential to God, and since those other attributes are *not* built into Joy, Joy cannot qualify as God.

Referring to God and Joy, Weinstein writes: “These frameworks...are not compatible within naturalism” (174). We are not invested in the word *naturalism*, but we see beholderism as being compatible with a sensible conception of naturalism. Again, beholderism is compatible even with atheism. Weinstein confesses that he is “not entirely clear on the meaning of beholderism” (182), and we freely confess that we are not entirely clear on its meaning, either. We thank Professor Weinstein for engaging our neologism and for prompting us to try to make our meaning clearer.

Weinstein devotes much of his reply to arguing that Smith was not a theist. Weinstein’s case for Smith-as-non-theist appears to us somewhat one-sided. More importantly, arguing that Smith was not a theist is a non sequitur. We did not claim Smith was a theist, and our argument does not rest on Smith’s being a theist. Indeed, in our 2025 article we acknowledged “the contested, unknown nature of Smith’s religious views” (Klein, Swanson, and Young 2025, 299). As we showed with a mountain of textual evidence, his system entails some form of beholderism. Evidence against Smith’s own theism is not sufficient to demonstrate Smith was not a beholderist.²

² Recall also the following in our 2025 article: “[W]e are not so much interested in debating God vs. Joy in the present paper. We are most interested in proposing God and/or Joy as one beholderist camp—an alternative to those who would flatten the ‘impartial spectator.’ So, again, whatever the differences between God and Joy, those differences do not matter to what follows. It’s all beholderism to us. To repeat, for us ‘God/Joy’ means God and/or Joy” (Klein, Swanson, and Young 2025, 299–300).

How a flattener might interpret TMS 215.11 and what's wrong with such interpretation

In our 2025 article we discuss paragraph 215.11 of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (TMS). Weinstein offers remarks on 215.11. We now turn to 215.11 and later return to Weinstein's remarks about 215.11.

The paragraph TMS 215.11 was added in Smith's final edition of TMS. Here it is again:

In the steadiness of his industry and frugality, in his steadily sacrificing the ease and enjoyment of the present moment for the probable expectation of the still greater ease and enjoyment of a more distant but more lasting period of time, the prudent man is always both supported and rewarded by the entire approbation of **the impartial spectator, and of the representative of the impartial spectator, the man within the breast.** The impartial spectator does not feel himself worn out by the present labour of those whose conduct he surveys; nor does he feel himself solicited by the importunate calls of their present appetites. To him their present, and what is likely to be their future situation, are very nearly the same: he sees them nearly at the same distance, and is affected by them very nearly in the same manner. He knows, however, that to the persons principally concerned, they are very far from being the same, and that they naturally affect *them* in a very different manner. He cannot therefore but approve, and even applaud, that proper exertion of self-command, which enables them to act as if their present and future situation affected them nearly in the same manner in which they affect him. (TMS 215.11; italics original, boldface added)

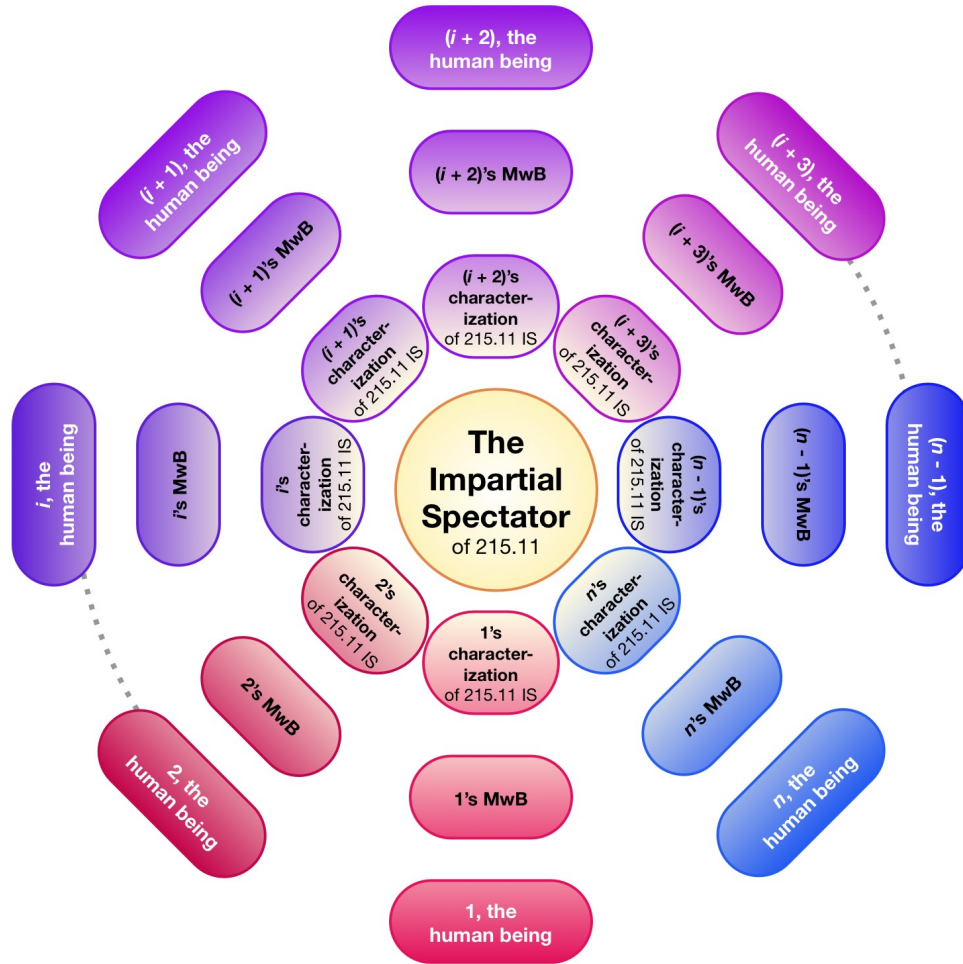
Smith treats the prudent man in the paragraphs that precede 215.11 and in the paragraphs that succeed 215.11. But Smith does not treat the prudent man in 215.11.

Paragraph 215.11 is about “the impartial spectator.” The challenge is to figure out what “the impartial spectator” signifies. We say it signifies God and/or Joy. Whatever that signified being is, it is superior to the prudent man.

The next paragraph (that is, TMS 215.12) goes back to describing the prudent man. Thus, 215.11 is a single turn-out paragraph on a superior. There is a parallel in paragraph TMS 81.1, a single turn-out paragraph on the jural superior.

Figure 1 offers a schematic that we use to exposit our interpretation of 215.11.

Figure 1: A schematic of TMS 215.11



There are n individuals. Start at the bottom, at the 6 o'clock position, and call that person 1, then proceed clockwise to 2, then jump to i and proceed individually to $i + 3$ and then jump to $n - 1$. (The two “jumps” are represented by the two curved and extended ellipses.)

For each human being i , we have, from outer to inner:

- i , the full human being
- i 's man within the breast (MwB) (in other words, i 's conscience)
- i 's characterization of the impartial spectator (IS) of 215.11
- The impartial spectator (IS) of 215.11

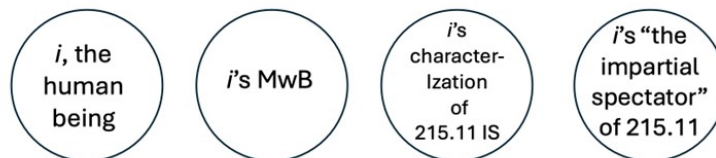
Perhaps a flattener would accept this figure, provided that the central figure, the impartial spectator of 215.11, is a human being without any superhuman qualities. We beholderists see that central figure as a being with superhuman qualities.

Here are the problems we see with the interpretation attributed to flatteners:

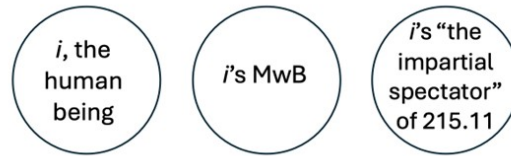
1. There is no sensible stopping point for those surveyed. That is, it does not make sense to say that the 215.11 impartial spectator (IS) surveys only Jim and Mary and no one else. Smith is not doing a solipsistic ethics for a clique, enclave, or primeval small band. Jim and Mary are indirectly connected to human beings worldwide, and ethical questions about themselves in relation to, say, people in China or in Africa, are natural to the ethical outlook. Smithian ethics are patterned after Christianity; all humans are God's creatures; all are made in His image; all are loved by Him; all are tested by Him.
2. Clearly, the IS of 215.11 surveys multiple people. Moreover, the preceding point would make it all people. But even if it is just two people who are surveyed, the 215.11 IS sees each's "present labor" and hears "the importunate calls of their present appetites." How can a normal human being see and hear all that? Who gets around that much? Who is constantly looking over one person's shoulder, much less two people's shoulders, and even less everyone's shoulders? If Jim is the prudent man, who, besides Jim himself, hears the importunate calls of his present appetites? That extent of the surveying is simply superhuman. It would require superhuman knowledge. No actual human could possibly achieve such knowledge, so such knowledge is superhuman. It is like Santa Claus. He is not a normal human being. He moves too fast and knows too much (whether each has been bad or good). Superhuman knowledge as an attribute of the impartial spectator is not special to paragraph 215.11. For example, Smith writes at TMS 118.9 that even if the evil deed of an evildoer "was for ever to be concealed *from every human eye*, it is all to no purpose. When he looks back upon it, and views it in the light in which the impartial spectator would view it, he finds that he can enter into none of the motives which influenced it" (italics added).
3. What's more, surveying all that he does, the IS of 215.11 is not worn out by all the surveying and importunate calls. That, too, is superhuman.
4. He approves of the surveyed persons' conduct when they act such that their present and future situations affect them "in the same manner in which they affect him." He is not merely good-willed. He is *affected* by all that he sees and hears—that, again, is superhuman.

5. That affection is the basis of his approval. He is benevolent. And in the following quotation, notice how Smith says that we necessarily ascribe “supreme wisdom and divine benignity” to God: “The happiness of mankind... seems to have been the original purpose intended by the Author of Nature when he brought them into existence. No other end seems worthy of that supreme wisdom and divine benignity *which we necessarily ascribe to him*” (166.7, italics added).
6. The IS of 215.11 is impartial. The impartiality here must run up to higher and higher levels of rules for the set of people surveyed. That is, it is not merely about the impartial application of a local or lower-level rule, but also about whether that rule is *an impartial rule*, according to higher rules. Slave trading conformed to certain rules in the European context, but those rules were not impartial at a higher level—the people who made the rules that allowed slave-trading did not impartially apply the higher rules. The upwardly-vital impartiality here relates to universal benevolence, as presented by Smith. Such ever-higher impartiality is superhuman.
7. Each person’s conscience is a representative of the 215.11 IS. If a flattener says that *i*’s MwB is merely a representative of *i*’s characterization of the 215.11 IS, that would not justify rejecting our claim that *i*’s MwB is a representative of the 215.11 IS. We may say that *i*’s MwB is a representative of a representation (or characterization) of the 215.11 IS, and that is consistent with saying that *i*’s MwB is a representative of the 215.11 IS. When we call a legislator a representative of his district or electorate, we could just as well say that he represents a representation of the good of that district. Since all of consciousness is within the empire of imagination, every object is, in a sense, approached by way of the person’s representation of the object in question.

Perhaps a flattener might object to the central position it gives the impartial spectator of 215.11. The flattener might say that the impartial spectator is, like the MwB, individuated to each person *i*. In that case, the diagram would be simply a series of *n* rows, with each row featuring four elements:



Or, the flattener might dispense with the third element, leaving just:



In this fashion, the flattener would try to sustain that the impartial spectator is individuated to person *i* in a manner analogous to how MwB is individuated to person *i*. We would respond with several points:

1. The text of 215.11 seems to make its impartial spectator stand in the same relation to all the persons surveyed and play the same role for each. Thus, the impartial spectator would be common at least to that set of persons.
2. Smith describes the MwB as “the representative of the impartial spectator.” What point would there be in distinguishing the MwB and the impartial spectator, and specifying the relationship between them, if they were both individuated to person *i*? We cannot see that there would be a point in speaking of an individuated representative of another individuated being; it would make more sense to collapse them into one entity. That, of course, is exactly what the flatteners do; but they do not explain why, if they are right, Smith distinguishes MwB and the impartial spectator and describes one as the representative of the other.
3. What meaning would there be to calling the represented being “impartial” if it too were individuated to *i*?

Weinstein’s treatment of 215.11

Weinstein quotes 215.11 in full and then says: “[T]here is nothing here that suggests supernatural capacities nor is there any text that is not easily interpreted metaphorically.” (188)

Given the existence of human civilizations, there is nothing superhuman in human beings generating a character known as Santa Claus. However, there are things about Santa Claus that are superhuman. To visit all those people on Christmas Eve is superhuman. To slip into locked homes undetected is superhuman. To know whether each has been bad or good is superhuman. To match presents to the beneficiary’s preferences as well as Santa does is superhuman.

Maybe someone would say that Santa is really just all those parents, so there is nothing actually superhuman. Santa is a metaphor or allegory. Weinstein says the impartial spectator of 215.11 is “easily interpreted metaphorically.” Yes, the impartial spectator of 215.11 may be interpreted metaphorically. We may likewise say that it may be interpreted allegorically. Again, Joy is allegory. We say that the superhuman aspects appear *in the allegory*, not in the fact of human beings allegorizing (whether about Santa or Joy).

Weinstein shares how he takes Smith’s “impartial spectator” to heart. He writes engagingly about an image of his daughter:

[O]ne of the things that I have learned as a father is that my daughter is “always with me” even when she is not, and that I frequently imagine her judgment when I strive for her approval. She is the most important person in my life, even more important to me than I am to myself, a conviction that most parents feel. I regard her as a profoundly moral person, and I would be distraught if I did something she condemned. She is my moral guidepost. She gives me energy...When I conjure her image—when I really confront my love for and trust in her—I most certainly feel it in my breast...

One could easily substitute my daughter for Smith’s man within the breast in the above passage. In fact, in my book *Israel, Palestine, and the Trolley Problem* (2024), I use language analogous to Smith’s to make a similar point. In the introduction, lamenting how horrendous the political realities are, I wrote: “I am heartbroken at my own conclusions, but I needed to put them out there anyway, particularly because, to steal a famous slogan from a kosher hot-dog company, ‘I answer to a higher authority.’ I wrote this essay so that I could look my eighteen-year-old daughter, Adina, in the eye” (Weinstein 2024, x).

No one could possibly interpret this introductory remark as suggesting that when I imagine my daughter as an impartial judge of my morality, I am thinking her into existence. Nor does it require that my idealized romanticized parental version of my child be accurate. She will, I am sure, turn out to be just as flawed as the rest of us, and given her age, there is no doubt that she has had many failures and shortcomings that she has kept from me. Yes, my image of her is real in some meaningful sense, and based on something independent of me, but so is my image of Homer Simpson. Anselm and Descartes are wrong in suggesting that we could not conceive of a perfect God without one actually existing. There is no reason why an imaginer can’t postulate an impartial spectator who is perfect while failing to be able to create one. (Weinstein 2026, 189–190)

Weinstein does not follow through on fitting his personalized example to Smith’s text, but we may attempt to do so. Let’s begin with the elements used in Figure 1. Associated with an individual i is the series:



Weinstein is *i*, the human being. How to match Weinstein's words to the other three circles is unclear. His conscience is his man within the breast or MwB, but Weinstein also writes: "One could easily substitute my daughter for Smith's man within the breast in the above passage." Were the daughter Weinstein's MwB, Weinstein would have to follow through on the text of 215.11 and say that his daughter is a representative of the 215.11 impartial spectator. He would then have to explain what it is that his daughter is a representative of.

Another problem with Weinstein's saying that his daughter is his MwB is that one's conscience is neither another human being nor an image or "idealized romanticized... version" of some other single human being. One's conscience may be a composite of social influences, but it is never so entirely based on one single individual. Surely Weinstein's conscience has been influenced by persons other than his daughter.

It is more sensible to fit Weinstein's "idealized romanticized parental version of [his] child" to one of the other two circles. Let's consider each in turn.

Weinstein's "idealized romanticized parental version of [his] child" as corresponding to Weinstein's characterization of the 215.11 impartial spectator: This option seems sensible, except that Weinstein should admit that his "perfect" and "always with me" version of his daughter is superhuman, as Santa Claus is superhuman. Indeed, Weinstein says he answers to "a higher authority." Weinstein says that one who is not a theist may "postulate an impartial spectator who is perfect." Also, he would have to follow through on the text of 215.11 and therefore regard his idealized version of his daughter as a characterization or representation of a being who is, again, superhuman, and who, according to Smith, is the being represented by the consciences of those surveyed.

Weinstein's "idealized romanticized parental version of [his] child" as corresponding to the 215.11 impartial spectator: Again, Weinstein would here have to admit superhuman qualities. Also, his "idealized romanticized parental version" of his daughter would have to survey multiple (arguably, all) people and be represented by each's MwB. In Smith's chapter on systems that make virtue consist in propriety, the penultimate paragraph—also added in Smith's final edition—is:

None of those systems either give, or even pretend to give, any precise or distinct measure by which this fitness or propriety of affection can be ascertained or judged of. That precise and distinct measure can be found nowhere but in the sympathetic feelings of the impartial and well-informed spectator. (TMS 294.49)

Propriety and precision do not go together—for *human beings*! It is only for this impartial spectator that they go together. Smith would tell Weinstein that “the impartial and well-informed spectator” is neither his daughter nor his idealized image of his daughter.³

Although Weinstein quotes 215.11 in full, he does not offer an interpretation of it. Indeed, nowhere in his paper does he expound on what Smith meant by “the impartial spectator.” Weinstein waves away Smith’s text, justifying his hand-waving with such remarks as: “Frankly, all of Smith’s divine references fall into categories Lakoff and Johnson refer to as ontological, container, and personification metaphors (Lakoff and Johnson 1980, 24–35).”

Halls and rooms

TMS paragraph 215.11 makes more sense when we see its impartial spectator as God or as Joy. All of TMS makes more sense when we see the 215.11 impartial spectator (and the 294.49 impartial spectator) as God or as Joy. Beholderism does not imply theism.

Even for someone who, like us, holds the conviction that Santa Claus is not real, Santa Claus is still the best way for that person to do Christmas. Likewise, even for someone who holds the conviction that the beholder is not real, beholderism is still the best way for that person to do ethics.

In *Mere Christianity*, which originated in radio broadcasts beginning in 1941, C.S. Lewis (2002, 10) likened mere Christianity to “a hall out of which doors open into several rooms.” Mere beholderism may be thought of as a hall anterior to that hall. If Lewis was a porter helping people into the hall of mere Christianity, perhaps Smith was a porter helping people into the hall of mere beholderism, from which they may then pass through other doors, one of which leads into the hall of benevolent monotheism, where there is, among others, a door that leads into the hall of mere Christianity, where there are doors leading to rooms of “the creeds of existing communions,” where “there are fires and chairs and meals.” What Lewis says about his mere-Christianity hall also works for the anterior mere-beholderist hall: “The hall is a place to wait in, a place from which to try the various doors, not a

³ We likewise could have used here Smith’s statement that “the sympathetic gratitude of the impartial spectator...will always correspond to [a man’s] beneficence” (225.19) for the idea that the impartial spectator, in the highest sense, has an ethical precision and accuracy that no human can have.

place to live in.” Humans, by nature, seek a communion, a room. Just as Lewis does not propose mere Christianity as something “a man could adopt...in preference to Congregationalism or Greek Orthodoxy,” the porter of the mere beholderist hall would not propose that hall as something a man could adopt in preference to Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Sikhism, the Bahá'í Faith, or some non-theistic, perhaps ‘Joy’-flavored, communion that would qualify as beholderist.

We are grateful to Jack Weinstein for his kind and fruitful engagement. To him and flatteners of all parties: We hope you find your inner beholderist.

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About the Authors



Daniel B. Klein is professor of economics and JIN Chair at the Mercatus Center at George Mason University, and chief editor of *Econ Journal Watch*. His latest book is *The Spirit of Smithian Laws*. His email is dklein@gmu.edu.



Jeffrey T. Young is Emeritus Professor of Economics at St. Lawrence University and a part time Lecturer in the School of Business at Gordon College. His latest book is *Adam Smith's Theory of Value and Distribution: Economics as a Moral Science Once Again* ([link](#)). His email is jeffrey.young@gordon.edu.

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