

Economics in Christian Perspective: Some Ontological and Epistemological Facets

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When considering a Christian perspective on economics, it is important to place the area of economic life into some philosophical perspective with regard to ontology and epistemology. What is it that we are discussing when we deal with “economics”? This term can ambiguously refer to both theoretical economic considerations, and the actual phenomenon of economic transactions and interactions among people and institutions. A brief discussion of foundational issues is therefore in order.

Firstly, some ontological discussion. The world in which we live is first of all God’s world, a world which God has brought into being, and which remains constantly and exhaustively dependent on God for its continued existence and functioning. That is, without God’s constant upholding of creation by his powerful word (Colossians 1:17, Hebrews 1:3), creation would cease to exist. Its functioning is governed not by “natural law,” that is, some ordering principles inherent in creation, but by the sovereign word of God, the only rightful king over what he has brought into being. Therefore, to discern rightly the way in which creation functions, we must resort to the Scriptures, which give us the only true and authoritative perspective on the creation and its constant dependence on God and his righteous rule over all things.

The perspective which Scripture gives indicates (Genesis 1) that God created real, concrete entities in integral relationship with each other. The world is not an amorphous collection of discrete objects, whose relationships are arbitrary and self-originated, but creatures of God, already related to each other in distinct and specific ways inherent in their very being. These creatures are discernible to us because we confront them in our daily lives. It is this concrete confrontation with real creatures in daily life that is the primary, foundational and authentic human experience. This then provides the basis for our epistemological concerns, to which we will return shortly.

These real creatures we confront are the actual components of our lives. We do not have to do with abstract qualities, or ethereal considerations, or purely academic issues. Our economic theories, as in any other academic area, have to do with real creatures, but only in terms of an investigation into specific features of the existence of those creatures that is secondary and derivative. But what is it that we confront when we are interacting with these real creatures? After all, our experience of them is not the same in every situation, in every context, in every occasion. We interact with other creatures along specific lines, in ways that can be empirically analysed and compiled to form a taxonomy of different kinds or varieties of interaction. This is a secondary process: we do not interact with “kinds of interaction,” we interact with real creatures, and it is the interaction of real creatures that is considered abstractly or analytically in theory-forming.

Failure to acknowledge the priority and primacy of the real creatures that we study is at root of many of the problems we face in economic life: real creatures, the people God made, are not the focus of economic theories, policies and legislative instruments: instead, what is usually at the forefront is **homo oeconomicus**, economic man, which is not a real creature coming from the creating hand of God, but an analytical abstraction, a mental construct, an intellectual concept which is used to formulate theories, that does not exist outside of the academic mind. It is an abstraction, a concept, an analytical tool only, and to consider that such a thing exists is to engage in reductionism of the worst kind: the people that God made, complex, multi-faceted, richly diverse and variously gifted, are reduced in this approach to a single-faceted, narrowly-focused and unreal entity that distorts, destroys and disintegrates the creature God made.

In our academic theories, we are not dealing with real creatures, but with a mental abstraction, focusing not on the richness and diversity of God’s creatures, but on one or two aspects or features of the functioning of these creatures for the purpose of more precise and in-depth analysis. That which we examine is not the real creature: it is our abstraction from that creature, an abstraction we have performed for the specific purpose of attaining greater understanding. It is impossible to examine such creatures in the round, so to speak, we can only do so by considering one facet or feature of

their functioning at a time. But in doing so, we must always remind ourselves that it is one facet or feature of their functioning that we are considering. We are not considering the real creature itself.

This can be seen from the fact that when we use physics to analyse motion, for example, we can consider “motion” in abstract, as a way in which real things function. It is irrelevant for our considerations whether the thing in motion is blue or red, spotted, striped, brindled or colourless, whether it costs a great deal or has no economic value worth considering, whether or not some people find the thing in motion beautiful, ugly or indifferent to their tastes. As none of these features are relevant to the motion of the object, then they can be ignored for the purposes of the analysis. But they cannot be ignored as real features of the object itself, and to consider the “physical” analysis to be the “real” nature of the thing is to reduce it from the complex, diversely-featured creature of God to a distorted, falsified entity that does not in fact exist. God’s creatures are as he made them to be; and any reductionistic approach we take does not grasp the real creature at all; it merely ignores or denies the existence of features or characteristics that are genuinely inherent in the creature, by considering them as included in the features we do accept, thereby preventing or at least greatly inhibiting any appreciation of those features **on their own terms**.

Thus a physicist can for the purposes of motion analysis ignore the economic cost of the objects he studies, but if he wishes to continue his work, he must face up to the fact that there is an economic cost involved and that someone must pay that cost if the work is to continue. That cost is not an artificial, human construct externally imposed in an arbitrary way on that object, as a physical reductionist may argue, but is an integral God-created feature of the way that object functions in the world God made. That is not to argue that objects, even humanly formed objects, have an “intrinsic” monetary value, for all economic value is historically and socially determined, as a consequence of the need or desire for specific things that have a scarcity value. The fact that it does indeed have the capacity for economic valuation is inherent in the way God formed his creatures, and that includes the objects that we form through our own technical activity. Computers and telephones are not creatures of God in any direct

sense, but they are formed by human beings, using the abilities and calling given by God, working with the raw material of creation.

We do not add to that material any features which it does not already possess: the economic value of a computer or a child's toy is not an arbitrary valuation we impose on an otherwise economically-indifferent object: that value is a real expression of the costs involved in producing that object. Those costs are themselves not arbitrary, but are an inescapable feature of God's world: nothing is without an economic feature to its functioning, even though that feature is not always prominent, or even actively present: but it is passively present constantly, because the economic feature of all God's creatures is inherent in their being. It is activated or realised by human economic activity, but that is possible only because it is a genuine facet of the functioning of that creature in God's world.

Secondly, that economic functioning is possible because all God's creatures share that feature: it is one of the integral relationships that all creatures share with every other creature. When human beings engage in economic activity involving the non-human creation, we do not bring our economic activity to raw, non-economically featured things, but engage with them in a real way, inherent in what they are as God's creatures. We do not impose our economic functions on them, but engage with them in terms of our mutual functioning under the norms which God made to govern the economic feature of every creature. There is of course a radical difference between human beings and other creatures, even other highly intelligent animals. Only human beings have an "economy," an ordered system of valuation in terms of costs and prices. Only human beings can activate the economic feature of other creatures, by taking them up into human economic activity; but even then these creatures function **passively** as economic objects. They do not participate **actively** in human economy; but that they are able to participate at all is because they have an economic feature to their existence by means of which we are able to engage with them in economic ways. Again, we do not bring our economic values to these other creatures and impose them from outside: we meet with them as God's economic agents, interacting with creatures God made in such a way that they can be readily taken up into human economic activity. We are not creating that possibility: we are only realising it in concrete ways.

This being the case then, we can see that economic theories must take account of the fact that what they deal with is not the real world **in toto** (for that is impossible to accomplish in any theory regardless of what discipline), but the abstraction of one of the functions of real creatures in an intellectual analysis. We do not deal with **homo oeconomicus** but with real people; **homo oeconomicus** does not exist, only the economic **feature** or **facet** of human life exists, and it is this feature of human life that we deal with when we form our economic theories. This is the basis of the epistemology involved in this discussion: abstract theory-forming is a secondary, derivative, cognitive activity that is reduced from and removed from, the real life of real people. We cannot deal in economic theory with real people; that is too complex and unwieldy for us. But we can deal with the economic **functioning** of real people, as long as we always remember that our theories are abstractions, that seek to explain one facet of human life, and not the whole.

Thus economic theories must take account of the fact that people are not economically “rational,” or economically determined, or predominantly or solely driven by economic considerations. They are dealing with real people, with multiple, diverse, complex facets to their lives, of which economics, it must be said, is only one, and often not even a prominent one. Take for instance young children: their lives, assuming they are relatively normal and not caught up in their parents’ economic fixations, are not focused on, dominated by, or governed by economic considerations. They are still in the process of learning the economic costs of things, that they can’t have every toy they see in the toy shops, not simply because they are inappropriate for them, have too many toys already, or are offensive to their parent’s tastes (ugly), morals (guns), or religious beliefs (witches, demons), but because they cannot be afforded, or are cheaply made and unlikely to last, or are simply wasteful of good money. Young children do not automatically realise these things; they must be taught sensible saving, spending, prioritising, comparing value and so on. But children are certainly caught up in the economic life of society, and even become important players in that economic life, especially prior to Christmas, and as teenagers, even become an important market group in themselves. Our economic theories cannot focus solely on adults, or even

mature, responsible adults, but on all players in the economy, according to the significance and involvement they have. And to do this brings us to another point to consider: economics is not all there is to life.

While the economy is important, and significant, and particularly dominant in contemporary society, it is often given an importance, significance, and dominance it does not deserve. Part of the problem we face as Christians is that the economy is over-valued. That is not all there is to life, it is not even all there is to political and national life. True the nation cannot survive with an economy shot to pieces with hyper-inflation or inability to service debt or purchase essential food or medical supplies, but neither can the nation survive if society has political or social or moral problems such that its very existence is threatened. The economy forms one facet of the life of the nation, and the other facets are equally important. Priority and significance may shift between these facets according to exigencies of events and developments, but that priority is not inherent in the economy any more than it is inherent in any other facet of life: all of life is significant, all of life is subject to the righteous rule of God, and all of life must be lived before him in obedience to the norms that he has given.

What then are the norms for life? How can these be discovered? To take the second issue first, the norms are given by God for the whole of creation. They are not “transcendent” rules, hovering Platonically over the world, accessible to rational minds and imperfectly instantiated in the world around us. They are not arbitrary constructions of human minds, imposed by us in a Kantian fashion on a chaotic environment. They are not rigid regulations which must be complied with to the letter. The norms are given by God for creation, as the standards for human life. Human life is to be lived in terms of these norms, that is, they make clear to us what human life is to be like. These norms are not separate from the creation, nor are they inherent in the creation, but are given with creation to direct and shape it; and in terms of human life, for us to live up to. Thus we have freedom and flexibility in how we live. God has given us the ability to develop and shape our corporate lives in society (and individual lives as well) in ways which reflect the richness, diversity, complexity and variety of his creation, including human beings. The multitude of cultures in the world is the result of

a great diversity of human responses to the call of God to us all to be engaged with the world entrusted to us as the stewards of God. We are to shape, to mould, to develop, to explore, to discover all the rich possibilities that God has implanted in his creation, and to do so in a way which brings glory to God. That activity includes economic activity, and engagement with the world in economic fashioning and shaping. That activity is then a facet of life given by God, called into being by God, and enabled and empowered by God through the abilities and skills entrusted to human beings. God has also established the norms for human life, including economic life, and calls us to live by these norms.

How do we discover the norms? In all of our engagement with the world, we are confronted with the normative character it displays. The norms can be discerned by empirical analysis, guided and directed by the revelation of God in Scripture. This revelation provides for us a perspective, an orientation, a way of approach to the world around us, that is alone faithful to God and truly responsive to him. If we take the Scriptures seriously, this leads us to something like the following basic perspective as a given: that we are created God's stewards, entrusted with his world to care for and develop on his behalf, sharing its resources with all humankind and the animals and plants and other creatures it is also given to as their home; that we are to engage with the world in many different ways, according to the gifts God has given richly to us all; that we are to live in accordance with his desires for us; that creation is normed by God to guide it and enable it to function in ways true to its nature and to its God; that we must follow those norms and live in accordance with them. These norms, then, are given for the whole of life; not economic life alone, not political life or ethical life alone. Thus, the whole of life is normed by God, and to live in ways which are obedient and faithful to him, we cannot ignore any of that normed character of the creation.

Thus, the norms for economic life must be followed not independently of, nor in isolation from, but in conjunction with and simultaneously with the norms for the whole of life. We cannot treat any facet of life in isolation, for we do not live life in terms of separate facets: we live life as whole people, undivided, integral, complete. Thus each norm for human life must be realised simultaneously. We must have justice

in political life, good stewardship in economic life, mutual love in family life, harmony and co-operation in social life; and of course, as the foundation for it all, faith and trust in God in the whole of life. These are not isolated elements, but distinguishable facets of whole, concrete, integral lives. Thus we are called to live normatively in every way, simultaneously. As Jesus said, “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices - mint, dill, and cummin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law - justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, **without neglecting the former.**” (Matthew 23:23). Simultaneous realisation of norms: do not neglect **any** of the matters of the law! “For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking it all.” (James 2:10). We cannot have a healthy economy with a sick social or political structure. Low inflation on its own will not achieve social justice if it is accomplished for instance at the expense of significant, long-term structural unemployment or inescapable poverty.

What then are the norms? As we are guided by Scripture in what to look for in the way of norms, we come to realise what these are in concrete terms through empirical analysis of human society. We must reflect on the history of human society, its ups and downs, its positive and negative phases, and successes and failures. We can discern from this an indication of what it is that makes for the just and healthy society, one that enables the whole of its citizenry to develop the gifts that God has given them, to exercise these gifts for the good of all, to care for the land in which they live, and to live in peaceful interaction with those of other nations.

It cannot be normative human life that deprives some in society of the opportunity to make use of their gifts, it cannot be just for some to enjoy wealth **at the expense of others**. It is only in the light of Scripture that we can see what these norms are, and how they should be expressed in concrete terms in our particular situation. We cannot arrive at a true understanding of what God requires of us and the norms he has established for his creation, if we are in rebellion against God, ignoring his revelation and his incarnate love for us in Jesus Christ. We cannot discern rightly the norms by which we are to live if we seek to discover them through rational analysis alone: there

is no “natural revelation” that can be read independently of the written revelation of God. We have been seduced by sin; and only through being liberated from the power of sin can we rightly see again; but even then, we need the corrective guidance of Scripture to see the creation aright.

Thus one of the insights made known to us in Scripture is that this is indeed God’s world, shaped and directed by his sovereign word of power, and which is normed by God for our guidance. If that is not accepted, then we will not seek the norms for human life in the governing hand of God establishing creation, but instead seek them in either a transcendent order outside of creation and independent of it (Plato), or seek them in the creation itself, inherent in it and therefore dependent on it, known through what we make of it. This can be done either through seeking the norms in outside objects (objectivism) or in our own minds, which we then impose on the world outside us (subjectivism). This is an inherently **conservative** approach, since what we have done with creation reveals its normative nature: whatever is, is right. There is no normative corrective force in that approach, since it does not lead us to critically examine what we have done. Nor does the transcendent approach help: such norms are so far removed from creation that we cannot discover how to concretely express them in terms of our own historical and cultural context.

But a normed creation, in which the norms are given by God, in conjunction with the originating word of power, enables us to see what we should do: there are standards to live by, which are not arbitrarily invented by the human mind, subject to no external controls; nor are they far off from us so that we cannot be sure we have access to them. The norms are made known in and through the creation, but they are not part of creation itself: they are given with creation to guide it and direct it aright, and their existence, contours and character are revealed to us in Scripture. Thus we find that if we pollute the waterways and the air, sickness and environmental degradation results. This is not something subjective (“It looks alright to me, what are you complaining about?”) nor something objective, external, static, unrelated to our historical situation, but the violation of norms producing a specific, normed result: if you poison the river, the fish will die. This is the normative character of creation: we cannot do what we like

with it; it is governed in a certain way, so that if it is treated inappropriately, negative consequences result.

Economic norms are to be discerned the same way. The Scriptures point us aright in the direction of true development and management of the economy. To go against the normative nature of our economic facet of life is to go against the way God made us to function. The Scriptures give in considerable detail a concrete articulation of normative economic life for the people of Israel, an agronomic society in a Middle Eastern country in a former age. We cannot replicate that society as though **it** was the norm; nor can we replicate the early church's life as though **that** was the norm. But we can see in the authoritative revelation of God what a normative society would be like; and how it was critiqued, assessed, commended and challenged by the words of the prophets and the teachers of wisdom; by the Messiah and by his apostles. We can today see in the Scriptures the pointers we need to discern the contours of a normative society, how that was lived out, where and how it failed, and in the light of that authoritative critique and guideline, shape our society not to imitate or copy the life of Israel or the church, but to produce a society, appropriate to our development, social context, historical situation, geographical location, and so on, which is seeking to live in a normative way in the whole of life, a life which is given by God and called to serve him as he has desired of us. The task of economics is to examine our economic life in the light of Scripture, and to recommend ways in which we can move closer to the norms it discerns at work in the world in the light of that Scripture.

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