

# Adam Smith Comes for Spiritual Direction

## Moral Choice and Spiritual Freedom in Big Data's Planned Economies

SD: Well, good morning, Mr Smith. What brings you to spiritual direction on such a blustery morning?

AS: This weather we are having reminds me of my student days at Glasgow University. You could have a gale in the morning and then a bonny afternoon. Yes, thank you for your welcome. I appreciate your seeing me.

SD: You are thought of as the father of so much of modern economic theory. I expect most people don't know that you won an exhibition at Glasgow which gave you a scholarship to Oxford on the condition that you would become a minister in the Church of Scotland. But you stuck with economics didn't you?

AS: Yes, that is true though much of my writings focused on the subject of religion and good moral choice.

SD: Would I be right in saying that your elaboration of the "invisible hand" was talking about the hand of God?

AS: Absolutely.

SD: I apologize if I have gotten us off track by questions about your background. Tell me what has brought you to spiritual direction in 2019.

AS: No apology needed. You are quite right. Economics has brought me here. Not the economics of climate change, which is an infinitely intriguing topic in these times, but not why I am here. What brings me to spiritual direction is a concern about whether the economic theories I developed in the 18th century are at odds with the opportunity for people to make good moral choices. I need guidance in puzzling this out so that my legacy of research and thinking in the 18th century will not be misunderstood in the 21st.

SD: Tell me Mr. Smith, for someone unlearned in economics like me, how precisely would you describe the issue that concerns you?

AS: As you know, much of my legacy in the hands of people like Milton Friedman has exalted the idea of democratic capitalism, and while he was not big on the need for government to restrain the excesses of capitalism that have led to such things as the financial crisis experienced in 2008, he did lead the charge to build the case that capitalism is the most efficient way for an economy to work.

SD: As you look at how the economies of different countries have unfolded after your life would you agree with him?

AS: I would certainly agree with him that for much of modern history it is clear that capitalism is the most efficient way for an economy to function. Of course, as Marx points out, unrestrained capitalism ends up creating oppressive work conditions and disparities of wealth that can be huge, but these can be managed through social legislation and government tax systems if a government is willing to do so. What we have seen as an alternative to democratic capitalism is central government planned economies. The Soviet Union is the poster child for how, with only pencil and paper tools available for data collection at the time, a system of planned economic growth was terribly inefficient. These inefficiencies and its desire to be a global power led to the fall of the Soviet Union.

SD: So where does that leave us now?

AS: Well what I see now is the possibility of a model for an efficiently planned economy has emerged through the backdoor of technology. My concern is that a new data driven economic model may be more efficient than my old ideas of the “invisible hand.”

SD: How has this emerged?

AS: This is largely due to big data and artificial intelligence (AI). What we see in the West is the development of a planned economy controlled by large corporations in different economic sectors who are making decisions based on big data and AI. For example, Big Pharma and Big Health companies basically control what drugs are researched and developed, the prices for them and the way medical therapies and products are delivered. These large corporate entities make their decisions based on big data massaged by AI, assumedly with profit being the only guiding principle in how the big data is analyzed for answers.

SD: What about another example?

AS: Oh, the best example is the tech industry where it is fair to say that what is called the Fang (Facebook, Amazon, Netflix and Google) controls that industry, the products developed, how they are marketed and priced, and how they are delivered. And, of course, this industry is at the heart of creating the big data banks of information on all citizens that are used by each major economic sector in making big data driven decisions about what to research, how much to spend where, what products to develop, and so forth.

SD: You mentioned this is happening in the West. What about in other places?

AS: China is our best alternative example. Here the data is not being amassed by large corporate interests as much as by the government. China begs the question of whether with big data and AI, a truly government planned economy, no longer dependent upon inefficient systems of gathering data, might actually be more efficient than a capitalistic one. But the truth is that we have moved to big data, planned economies in both East

and West. In China the government controls big data and then cranks in its values, such as where to increase research in a particular area (e.g. to win the technology race with the West) at the expense of consumer demand. While in the West the economy is driven sector by sector by large corporate interests making decisions ostensibly based purely on a profit motive analysis of the big data they have collected.

SD: This is all very interesting, but I must interject here, what brings you to spiritual direction now in the 21st century? I know there has been much discussion since you wrote An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations in 1776 as to whether or not, despite the religious terms of your scholarship, you were, like many Enlightenment thinkers, not a Christian, but a desist. The truth is I don't get many desists in spiritual direction, either in contemporary times or from the past. Regardless, you are most welcome.

AS: Thank you. I do feel welcome. You know, of course, that in my great opus I connected individuals' self-interest with the public interest of the entire society. But for all my work on behalf of the free marketplace, I did not completely rule out a beneficial, positive role for the state. I believed government could furnish a link between the self-interest of the individual and the public interest of society as a whole. I also saw the importance of non-state institutional mechanisms, like religious institutions as possibly providing the answer to gaps created by unfettered free enterprise.

My circuitous answer stems from the worrisome conclusion, which has brought me here: I don't believe we have moral choices in our economic decisions any more.

SD: In addition to economics you did teach moral philosophy when you returned to the University of Glasgow.

AS: People today, just like in my time, make decisions of individual self-interest in the market place. This hasn't changed. But what has changed is how the opportunity for those decisions are created. We don't have the kind of economic systems today that are likely to allow moral choices to arise, or to result from many individual self-interest driven marketplace decisions. We have planned economies. With most of the economic activity in the world driven by large corporate sector big data profit driven economic decisions in the West, or big data government driven decisions in China, where is there room for individual moral choice or room for individual self-interest driven choices to result in moral good. What hurts my heart today, in returning to the 21st century to see how my economic legacy has played out, is that I don't see an opportunity in either East or West for citizens to make good moral choices or for their self-interest driven decisions to result in good moral outcomes for society as a whole.

You might rightly call me a desist. I did manage a pint or two very often with my good buddy David Hume, who in the Enlightenment spirit of the times never minded being called a non-believer. However, I come to you to ask for spiritual guidance for humanity as it becomes increasingly boxed in a cage which does not have the healing, salutary benefits of individuals having the opportunity to make moral choices either for

themselves or self-interest driven decisions that collectively support the public good. I fully acknowledge that religion, particularly in the West progressive Christianity, has been the primary force behind creating an opportunity for moral choices that have increased humankind's humanity.

SD: Yes, you are right about the contribution of progressive Christianity as the force that led to the abolition of slavery, guided the civil rights movement and more recently has fueled the fight for gender equality and gender identity freedom.

AS: I am also aware that progressive Christianity, unlike some of its other versions, has always had a realization that the big problem of sin is not that of individuals falling short, but of systemic arrangements that oppress and marginalize individuals and groups of individuals. This is both the more ancient and progressive view of sin, that it is corporate in character, which affirms my concern that big data is creating systems that reduce moral choice and are sinful.

SD: I am beginning to see the thrust of the your basic question. How do our individual spiritual lives make moral choices in a big data driven economic system, where the individual has virtually no control or influence upon the selection of choices given to us by big data driven algorithms? Christian liberation theology has tried to address an earlier version of this question of systemic or corporate sin.

AS: You are getting to the nub of it. One side of the question is do we have any spiritual freedom to make solid moral choices, whether based on religion or reason, in a big data driven society. The other side of the question is—are there ways that spiritually aware individuals and churches, or other religious or social groups, can ameliorate the worst aspects of a big data driven culture. And those worst aspects are not only the reduction of individual moral choices, but also the ways that the algorithms of systemic data driven networks can oppress or marginalize certain groups of people.

SD: An intriguing pair of questions. In the West, data algorithms are driven primarily by our more base instincts. From the perspective of evolutionary biology survival depends upon being attracted to and taking quick action based on signals that galvanize fear. So in the West you can say that a large part of the big data approach to the acquisition and exploitation of data is through the base instincts, particularly fear, but also greed, power and sexual exploitation. On the other hand, we know that while fear signals stick like velcro in the brain, positive experiences land like teflon and don't easily build up patterns of behavior that would enhance data set algorithms that might reinforce individuals making decisions on behalf of the public good.

AS: Yes, in the West big data is driven by base, survival instincts of fear and greed, and decisions made from data algorithms biased in this way are not decisions calculated to benefit the public good. Perhaps decisions made from big data in China might be more easily channeled to encourage behavior meeting the moral imperatives of a Confucian ideal of public good; but, then there is the moral problem of a lack of free choice in such an autocratic system. Still, there isn't much free choice in the West either.

SD: You have been right to bring these questions to spiritual direction. The aim of most spiritual traditions, especially and including progressive Christianity, is to make serving the public good, and those less fortunate, the paramount goal of the tradition's activities. The outer expression of service to others is the contemplated result of any mature inner spiritual growth and development.

AS: Our discussion has helped me get some insight. The question in the West boils down to one of whether there is any chance that a progressive Christian ideal of service to others might somehow be a part of an "invisible hand" that overrides or ameliorates base instinctual drives that gives primacy to fear and greed as the most efficient criteria to generate profits for those who exploit big data.

SD: I hope you are not asking me for my opinion on this question. I agree with the idea that often base instincts run big data outcomes and thus are woven into the algorithms that utilize data. Most progressive Christians would hope such algorithms are shaped toward love and generosity and other faith ideals. But if these ideals don't have the bang for the buck that the baser instincts do, then this is not likely to happen unless there is some intervention.

AS: It seems to me the threat and reality of base instinct driven big data decisions on your modern culture, combined with the speed of your technology, creates an immediate, real, and cumulatively harmful impact.

SD: That is probably so. Perhaps big data has made our culture more uncaring and less open to people reaching out to each other and realizing that relationships, upon which you centered your analysis of moral choice, are more important than money or achievement.

AS: One thing for sure is that big data has caused cultural changes at an increasingly rapid pace. And it often seems that what rises to the top of the charts, again data driven, are those stories where greed and power are most on display. But let me ask you. What are the economics of spreading love and caring among people? Is there a way big data can help do this rather than undermine it?

SD: This is precisely the problem that brought you here. Real moral choice will not happen in an unfettered capitalistic economic system where the corporate sectors control big data. On the other hand, we all fear the autocratic control of big data occurring in China, even if some of that control is socially beneficial in the suppression of pornography and hate speech.

AS: You could use the Christian archetypal image of eating an apple of the tree of acknowledge of good and evil and say big data has eaten all the apples. So maybe the apples themselves, that is big data or economics driven by big data, holds the answer progressive Christians would seek of an economic system: continually evolving to build a more just and caring world. The argument I made in my most important work, *The*

*Theory of Moral Sentiments*, is that conscience arises from dynamic and interactive social relationships through which people seek "mutual sympathy of sentiments." Big data and AI really do represent a way to manipulate the dynamic and interactive social relationships I was talking about. If big data used the right algorithms maybe becoming a loving, caring human being might be the work of the "invisible hand" after all.

SD: I am afraid the "invisible hand" we have now is badly soiled. The challenge you are coming back from history to so timely present is how might the principles of perennial human wisdom, which includes progressive Christianity and your Enlightenment view of good moral conscience, be made a part of the algorithms that create the culture that shapes our lives and gives us opportunity for good moral choices.

AS: I must say our conversation has given me more clarity and no answers. But then perhaps it is impossible to hope that visiting from the past I would obtain answers for the present. But it does make me think that spiritually grounded groups, seeking to bring more love and caring into the world, might become algorithm watchdogs. They could review and critique the corporate algorithms that control our culture and at least give warnings to the public about those that most restrict moral choice and discount human dignity, love and caring. Does an algorithm encourage equality of opportunity among people, or does it promote division and give social status to difference? If I was alive now, I believe it would be fascinating to work with big data and behavioral economics. How exciting it might be to work on creating big data algorithms to encourage a more compassionate world. I pass the idea along to you in the present. Thank you for the opportunity to spend time having this discussion.

SD: You are most welcome. With your permission I will share our discussion with others and maybe this will encourage more questions and insight into how to make our world a better place. Perhaps the Christian admonition of yesterday, "to feed the hungry and heal the sick," is today best translated into create and support compassionate algorithms that help eliminate systemic poverty and provide ways for each human being to see the worth and dignity of every other.

