

## Theology and Economics: Two Different Worlds?

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### 1.

It is quite striking that in the gospel parables Jesus more than once uses the world of economics as a framework for his stories—the parable of the talents, the dishonest steward, even, we might say, the little vignette of the lost coin. Like farming, like family relationships, like the tensions of public political life, economic relations have something to say to us about how we see our humanity in the context of God’s action. Money is a metaphor like other things; our money transactions, like our family connections and our farming and fishing labors, bring out features of our human condition that, rightly understood, tell us something of how we might see our relation to God.

The point doesn’t need to be labored. Monetary exchange is simply one of the things people do. It can be carried out well or badly, honestly or dishonestly, generously or meanly. It is one of those areas of life in which our decisions show who we are, and so it is a proper kind of raw material for stories designed to suggest how encounter with God shows us who we are. All obvious enough, you may think. But we should reflect further on this—because we have become used in our culture to an attitude to economics which more or less turns the parables on their head. In this new framework, economic motivations, relationships, conventions, and so on are the fundamental thing and the rest is window-dressing. Instead of economics being one source of

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metaphor among others for the realities of self-definition and self-discovery, other ways of speaking and understanding are substitutes for economic assessment. The language of customer and provider has wormed its way into practically all areas of our social life, even education and health care. The implication is that the most basic relation between one human being and another or one group and another is that of the carefully calibrated exchange of material resources; the most basic kind of assessment we can make about the actions of another, from the trader to the nurse to the politician, is the evaluation of how much they can increase my liberty to negotiate favorable deals and maximize my resources.

In asking whether economics and theology represent two different worlds, we need to be aware of the fact that a lot of contemporary economic language and habit does not only claim a privileged status for economics on the grounds that it works by innate laws to which other considerations are irrelevant. It threatens to reduce other sorts of discourse to its own terms—to make a bid for one world in which everything reduces to one set of questions. If we want to challenge the idea that theology and economics do belong in completely separate frames, the first thing we need to do, paradoxically, is to hang on to the idea that there really *are* different ways of talking about human activity and that not everything reduces to one sovereign model or standard of value. Economic exchange is *one of the things people do*. Treat it as the only “real” thing people do and you face the same problems that face the evolutionary biologist for whom the only question is how organisms compete and survive or the fundamentalist Freudian for whom the only issue is how we resolve the tensions of infantile sexuality.

In each of these reductive contexts, there is something of the same process going on. Each will tell you that your capacity to examine yourself and clarify for yourself who you are in the light of your memory and your imagination and your variegated relationships is a fiction—or at best a small and insignificant aspect of your identity. The face you see in the mirror is not the real thing: you are being activated by hidden motives and calculations, you are unconsciously balancing out the forces that are involved in guaranteeing your chances of survival as a carrier of genetic material or in mediating and controlling the frustrations of Oedipal desire—or in securing the maximal control of disposable resources in a world of scarcity and competition.

All of these models leave you with an uncomfortable lack of clarity about whether you can really take intelligent decisions at all on the basis of the kind of person you consciously want to be.

Traditional religious ethics—in fact, traditional ethics of any kind—does not require you to ignore the hidden forces that may be at work in any particular setting. It simply claims that being aware of them is part of something more integrated—a habit of picturing yourself as a single self-continuous agent who can make something distinctive out of all this material. Being a human self is learning how to ask critical questions of your own habits and compulsions so as to adjust how you act in the light of a model of human behavior, both individual and collective, that represents some fundamental truth about what humanity is *for*. Put like this, it is possible to see the various balancing acts we engage in, the calculations of self-interest and security, the resolution of buried tensions, as aspects of finding our way to a life that *manifests* something—instead of just solving this or that problem of survival or profit. It is really to claim that our job as human beings is to *imagine ourselves*, using all the raw material that science or psychoanalysis or economics can generate for us—in the hope that the images we shape or discover will have resonance and harmony with the rhythms of how things most deeply are, with what Christians and others call the will and purpose of Almighty God.

If all that is clear to begin with, we can also begin to see economics in its proper place. It is one thing that people do, yes; but perhaps at this stage of the argument we can grant that it has a very special importance. In the last few years, I have found myself repeatedly noting that the term “economy” itself is in its origins simply the word for housekeeping. And if this is the root or the core of its sense, we ought to be able to learn something about where the whole discourse belongs by thinking through what housekeeping actually is. A household is somewhere where life is lived in common; and housekeeping is guaranteeing that this common life has some stability about it that allows the members of the household to grow and flourish and act in useful ways. A working household is an environment in which vulnerable people are nurtured and allowed to grow up (children) or wind down (the elderly); it is a background against which active people can go out to labor in various ways to reinforce the security of the household; it is a setting where leisure and creativity can find room in the general business of intensifying and strengthening the relationships

that are involved. Good housekeeping seeks common well-being so that all these things can happen; and we should note that the one thing required in a background of well-being is stability. “Housekeeping theory” is about how we use our intelligence to balance the needs of those involved and to secure trust between them. A theory that wanders too far from these basics is a recipe for damage to the vulnerable, to the regularity and usefulness of labor, and to the possibilities human beings have for renewing (and challenging) themselves through leisure and creativity.

That is the kind of damage that manifestly results from an economic climate in which everything reduces to the search for maximized profit and unlimited material growth. The effects of trying to structure economic life independently of intelligent choice about long-term goals for human beings have become more than usually visible in the last eighteen months, and one reason for holding this conference is the growing force of the question “what for?” in our global market. What is the long-term well-being we seek? What is the human face we want to see, in the mirror and in our neighbors? The isolated *homo economicus* of the old textbooks, making rational calculations of self-interest, has been exposed as a straw man: the search for profit at all costs in terms of risk and unrealism has shown that there can be a form of economic “rationality” that is in fact wildly irrational. And, over the last two or three decades, the impact of a narrow economic rationality on public services in our society has shown how there can be a “housekeeping” strategy that ends up destroying the nurture and stability that make a household what it is. What we most need, it seems, is to recover that vision of what the Chief Rabbi in the United Kingdom has called the home we build together.

## 2.

So the question of how we think about shared well-being is the central one before us. If we are not to be reduced to speaking about this only in vague terms of the control of material resources, we need a language that allows us to imagine and to criticize our humanity in relation to something more than the immediate environment. Theology does not solve specific economic questions (any more than it solves specific scientific ones), but what it does offer is a robust definition of what human well-being looks like and what the rationale is for human life well-lived in common.

Central to what Christian theology sets before us is mutuality. The Christian Scriptures describe the union of those who are identified with Jesus Christ as having an organic quality, a common identity shaped by the fact that each depends on all others for their life. No element in the Body is dispensable or superfluous: what affects one affects all, for good and ill, since both suffering and flourishing belong to the entire organism, not to any individual or purely local grouping. The model of human existence that is taken for granted is one in which each person is both needy and needed, both dependent on others and endowed with gifts for others. And while this is not on the whole presented as a general social program, it is manifestly what the biblical writers see as the optimal shape of human life, life in which the purposes of God are made plain. Jesus' own teaching and practice make it quite explicit that the renewed people of God cannot exist when certain categories are systematically excluded, so that the wholeness of the community requires them to be invited. St. Paul spells out the implications in terms of the metaphor of organic unity in the Body; St. John recalls the teaching of Jesus at the Last Supper about the divine purpose of a oneness that will mirror the oneness of Jesus and the eternal source of his being. "Indwelling" in one another is the ground of Christian ethics. Each believer is called to see himself or herself as equally helpless alone and gifted in relationship.

Helpless alone and gifted in relationship: this is where we start in addressing the world of economics from a Christian standpoint. No process whose goal is the limited or exclusive security of an individual or an interest group or even a national community alone can be regarded as unequivocally good in Christian terms because of the underlying aspiration to a state of security in isolation. If my well-being is inseparable in God's community from the well-being of all others, a global economic ethic in which the indefinitely continuing poverty or disadvantage of some is taken for granted has to be decisively left behind. And this, remember, not simply because there is an imperative to be generous to others but because we must recognize our own need and dependence even on those who appear to have nothing to give. To separate our destiny from that of the poor of the world, or from the rejected or disabled in our own context, is to compromise that destiny and to invite a life that is less than whole for ourselves.

To use a different but perhaps helpful metaphor, our life together reflects the way our very language works. We speak because we are spoken to and learn to become partakers in human conversation

by being invited into a flow of verbal life that has already begun. It is simply and literally impossible for us to learn and use language without acknowledging dependence; aspirations to an isolated life in this context are straightforwardly meaningless. No word or phrase is simply a possession; it is there to pass on, to use in the creation of a shared reality. And the worst abuses and misconceptions of language are those in which words and phrases are “traded” (an interesting metaphor in this connection!) in ways that do not seek to build that shared reality—whether this is a matter of using language as a weapon or using it as a way of concealing truth or using it to manipulate judgment and desire. It is not an accident that in a context where injustice and narrow judgment prevail in economic relations, language itself becomes stale or dead. If we think of how much “dead” language there is around in our culture—in bad journalistic writing, in advertising, in propaganda, in official jargon—we may get a clear glimpse of just how bad our economic life has become. We talk, in another powerful and significant metaphor, of “debasing the currency” of our speech. We know that it is possible for us to forget that we need *living* language—honest language, fresh metaphors, new puzzles and challenges—for our life to be as it should. We depend on others generating this living speech and we need to be able ourselves to contribute to it: the silence of cliché and cynicism is the diabolical mirror image of the silence that comes on the far side of the most creative speech. The silence of cliché is what happens when there seems no point in listening for the new, and no energy for active response to what is said. You might as well say *x* as say *y*: everything is exchangeable. Which is itself a characteristic of the market mentality: everything can be measured and thus replaced by something of equivalent significance as far as material profit and security are concerned. Paying the right kind of attention to the corruptions of language in our age is inseparable from attending to the corruptions of our economic exchanges, and it is no less of a religious obligation.

In sum, faith educates us in dependence and in the authority of the giver at the same time; and in our current climate, this particular balance is one of the hardest to achieve. But if our economic life is indeed “one of the things we do,” it will be marked in its actual operations by just the same constraints and buried rhythms or tensions that appear in other aspects of what we do. If theology has something to say about those rhythms and tensions, it has something to say to economics.

## 3.

If what we have said so far makes sense, theology contributes two things to the discussion of an ethical economic future. It challenges, as we have seen, the idea that there is a mysterious uniqueness about economic life that takes it out of the normal scope of our discussions of intelligent choice and the humane evaluation of options. It proposes a model of human life together that insists on the fact that we are all involved in the fate of any individual or group and that no one is exempt from damage or incapable of gift within the human community as God intends it. But the second aspect worth noting is that, by underlining the fact that we do have the capacity for truthful self-understanding and thus for intelligent scrutiny of alternative courses of action, the Christian theological vision also offers a critical account of what human personality can be. It provides a basis for talking about character and thus about virtue (as I have suggested elsewhere). It takes for granted that we have a proper interest in the continuity, the intelligibility, of our lives; that we have a proper interest, to use a slightly different idiom, in integrity—in being recognizable to ourselves from moment to moment and being answerable for ourselves from moment to moment. It is clear enough, alas, that regulation alone is ill-equipped to solve our problems: the issues need to be internalized in terms of the sort of life that humans might find actively desirable and admirable, the sort of biographies that carry conviction by their self-consistency. And this means recovering the language of the virtues and the courage to speak of what a good life looks like—as well as the clarity to identify what has gone wrong in our society when we fail to set out a clear picture of the good life as it appears in trade and finance as much as in the classical professions.

This means in turn rescuing the concept of civic virtue, and thus the idea of public life as a possible vocation for the morally serious person. The discussion we have embarked on in this conference is not simply about the theological grounds for a more just social order, though it is at least that; it is also a matter of grasping that “well-being” involves the capacity, in the words that some contemporary philosophers like to use, of bearing one’s own scrutiny—being able to look at yourself without despair or contempt. This is not at all the same as looking at yourself with complacency or self-congratulation. It has to do with developing a discerning self-awareness that is awake to

possible corruptions, able to ask questions of all sorts of emotional and self-directed impulses, and capable of developing habits of honest self-examination. It depends not on the confidence of getting or having got things right but on the confidence that it is possible steadily to expose yourself to the truth, whatever your repeated failures to live in and through it. Well-being entails a dimension of hopeful honesty which keeps alive the conviction that learning and change are real in human life and that there can be a story to be told that will hold a life together with some sort of coherence.

So the contribution of theology to economic decision-making is not only about raising questions concerning the common good, questions to do with how this or that policy grants or withholds liberty for the most disadvantaged. These are obviously necessary matters, and a sound theological stress on mutuality, on the balance of dependence and gift sketched earlier, is crucial to our public discussion of economics. But we need also to look with the greatest of care at what is being assumed and what is being actively promoted by our economic practices about human motivation, about character and integrity. This has an impact, of course, on the integrity of business practice, but it also has to do with assumptions about competition, about the priority of work over family, about what advertising appeals to and what behavior is rewarded. If we find, as a good many commentators and researchers have observed in recent years, that working practices regularly reward behavior that is undermining of family life, driven or obsessive, relentlessly competitive and adversarial, we have some questions to ask. As well as working for a global economic order that is just and mutual, we need habits in the actual workings of the financial “industry” that do not destroy what I called earlier “discerning self-awareness” and the capacity for humane relationships.

#### 4.

Economic activity is something people do, one kind of activity among others, and as such it is subject to the same moral considerations as all other activities. It has to be thought about in connection with what we actively want for our humanity. And questions about what we want will take us beyond “pure” economic categories just as surely as talking seriously about politics or technology will take us outside a narrowly specialized discourse once we want to know what



they are for. Human life is indeed a tapestry of diverse activities, not reducible to each other. It is not the case that all motivation is “really” economic, that all relations are actually to do with exchange and the search for profit. Yet it can be said with some reason that economics in the sense of housekeeping is a background for other things; and because of that it is particularly important to keep an eye on its moral contours. Get this wrong and many other things go wrong, in respect of individual character as well as social relations.

Thus we are bound to look for the sort of language that will keep our imagination and our critical faculties alive in this enterprise, that will keep us alert to the dangers of all sorts of reductionism. Theology in one way does represent a “separate” frame of reference, one that does not at all depend on how things turn out in this world for its system of values. That is why it is not in competition with other sorts of discourse. But that is also why it is so important—so indispensable, a believer would say—a register for talking about such a range of activities. It recalls us to the idea that what makes humanity human is completely independent of anyone’s judgments of failure or success, profit or loss. It is sheer gift—sheer love, in Christian terms. And if the universe itself is founded on this, there will be no sustainable human society for long if this goes unrecognized.

