

ECONOMICS AND THEOLOGY

Topic: Economics and Theology: Contrast and Complementarity
Convener: Albino Barrera, Providence College
Presenters: Mary L. Hirschfeld, University of Notre Dame
Respondent: Thomas Massaro, Weston Jesuit School of Theology

Mary Hirschfeld presented her paper entitled “‘I Prefer Not To’: Herman Melville’s ‘Bartleby the Scrivener’ as a Vehicle for Exploring the Tensions in Economic and Theological Understandings of Freedom.” The concept of freedom figures prominently in both neoclassical economic and theological discourse. However, there is no universal definition of freedom, a term which is often used equivocally not only between disciplines, but even within a given discipline. In economic discourse, freedom can be understood as both the means of achieving economic wealth and the end for which economic wealth is pursued. Yet, ironically, the discipline simultaneously models individuals as exercising a very constricted sort of freedom of choice, one which subjects individuals to the manipulation of others. Theology has more consciously wrestled with the problem of how to understand human freedom. As Servais Pinckaers observes, the shift from understanding freedom as “freedom for excellence” to understanding it as a “freedom of indifference” had important consequences for the development of moral theology. The tensions within economics reflect some of the key points of the theological debate, and thus can serve to illustrate what was at stake in the seemingly arcane theological debates of the thirteenth century that ushered in our modern understanding of freedom.

Herman Melville’s short story, “Bartleby the Scrivener,” proves to be a useful vehicle for sketching out these complex themes, since it both nicely illustrates the internal tensions associated with neoclassical economists’ conception of freedom, and some of the difficulties inherent in the voluntarist notion of “freedom of indifference.” If “freedom of indifference” seemed attractive, in part because it avoided the type of determinism that is at the core of economic thinking, it nonetheless has no way of replacing the function that same determinism plays in making sense of actual human behavior. A retrieval of Aquinas’s notion of “freedom for excellence” seems more promising, especially if it is set in the context of an understanding of the relationship between finite goods and the infinite Good, which is missing from economic thought, and which seems to be the root of the dilemma present in economic thought, as illustrated by Bartleby.

Albino Barrera presented a paper entitled “The Social Mortgage on Intellectual Properties and its Theological Warrants: Illustrating the Complementarity of Economics and Theology.” People do not enjoy absolute proprietary claims to their natural talents and skills. Just like the goods of the earth, intellectual properties are subject to a social mortgage. Human accomplishments are never merely personal but also bear a large social dimension to them stemming from the participated nature of human existence and activity. Moreover, knowledge is a social product.

The biblical notion of *sedeq* requires right relationships in human affairs. This includes proper stewardship of the person's manifold gifts—the gift of the earth, the gift of each other, and the gift of oneself.

This paper also illustrates the complementarity of economics and theology. Economics strengthens our theological reflection on intellectual objects by highlighting the requirements of general, commutative, and distributive justice—all necessary conditions for the attainment of the common good and the actualization of biblical *sedeq* in the postindustrial community. For its part, theology pushes the envelope of economic theory and policy by exposing the market failures that result from the discipline's tendency to use the nation as the basic unit of economic analysis and to ignore the marginalized.

In his response, Thomas Massaro observed that the market mechanism simply cannot be asked to perform functions of which it is incapable. Hence John Paul II's frequent warnings against superdevelopment, about the need to circumscribe markets within strong juridical frameworks and about the workings of human culture and civil society to tame undesirable effects of markets, such as the failure to distinguish human needs from wants. Only the broadest imaginable conception of value is fully worthy of the *humanum*. And of course the most important aspect of human life involves not material things acquired but relationships forged and sustained. Christian social ethics boils down to getting the relationships right, and economic theories regarding market operations must always remain in dialogue with theology and similar disciplines that consider aspects of human life beyond the allocation of material resources.

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