

Southern Methodist University

SMU Scholar

---

Religious Studies Theses and Dissertations

Religious Studies

---

Spring 5-19-2018

## Christian Political Economy and Economic Science: A Pathway for Interdisciplinary Dialogue

Nathan McLellan

*Southern Methodist University*, [nmclellan@smu.edu](mailto:nmclellan@smu.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://scholar.smu.edu/religious\\_studies\\_etds](https://scholar.smu.edu/religious_studies_etds)



Part of the [Christianity Commons](#), [Economic History Commons](#), [Ethics in Religion Commons](#), [Political Economy Commons](#), and the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

McLellan, Nathan, "Christian Political Economy and Economic Science: A Pathway for Interdisciplinary Dialogue" (2018). *Religious Studies Theses and Dissertations*. 5.

[https://scholar.smu.edu/religious\\_studies\\_etds/5](https://scholar.smu.edu/religious_studies_etds/5)

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the Religious Studies at SMU Scholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in Religious Studies Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of SMU Scholar. For more information, please visit <http://digitalrepository.smu.edu>.

CHRISTIAN POLITICAL ECONOMY AND ECONOMIC SCIENCE:  
A PATHWAY FOR INTERDISCIPLINARY DIALOGUE

Approved by

---

Prof. Robin W. Lovin  
Southern Methodist University

---

Prof. William J. Abraham  
Southern Methodist University

---

Prof. Charles E. Curran  
Southern Methodist University

---

Prof. Paul Oslington  
Alphacrucis College

CHRISTIAN POLITICAL ECONOMY AND ECONOMIC SCIENCE:  
A PATHWAY FOR INTERDISCIPLINARY DIALOGUE

A Dissertation Presented to the Graduate Faculty of  
Dedman College

Southern Methodist University

In

Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

with a

Major in Religious Studies

By

Nathan I. C. McLellan

B.Appl.Econ., Massey University, New Zealand  
M.Appl.Econ(Hons)., Massey University, New Zealand  
M.C.S., Regent College, Vancouver, Canada

May 19, 2018

Copyright (2018)

Nathan I. C. McLellan

All Rights Reserved

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The opportunity to study at Southern Methodist University has been one of the great privileges of my life. I am very grateful to have had this opportunity and for all the benefits I have received as a result.

I want to thank my dissertation committee of William Abraham, Charles Curran, Robin Lovin, and Paul Oslington. Each of these world-class teachers and scholars has left an indelible mark on my thinking and vocation. In particular, I want to thank Robin Lovin (my doctoral advisor), whose wise judgment, broad reading, lucid writing, and care and encouragement of his doctoral students have not only seen me through the Ph.D., but stand as an example for emulation.

The intellectual community and the friendships that I formed in the Graduate Program in Religious Studies at Southern Methodist University have enriched my family's life and mine. In particular, I want to acknowledge my friends and colleagues Dallas Gingles, Spencer Bogle, Justus Hunter, David Mahfood, and Ben Boeckel.

I also want to thank my friend April French who has encouraged me and supported my family throughout the Ph.D. at Southern Methodist University.

This dissertation was completed while being the CEO and a Teaching Fellow at Venn Foundation. I want to acknowledge the support of both the board and staff at Venn Foundation. I especially want to thank my colleague and friend, John Dennison, who encouraged me during

the final stages of the dissertation. Having travelled this path himself, he has been a wise and prayerful counselor.

Without Bronwyn, I would never have completed this dissertation. She has encouraged me at every stage and protected me from unnecessary distractions. Chiefly, she has provided companionship that has infused the writing of the dissertation with much joy. Joy, too, has been provided by Jonathan and Caleb, whose interest in the world and people remind me to take delight in the process of inquiry.

Finally, I want to acknowledge my parents, Ian and Chrissie McLellan (to whom this dissertation is dedicated). They have taught me—and continue to teach me—what a fruitful and joyful life looks like. I am grateful for their example and love.

McLellan, Nathan I. C.

B.Appl.Econ., Massey University, New Zealand, 1998  
M.Appl.Econ (Hons)., Massey University, New Zealand, 2000  
M.C.S., Regent College, Vancouver, Canada, 2011

Christian Political Economy and Economic Science:  
A Pathway for Interdisciplinary Dialogue

Advisor: Professor Robin W. Lovin

Doctor of Philosophy Conferred May 19, 2018

Dissertation Completed February 15, 2018

This dissertation considers two intellectual impediments to interdisciplinary dialogue between Christian theologians, ethicists, and economists: scarcity and the status of economics as a *wertfrei* science. Using the landmark methodological work of Lionel Robbins, *An Essay on the Nature and Significance of Economics Science*, to frame the discussion, this dissertation seeks to remove these two intellectual impediments to interdisciplinary dialogue by considering three nested questions. They are:

- (1) Is scarcity—as defined by Robbins—an accurate description of the world?
- (2) If scarcity, as defined by Robbins, is an accurate description of the world, how is this to be justified theologically, and what are the implications for the demarcation of economics?
- (3) Is economics a *wertfrei* science, and, if it is, what are the implications for interdisciplinary dialogue?

Chapter 1 elucidates these questions by outlining Robbins’s conception of scarcity, his scarcity definition of economics, and his understanding of economics as a *wertfrei* science. The first part of Chapter 2 considers question (1) by examining various challenges that have been leveled at Robbins’s understanding of scarcity as a description of the world. Having shown that the various challenges fail to overturn Robbins’s understanding of scarcity as a description of the world, the second part of Chapter 2 begins to consider question (2) by framing Robbins’s

understanding of scarcity in terminology more familiar to the Christian theologian and ethicist. Chapter 3 continues to consider question (2) by developing a theodicy that accounts for why humans find themselves in a world in which the degree of scarcity is such that human needs, at times, go unmet. Chapters 2 and 3, then, provide a theological rationale for scarcity and a theological rationale for the existence of economics as the study of scarcity-constrained choice.

Chapter 4 turns to question (3), returning to Robbins's understanding of economics as a *wertfrei* science as presented within *An Essay on the Nature and Significance of Economic Science*, and what this means for the relationship between economic science and ethics. This chapter also introduces a later essay written by Robbins, *Economics and Political Economy*, to further elucidate Robbins's understanding of the relationship between economic science and ethics, and his advocacy for political economy as the discipline that seeks to integrate the deliverances of both economic science and ethics with a view to offering policy advice. This chapter argues for a retrieval of political economy, but (*contra* Robbins) based on a realist meta-ethics.

Chapter 5, which is the culminating and capstone chapter, argues for Christian political economy as the site for interdisciplinary dialogue between Christian theologians, ethicists, and economists, now that the intellectual impediments of scarcity and economics as a *wertfrei* science have been overcome. As a particular instantiation of political economy, Christian political economy draws on the deliverances of both Christian ethics and economic science. In doing so, it respects and understands the scope and nature of economic science and seeks to maintain its theological integrity by drawing from Christian ethics.



## TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES	x
LIST OF TABLES	xi
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS	xii
CHAPTER	
INTRODUCTION	1
1. THE DEFINITION AND SCOPE OF MODERN ECONOMICS	10
Introduction	10
Delineating Scarcity	13
Anterior Conceptions of Scarcity	18
A Basic Framework	34
Scarcity and the Definition of Modern Economics	39
Economics and Value Judgments	48
Conclusion	53
2. SCARCITY OR ABUNDANCE?	55
Introduction	55
The Nature-of-Desire Challenge: William Cavanaugh and There Is Never Enough to Go Around	57

The Nature-of-Goods Challenge: Kathryn Tanner and the Economy of Grace	66
The Incommensurability Challenge: D. Stephen Long and the Tragic World of Scarcity	78
Conceptions of Scarcity, the Finitude of Creation, and the Human Vocation	87
Conclusion	96
3. GOD, SCARCITY, AND VOCATION	98
Introduction	98
Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Theodicies	103
Thomas Malthus	104
William Paley	110
John Bird Sumner	116
A Contemporary Theodicy: Albino Barrera and the Evil of Scarcity	124
God, Scarcity, and the Human and Christian Vocation	135
Conclusion	150
4. ECONOMICS, ETHICS, AND POLITICAL ECONOMY	153
Introduction	153
Economic Science, Ethics, and Political Economy	156
Neutrality, Commitment, and Objectivity	170
“Facts” and “Values”	183
Adjusting Robbins’s Schema	192
Conclusion	202
5. CHRISTIAN POLITICAL ECONOMY	204
Introduction	204
Christian Economics?	206

Objection 1: Economic Science Fails To Explain	209
Objection 2: God is an Agent	214
Christian Political Economy?	217
Objection 1: The Christian Faith Has Nothing Unique To Offer	220
Objection 2: The Christian Faith Has Nothing Substantive and Realistic To Offer	228
Economic Science and Christian Political Economy	231
Modern Catholic Social Teaching and Andrew Yuengert	233
Concluding Thoughts and an Agenda for Future Work	239
BIBLIOGRAPHY	244

## LIST OF FIGURES

1. Robbinsian and Malthusian States	35
2. Ethics and Economic Science in <i>ENSES</i>	163
3. Ethics, Economic Science, and Political Economy in <i>Economics and Political Economy</i>	168
4. Strength and Weakness of Policy Ends	225

## LIST OF TABLES

1. Conditions of Robbinsian Scarcity	14
2. Summary of Theodicies	133

## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

<i>DE</i>	<i>Divine Economy</i>
<i>ENSES</i>	<i>An Essay on the Nature and Significance of Economic Science</i>
<i>EG</i>	<i>Economy of Grace</i>
<i>FE</i>	<i>First Essay on Population, 1798</i>
<i>GES</i>	<i>God and the Evil of Scarcity</i>
<i>MCST</i>	<i>Modern Catholic Social Thought</i>
<i>TRC</i>	<i>Treatise on the Records of Creation, and on the Moral Attributes of the Creator</i>

*for my parents,  
Ven. K. I. and C. E. McLellan*

## INTRODUCTION

In the last 30 years, Christian theologians and ethicists have renewed their interest in economic systems, the economy, and the discipline of economics. During the same period, some economists have become interested in ethical issues and the discipline of ethics, and even Christianity and theology. These shifting interests are due, at least in part, to concerns about economic issues, such as increasing economic inequality, as well as the persistence and even expansion of religion in societies. The convergence of these shifting interests in theology, ethics, and economics has provided an opportunity for interdisciplinary dialogue and collaboration. The extent, however, to which interdisciplinary dialogue has taken place successfully between Christian theologians, ethicists, and economists is questionable.

In the introduction to a volume of essays published in 1994 looking to explore, *inter alia*, the possibility and nature of dialogue between Christian theologians and economists, the editors of the volume relate a story about a small conference convened by Karl Brunner with liberation theologians and economists (including a Nobel Laureate) in which they were both present. They write:

The whole event was a spectacular disaster. Tempers were lost. Insults were hurled. Yet nothing seemed to stick. Economists would make their points with the confident air of blowing the theologians out of the water; the theologians would carry on as though nothing of any relevance had been said. And vice versa. Those few of us in the middle, willing to sympathize with both sides and able to appreciate something of the arguments of each, were reduced to an appalled silence. One had the sense of a game of checkers being attempted with black pieces on the white squares and white pieces on the black. There was simply no engagement, only an endless talking at cross-purposes. Whatever else the outcome, those with a disposition to learn *anything* from the conference learned that



genuine disagreement is an intellectual achievement and that locking horns in battle requires some common ground on which to stand.<sup>1</sup>

In some pockets, the situation like that described above has improved; but in others, it does not seem to be so.

When I began formal theological education in 2007, one of my motivations was to engage with what Christian thinkers had written about the economy, economic issues, and economics. After working as a research and policy economist for over six years, I had concluded that my formal training in economics was limited in helping me as a *policy* economist. In addition, I had a growing intuition (based on some limited reading) that the Christian faith had something to offer economic policy. Given this intuition, I was somewhat surprised by what awaited me. With the exception of Catholic Social Teaching (and even here there was fault), I found misunderstanding, confusion, and what I perceived to be, at times, suspicion of economists and economics from some Christian theologians and ethicists. On the other hand, when I tried to engage some of my economist colleagues on ethical and even theological issues there was little appetite to engage. The first conference I attended on the Christian faith, the economy, and economics, was a disappointing experience, with a lack of robust engagement, particularly in pinpointing reasons as to why there was disagreement. And, yet, despite these disappointments and frustrations, I continued to remain convinced that the respective disciplines had something to learn from and offer each other and, in doing so, to contribute to the development of economic policy. For these reasons, I concur with Mary Hirschfeld's comments—offered in response to a symposium entitled “What do Economists and Theologians Have to Say to Each Other? Present Situation and Future Prospects”—that:

---

<sup>1</sup> H. Geoffrey Brennan and A. M. C. Waterman, eds., “Introduction: Economics and Religion?,” in *Economics And Religion: Are They Distinct?* (Norwell, Massachusetts: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1994), 4. Emphasis original.

The magnitude of the chasm between economics and theology is such that the panel spent more time discussing the conditions for fruitful dialogue between the two disciplines than in actual dialogue... The project of establishing the conditions for dialogue is both daunting and essential. Both disciplines could benefit enormously from exchange, yet the two disciplines speak very different languages and some mode of translation needs to be established before meaningful exchange can take place at all.<sup>2</sup>

This dissertation, then, is a contribution to establishing the conditions for interdisciplinary dialogue or exchange. It does so by, first and foremost, addressing two major intellectual impediments to interdisciplinary dialogue (in part, by engaging in the necessary work of translation that Hirschfeld points to in the quote above), and, with the results of that work in hand, to offer a proposal as to how best to place disciplinary structure around the exchange between Christian theologians, ethicists, and economists.<sup>3</sup> More specifically, the dissertation addresses the following two related impediments to interdisciplinary exchange: i) the delineation of scarcity as an accurate description of the world and, based on this, the delineation of economics as the discipline that studies the allocation of scarce resources to alternative ends; and ii) that as a science studying the allocation of scarce resources, economics should remain ethically neutral with respect to ends and the means-ends *ratio*; in other words, that it should be a *wertfrei* science.<sup>4</sup>

Various Christian theologians and ethicists have dismissed the notion of scarcity as an accurate description of the world. To do so—as will be seen more clearly throughout this dissertation—is to undermine the intellectual foundation of economics, thereby sealing off

---

<sup>2</sup> Mary Hirschfeld, “Discussion: Economics and Theology in Conversation,” *Faith & Economics* 58 (2011): 24.

<sup>3</sup> This is not to say that the impediments are only intellectual. There are also significant institutional and cultural impediments to interdisciplinary dialogue. See Paul Oslington et al., “What Do Economists and Theologians Have to Say to Each Other? Present Situation And Future Prospects: A Symposium,” *Faith & Economics* 58 (2011): 1–30.

<sup>4</sup> What Robbins means by saying economics is *wertfrei* will be discussed in further detail later in this dissertation.

theologians and ethicists from genuine dialogue with economists. Moreover, various Christian theologians and ethicists have challenged the notion of economics as an ethically-neutral science. While not sealing off economists from Christian theologians and ethicists in the same way that the dismissal of scarcity does, a failure to understand various aspects of this challenge has impeded interdisciplinary dialogue.

The approach adopted in this dissertation to address these impediments is to return to a pivotal work on economic methodology by Lionel Robbins entitled, *An Essay on the Nature and Significance of Economic Science*, and a subsequent essay entitled, *Economics and Political Economy*.<sup>5</sup> In the landmark work *An Essay on the Nature and Significance of Economic Science*, Robbins famously defines the discipline of economics as “the science which studies human behaviour as a relationship between ends and scarce means which have alternative uses.”<sup>6</sup> As this definition itself suggests, the notion that means are scarce is critical to his demarcation of the field of economics. For this reason, others have styled Robbins’s definition as “the scarcity definition of economics.”<sup>7</sup> For Robbins, to say that means are scarce is to assert that the demand for resources to meet various, competing ends exceeds their available supply.<sup>8</sup> He considers this to be the near-universal state in which humans find themselves: “Scarcity of means to satisfy

---

<sup>5</sup> Lionel Robbins, *An Essay on the Nature & Significance of Economic Science* (London: Macmillan, 1932); Lionel Robbins, *An Essay on the Nature & Significance of Economic Science*, 2nd Edition (London: Macmillan, 1935); Lionel Robbins, *An Essay on the Nature & Significance of Economic Science*, 3rd Edition (New York: New York University Press, 1984); Lionel Robbins, “Economics and Political Economy,” *The American Economic Review* 71, no. 2 (1981): 1–10.

<sup>6</sup> Robbins, *An Essay*, 16.

<sup>7</sup> Roger E. Backhouse and Steven G. Medema, “Retrospectives: On the Definition of Economics,” *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 23, no. 1 (2009): 221–33.

<sup>8</sup> As will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 1, a resource is considered scarce when, at a zero resource price, the quantity demanded exceeds the quantity supplied. This situation gives rise to the need for scarcity-constrained choice.

ends of varying importance is an almost ubiquitous condition of human behaviour.”<sup>9</sup> This requires humans to economize on resources by allocating scarce means to some ends, but not to others. Economics is the science that studies this human activity. In other words, the field of economics undertakes second-order reflection on the basic human task of economic allocation in the state of scarcity.

In addition to delineating economics on the basis of scarcity, Robbins further contends that, “Economics is not concerned with ends as such.”<sup>10</sup> As a *science* that studies the allocation of scarce resources, it should not be concerned with ends *per se*. When practicing economics, the economist is not interested in why persons value some ends over others and, therefore, should have a neutral stance when it comes to the evaluation of ends.<sup>11</sup> In other words, economics is ethically neutral or *wertfrei* (as defined by Weber, whom Robbins cites in support of his position). Thus, Robbins claims that ethics, which is concerned with valuation, is fundamentally distinct from economics:

Unfortunately, it does not seem logically possible to associate the two studies [economics and ethics] in any form but mere juxtaposition. Economics deals with the ascertainable facts; ethics with valuations and obligations. The two fields of enquiry are not on the same plane of discourse. Between the generalisations of positive and normative studies there is a logical gulf fixed which no ingenuity can disguise and no juxtaposition in space or time bridge over.<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> Robbins, *An Essay*, 15. Robbins recognizes that departures from the state of scarcity might occur (see Robbins, 13–15). These will be discussed in Chapter 1.

<sup>10</sup> Robbins, *An Essay*, 24.

<sup>11</sup> Thus Robbins writes, “Economics is essentially a series of relationships—relationships between ends conceived as the possible objectives of conduct, on the one hand, and the technical and social environment on the other. Ends as such do not form part of this subject matter.” Robbins, 38.

<sup>12</sup> Robbins, 148.

Most economists hold to Robbins's scarcity definition of economics and his idea of economics *qua* science as an ethically-neutral discipline.<sup>13</sup> For this reason, *An Essay on the Nature and Significance of Economic Science* is used to structure this dissertation and address the debate that surrounds scarcity and ethical neutrality as impediments to interdisciplinary dialogue. With this work in hand, this dissertation will also draw on Robbins's subsequent essay, *Economics and Political Economy*, alongside *An Essay on the Nature and Significance of Economic Science*, to propose how best to place disciplinary structure around the exchange between Christian theologians, ethicists, and economists. The culminating argument of this dissertation is for the discipline of Christian political economy as the site of interdisciplinary dialogue between Christian theologians, ethicists, and economists, within which there is a careful integration of the deliverances of Christian ethics and economic science.

The remainder of this dissertation is organized as follows. Chapter 1 begins with an analysis of Robbins's *An Essay on the Nature and Significance of Economic Science*. This chapter delineates Robbins's conception of scarcity, comparing it with Malthus's anterior conception of scarcity, and then discusses Robbins's conception of economics as a science based on scarcity-constrained choice; a *wertfrei* science in which the economist remains ethically neutral with respect to ends (and, one infers, the means-ends *ratio*). In doing so, this chapter distills three nested questions that are explored throughout the remainder of the dissertation:

(4) Is scarcity—as defined by Robbins—an accurate description of the world?

---

<sup>13</sup> Backhouse and Medena note: "Perhaps the most common currently accepted definition of economics stems from Lionel Robbins's *Essay on the Nature and Significance of Economic Science* (1932 [1935]), where Robbins (p. 15 [p.16]) defined economics as 'the science which studies human behavior as a relationship between ends and scarce means which have alternative uses.' Backhouse and Medema, "Retrospectives," 225. That most economists now see economics as an ethically-neutral academic discipline, see James E. Alvey, "A Short History of Economics as a Moral Science," *Journal of Markets & Morality* 2, no. 1 (1999): 53–73.

- (5) If scarcity, as defined by Robbins, is an accurate description of the world, how is this to be justified theologically, and what are the implications for the demarcation of economics?
- (6) Is economics a *wertfrei* science, and, if it is, what are the implications for interdisciplinary dialogue?

The first part of Chapter 2 turns to question (1). Various challenges have been leveled at Robbins's understanding of scarcity as a description of the world. This chapter considers three such challenges, concluding, in the final analysis, that they fail to overturn scarcity as a description of the world. Given this result, the second part of Chapter 2 offers an account of scarcity in language more familiar to Christian theologians and ethicists. If Robbins's delineation of scarcity is accurate, then it should be possible to "translate" it (to use Hirschfeld's terminology) into theological language to facilitate meaningful dialogue. In other words, the second part of Chapter 2 turns to question (2).

Chapter 3 continues to address question (2). As will be discussed in Chapter 1, Robbins conceives of scarcity as a relative concept. One can envisage degrees of scarcity. Why, then, is it the case that humans find themselves in situations in which the degree of scarcity is such that, at times, human needs go unmet? As will be discussed, this is not a new question to economic discourse. In the late eighteenth century and the nineteenth century various theodicies were developed to explain the existence of what Chapter 1 will delineate as Malthusian scarcity: a situation in which human need is unable or just able to be met. This chapter will review three theodicies from the late eighteenth century and nineteenth century, as well as a contemporary theodicy. It will then offer an alternative theodicy to explain why the world and human beings are constituted such that there is the threat that human need will go unmet and that this threat will sometimes eventuate. The work of Chapter 2 and Chapter 3, then, will provide a theological

rationale for scarcity, and, by implication, a theological rationale for the existence of economics as the study of scarcity-constrained choice.

Chapter 4 turns to question (3). This chapter returns to *An Essay on the Nature and Significance of Economic Science* to examine Robbins's understanding of ethical neutrality. In doing so, it draws on the work of Max Weber, whom Robbins draws upon in his argument for economics as a *wertfrei* science. After investigating Robbins's understanding of ethical neutrality, this chapter turns to consider how this informs Robbins's understanding of the relationship between economic science and ethics. This chapter also highlights the importance of a later essay by Robbins, *Economics and Political Economy*, for understanding the relationship between economic science and ethics. Notwithstanding that there are some problems with Robbins's understanding of ethics, this chapter argues that there are a number of benefits in retrieving Robbins's idea of political economy as a hybrid or bridge discipline that seeks to integrate the deliverances of both economic science and ethics.

Chapter 5 is the culminating and capstone chapter, offering a proposal for Christian political economy as the site for interdisciplinary dialogue between Christian theologians, ethicists, and economists, given that the two intellectual impediments to interdisciplinary exchange—*viz.*, the delineation of scarcity as an accurate description of the world and economics as the discipline that studies scarcity-constrained choice; and economics as a *wertfrei* science—have been addressed. In developing this proposal, this chapter discusses how Christian political

economy engages with the disciplines of Christian ethics and economics, considers various objections, and illustrates how a particular Christian tradition conforms to the proposal offered in Chapter 5.<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> For those who know well the literature that attempts to understand and relate the disciplines of theology, ethics, and economics, this dissertation addresses two “avenues of research” that Anthony Waterman stated needed work in his important essay *Economists on the Relation Between Political Economy and Christian Theology*, published in 1987. In this essay, Waterman suggests:

- i) “It is important for contemporary economists to be clear about just how “autonomous” economics actually is in relation to theology and ethics”; and
- ii) “For those who wish to take autonomy for granted and get on with the more humdrum job of using economics to achieve social goals determined by Christian theology, there are two strictly theological tasks to be completed. In the first place, the objections of J.S. Mill must be met by those who wish to assert simultaneously both the dominance of scarcity in human affairs which is the peculiar insight of political economy and the traditional attributes of God which are required by orthodox Christian belief. In the second, Frank Knight’s as yet unanswered attack upon the notion that Christianity can provide “value axioms”: for use in public policy formulation must be dealt with by those who wish to practise or advocate a division of labour between economists and theologians.” A. M. C. Waterman, “Economists on the Relation Between Political Economy and Christian Theology: A Preliminary Survey,” *International Journal of Social Economics* 14, no. 6 (June 1, 1987): 63.

To my mind neither of these have been adequately addressed, and this dissertation is my attempt to do so.



## CHAPTER 1

### THE DEFINITION AND SCOPE OF MODERN ECONOMICS

#### *Introduction*

Lionel Robbins's *An Essay on the Nature and Significance of Economic Science* (First Edition, 1932; Second Edition, 1935; and Third Edition, 1984; hereafter, *ENSES*) is considered one of the most important works on economic methodology in the twentieth century.<sup>15</sup> In the PREFACE TO THE FIRST EDITION Robbins states his two goals in writing *ENSES*:

In the first place, it seeks to arrive at precise notions concerning the subject-matter of Economic Science and the nature of the generalizations of which Economic Science consists. Secondly it attempts to explain the limitations and the significance of these generalizations, both as a guide to the interpretation of reality and as a basis for political practice.<sup>16</sup>

With respect to the first goal, Robbins famously defines economics as “the science which studies human behaviour as a relationship between ends and scarce means which have alternative uses.”<sup>17</sup> As this definition itself suggests, scarcity is critical to Robbins's demarcation of economics. For this reason, Robbins's definition is often described as “the scarcity definition of

---

<sup>15</sup> O'Brien considers it “one of the two most important methodological statements by any economist” in the twentieth century, placing it alongside Milton Friedman's *Essays in Positive Economics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953). D. P O'Brien, *Lionel Robbins* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988), 23.

<sup>16</sup> Robbins, *An Essay on the Nature & Significance of Economic Science*, 1932, vii.

<sup>17</sup> Robbins, *An Essay*, 16.

economics.”<sup>18</sup> Backhouse and Medema point out that, although it took some time for the scarcity definition to become accepted by the economics profession, it is now “perhaps the most common currently accepted definition of economics.”<sup>19</sup> As an example, Gregory Mankiw’s popular introductory textbook, *Principles of Economics*, stipulates, “Economics is the study of how society manages its scarce resources.”<sup>20</sup>

For Robbins, because economics is the *science* that studies scarce resource allocation, it is a *wertfrei* academic discipline. This means “Economics is entirely neutral between ends” and, therefore, the economist *qua* economist refrains from ethical evaluation.<sup>21</sup> This conception of economics as a *wertfrei* discipline, in which Robbins explicitly acknowledges his intellectual debt to Max Weber, is based on a sharp distinction between “facts” and “values”. “Economics,” writes Robbins, “deals with ascertainable facts; ethics with valuations and obligations.”<sup>22</sup> For this reason, the enquiries of economics and ethics “are not on the same plane of discourse” because “between the generalisations of positive and normative studies there is a logical gulf fixed which no ingenuity can disguise and no juxtaposition in space and time bridge over.”<sup>23</sup> In relation to Robbins’s second goal in writing *ENSES*, this places an important limitation on the scope of economics: economics as a discipline should not comment on the ethical

---

<sup>18</sup> For example, Lionel Robbins, “Live and Dead Issues in the Methodology of Economics,” *Economica* 5, no. 19 (1938): 344. Also Backhouse and Medema, “Retrospectives.”

<sup>19</sup> Roger E. Backhouse and Steven G. Medema, “Defining Economics: The Long Road to Acceptance of the Robbins Definition,” *Economica* 76 (2009): 805–20; Backhouse and Medema, “Retrospectives,” 225.

<sup>20</sup> N. Gregory Mankiw, *Principles of Microeconomics*, 5th Edition (Mason, OH: South-Western College Pub, 2008), 4.

<sup>21</sup> Robbins, *An Essay*, 24.

<sup>22</sup> Robbins, 148.

<sup>23</sup> Robbins, 148.

appropriateness of ends.<sup>24</sup> Although the appropriation of the fact-value distinction by economists predates Robbins, *ENSES* reinforced the importance of making this distinction for the economics profession and applied it in new ways. To this day, it remains important.

As already discussed, scarcity and the scarcity definition of economics and economics as a *wertfrei* science are key impediments to interdisciplinary dialogue between Christian theologians, ethicists, and economists. In general, modern economics is consciously built on the foundational postulate of scarcity. Indeed, as will be discussed subsequently in this chapter, even those economists who dismiss the scarcity definition of economics do not necessarily reject the Robbinsian delineation of scarcity and the centrality of scarcity-constrained choice to the discipline of economics. Robbins's argument for economics as a *wertfrei* science prescribes a particular ordering of the relationship between (Christian) ethics and economics.

The overall aims of this chapter are to outline Robbins's conception of scarcity and the scarcity definition of economics, and to explain why Robbins thought economics should exclude ethical evaluation. The intent is to gain a basic understanding of Robbins's conception of scarcity and the scope of economics and, in relation to these, to tease out the critical issues that will be central to this dissertation. These will be specified as three questions to be addressed in subsequent chapters.<sup>25</sup>

To this end, the first section of this chapter begins by describing Robbins's delineation of scarcity. This is followed by a section that situates Robbins's conception of scarcity in relation to three important thinkers in the English tradition of economic thought: Thomas Robert Malthus, William Stanley Jevons, and Philip Wicksteed. This is not intended to be a comprehensive

---

<sup>24</sup> And, as will be discussed later in this dissertation, on the ethical appropriateness of the means-ends *ratio*.

<sup>25</sup> See the conclusion to this chapter.

historical survey by any means. Rather, the goal is to situate Robbin's conception of scarcity in relation to anterior conceptions of scarcity to be used in subsequent analysis, including the development of a basic framework that will be employed as this dissertation unfolds. With this material in hand, the next section will then discuss Robbins's definition of economics. Particular attention will be given to Robbins's argument for the scarcity definition over and against the material welfare and social (or exchange) definitions of economics that were prevalent at the time Robbins wrote *ENSES*. Before concluding, the penultimate section of this chapter will discuss Robbins's exclusion of ethical evaluation from the scope of economics.

### *Delineating Scarcity*

In *ENSES*, Robbins identifies four "fundamental characteristics" that are critical from an economic standpoint:

[1] The ends [to which time and means can be put] are various. [2] The time and means for achieving these ends are limited and [3] capable of alternative application. [4] At the same time the ends have different importance.<sup>26</sup>

These four characteristics relate to Robbins's delineation of scarcity. When specified as conditions, characteristics 1 to 4 are necessary conditions for scarcity to exist: ends must be various [1], the time and means, or simply, resources, for achieving those ends must be limited [2], those resources must be capable of alternative application [3], and ends have different importance [4] (*i.e.*, humans are able to "order" their desired ends into a "hierarchy.")<sup>27</sup> Even when conditions 1 to 4 are jointly fulfilled, however, they are not sufficient to give rise to scarcity. In addition to these, it must also be the case that the demand for resources exceeds their

---

<sup>26</sup> Robbins, *An Essay*, 12. Numbering added.

<sup>27</sup> Robbins, 14.

available supply. Precisely, the demand for time and means must exceed their available supply at zero resource prices.<sup>28</sup> These five necessary conditions are reported in Table 1, where the notation  $N_1$ ,  $N_2$ ,  $N_3$ , and  $N_4$  corresponds to 1 to 4 of Robbins’s fundamental characteristics and  $N_5$  to the condition that the demand for resources exceeds their available supply. The sufficient condition for Robbinsian scarcity is that necessary conditions  $N_1$  to  $N_5$  jointly hold.

**Table 1: Conditions for Robbinsian Scarcity**

---

Necessary Conditions	$N_1$ : Ends are various $N_2$ : Time and means are limited $N_3$ : Time and means are capable of alternative application $N_4$ : Ends have difference importance ( <i>i.e.</i> , ends can be ordered or ranked) $N_5$ : Demand for time and means exceed their limited supply at zero resource prices
Sufficient Condition	$N_1$ to $N_5$ jointly hold

---

$N_5$  makes explicit that it is not the mere limitation of resources that gives rise to scarcity, but the supply (limitation) of resources *relative* to demand. For this reason, Robbins writes, “It is clear, therefore, that the quality of scarcity in goods is not an “absolute” quality. Scarcity does not mean infrequency of occurrence. It means limitation in relation to demand.”<sup>29</sup> Hence, it is also appropriate to speak of the degree of scarcity—a degree determined by the relative strength of demand and supply. For example, that the degree of scarcity for land in a downtown metropolitan area may differ from the degree of scarcity for land in smaller urban areas, because of the relative conditions of demand and supply in these different locations. In general, a range of

---

<sup>28</sup> Thus Bronfenbrenner notes, with reference to a single good, “To the economist... a good is scarce whenever the amount demanded as a *free good* (with no price at all, whether measured in money, bushels of wheat, or hours of labor) exceeds the amount supplied as a free good.” M. Bronfenbrenner, “The Scarcity Hypothesis in Modern Economics,” *The American Journal of Economics and Sociology* 21, no. 3 (1962): 265. Emphasis original.

<sup>29</sup> Robbins, *An Essay*, 46.

factors will influence the relative strength of supply and demand for individual resources, including the requirements for human existence, the physical and social environments, the technologies available, the specific qualities of different resources, the demand for and supply of other resources, and so on.

Robbins writes that scarcity means that humans must engage in economizing activity:

When time and the means for achieving ends are limited *and* capable of alternative application, *and* the ends are capable of being distinguished in order of importance then behaviour necessarily assumes the form of choice. Every act which involves time and scarce means for the achievement of one end involves the relinquishment of their use for the achievement of another. It has an economic aspect.<sup>30</sup>

The “economic aspect” of human behavior, then, is the economizing of scarce resources to achieve particular ends.

When scarcity is coupled with human choice between alternative ends, a corollary concept which follows is opportunity cost: the cost of relinquishing the next best opportunity when allocating resources to a particular end. For this reason, Buchanan writes, “The concept of opportunity cost (or alternative cost) expresses the basic relationship between scarcity and choices.”<sup>31</sup> Take, for example, the case of someone who has inherited a piece of woodland in a downtown metropolis. There are various alternative uses for this land. It could be left as woodland for private use, it could be turned into a public park, it could be used to build a hotel or a set of apartments, and so on. Assuming the top two choices of the inheritor, in descending order, are: i) to clear the land and build a set of apartments; and ii) to turn the woodland into a public park, the opportunity cost of building the set of apartments is the foregone opportunity of turning the woodland into a public park. The inheritor faces this opportunity cost because, first,

---

<sup>30</sup> Robbins, 14. Emphasis original.

<sup>31</sup> James M. Buchanan, “Opportunity Cost,” ed. Steven N. Durlauf and Lawrence E. Blume, *The New Palgrave Dictionary of Economics* (Basingstoke: Nature Publishing Group, 2008), 198.

the resource is scarce: the ends to which it could be put are various (the inheritor could build apartments or create a public park); the resource is limited (there is one fixed piece of woodland at the inheritor's disposal); it is capable of alternative uses (it can be used to build apartments or create a public park); and the actual demand the inheritor has for different uses of the land exceeds the quantity of land that has been inherited. Second, the inheritor faces this opportunity cost because she has the capacity to choose between different ends (to build a set of apartments instead of creating a public park). In general, then, humans confront what has come to be termed the economic problem: the problem of deciding to which ends to allocate scarce resources.

Robbins views scarcity as a near-universal state. The economic problem is ubiquitous, which is why he describes the conditions that give rise to scarcity and opportunity cost as the “fundamental characteristics” of human experience from an economic standpoint.<sup>32</sup>

Nevertheless, he recognizes that there are exceptions when it comes to individual resources or goods. For example, he notes that some goods, such as air, “are present in such comparative abundance that the use of particular units of one thing does not involve going without other units for others.”<sup>33</sup> In this case, although necessary conditions  $N_1$ - $N_4$  may hold, necessary condition  $N_5$  does not because the demand for the good does not exceed the available supply at a zero

---

<sup>32</sup> Robbins, *An Essay*, 12. Elsewhere in *ENSES*, Robbins writes of the conditions that give rise to scarcity and choice as the “chief” or “main” postulates of economic theory, which he distinguishes from “a great multitude of subsidiary postulates regarding the condition of markets, the number of parties to the exchange, the state of law, the *minimum sensible* of buyers and sellers, and so on and so forth.” Robbins, 78–79. These subsidiary postulates are “historico-relative” in the sense that they will vary depending on the economic phenomena being studied. In contrast, the main postulates “are applicable whenever and wherever the conditions which give rise to economic phenomena are present” and, therefore, “it is not true that the main assumptions are historico-relative *in the same sense* [as the subsidiary postulates].” Robbins, 80. Emphasis added. A further discussion of the main and subsidiary postulates of economic theory is contained within Chapter 4.

<sup>33</sup> Robbins, *An Essay*, 14–15.

resource price. Thus goods such as air are considered free goods, and their use does not entail opportunity costs.<sup>34</sup>

Robbins also considers the case of God’s provision of manna for Israel in the wilderness (Ex. 16). In this situation, manna could only be eaten for “it was impossible to exchange it for something else or to postpone its use, [and, therefore,] it was not the object of any economic activity with an economic aspect.”<sup>35</sup> In other words, owing to the peculiarities of Israel’s situation in the desert and the properties of manna itself, the condition that a resource be capable of alternative application ( $N_3$ ) was not fulfilled. Thus, manna was a free good.<sup>36</sup>

Although Robbins discusses the case of individual free goods and oftentimes illustrates the notion of scarcity using the example of a single good, Robbins’s general delineation of scarcity is set in a multi-good context. For this reason, one must keep in mind that, for Robbins, the valuation of any one good is made relative to others (as the concept of opportunity cost makes clear). Robbins’s delineation of scarcity, therefore, relates to the nexus of goods.

---

<sup>34</sup> While the example of air might have been true when Robbins wrote *ENSES*, this is arguably no longer true. Hence, Barrera, notes, “Long before our current sensitivity to the ecological damage wrought by agricultural and industrial production, earlier editions of introductory economics textbooks (e.g., Samuelson 1955, 418, 429) cite air and water as examples of free goods not subject to scarcity. Today, we are only too painfully aware of the need to conserve dwindling supplies of clean air and fresh water.” Albino Barrera, *God and the Evil of Scarcity: Moral Foundations of Economic Agency* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2005), 206.

<sup>35</sup> Robbins, *An Essay*, 13.

<sup>36</sup> In this example, Robbins lays the stress on the lack of substitutability between *uses*: manna is incapable of alternative application—it can only be eaten—and hence it violates  $N_3$ . There is, however, another way to view this example using the conditions outlined in Table 1, in which  $N_3$  holds, but where manna is still considered a free good because  $N_5$  is violated. On this view,  $N_3$  holds because manna is capable of alternative application *in the sense that it can be used to supply different persons’ hunger*. The fact that manna can only be eaten reduces its substitutability, but does not completely reduce it because it can be substituted between different persons. On this interpretation, what makes manna a free good is the fact that the supply of manna was more than sufficient to meet every person’s hunger—as evident from the manna that is left to decay on the ground.  $N_5$ , in other words, does not hold. If it had actually been the case that the quantity of manna was deficient to satisfy all the Israelites’ hunger, then manna would have been a scarce good and Israel would have faced an economic problem: how to allocate manna to different ends—namely, different persons. My preference is to view the allocation of a resource to different persons as an instance of “alternative application” of a resource to “various ends” within the Robbinsian framework, because it seems more consonant with Robbins’s general outlook, even though Robbins does not seem to interpret this particular example in the way that I have.



This point serves to highlight a crucial difference in Robbins's understanding of scarcity, compared to how the term "scarcity" is often understood and used outside of the discourse within economics. In common speech, to say, "Food is scarce," is usually to communicate that there is not enough food to go around in order to satisfy human hunger. For Robbins to say, "Food is scarce," is to indicate that the production and consumption of food entails opportunity costs within the nexus of goods. Resources are limited to such a degree that all human demands cannot be satisfied, which means there are trade-offs between goods and their uses. For Robbins, the actual production and consumption of food might be sufficient to satisfy all human hunger, and yet food would still be considered a scarce good because its production and consumption entail opportunity costs. The differences between these two understandings of scarcity, and their relationship, will be discussed further in the following two sections.

### *Anterior Conceptions of Scarcity*

Although Robbins is the first person to demarcate economics as a discipline explicitly on the basis of scarcity, the idea of scarcity and its importance for economic analysis was not new to him. Indeed, in the history of economic thought a notion of scarcity came to be especially associated with the name Thomas Robert Malthus. For this reason, Waterman writes, "Malthus' first *Essay on Population* [hereafter, *FE*] is the great watershed in the history of economic thought, for it put scarcity at the centre of our discipline [economics] for the first time."<sup>37</sup> Specifically, it is Malthus's analysis of the scarcity of the "means of subsistence" or "food" that lies at the center of his economic analysis. Food scarcity is, for Malthus, a reality which arises from the human need for food and human sexual passion and the corresponding dynamics of

---

<sup>37</sup> A. M. C. Waterman, "Review of God and the Evil of Scarcity: Moral Foundations of Economic Agency by Albino Barrerra," *Faith and Economics* 49 (2007): 62.

food production and human reproduction. Malthus states, “I think I may fairly make two postulata. First, That food is necessary to the existence of man. Secondly, That the passion between the sexes is necessary, and will remain nearly in its present state.”<sup>38</sup> “These two laws,” writes Malthus, “ever since we have had any knowledge of mankind, appear to have been fixed laws of our nature; and, as we have not hitherto seen any alteration in them, we have no right to conclude that they will ever cease to be what they now are, without an immediate act of power in that Being who first arranged the system of the universe.”<sup>39</sup>

Associated with these two postulata are the dynamics of food production and human reproduction, in which Malthus contends that food production follows an arithmetic progression, whereas population, when “unchecked” by subsistence, follows a geometric progression.<sup>40</sup> Population increases in a geometric progression because the “passion between the sexes” means that humans will continue to reproduce themselves. On the other hand, subsistence increases, at best, in an arithmetic progression because of the “qualities of land.”<sup>41</sup> To illustrate what he takes to be the plausibility of his latter assertion, he asks his readers to imagine a scenario in which the population of Britain doubles every 25 years. Malthus writes:

If I allow that by the best possible policy, by breaking up more land, and by great encouragement to agriculture, the produce of this Island may be doubled in the first twenty-five years, I think it will be allowing as much as any person can well demand.

In the next twenty-five years, it is impossible to suppose that the produce could be quadrupled. It would be contrary to all our knowledge of the qualities of land. The very utmost that we can conceive, is, [sic] that the increase in the second twenty-five years might equal the present produce. Let us then take this for our rule, though certainly far beyond the truth; and allow that by great exertion, the whole produce of the Island might be increased every twenty-five years, by a quantity of subsistence equal to what it at

---

<sup>38</sup> T. R. Malthus, *First Essay on Population, 1798*, ed. James Bonar (London: Macmillan, 1926), 11.

<sup>39</sup> Malthus, 11–12.

<sup>40</sup> Malthus, 14.

<sup>41</sup> Malthus, 22.

present produces. The most enthusiastic speculator cannot suppose a greater increase than this. In a few centuries it would make every acre of land in the Island like a garden. Yet this ratio of increase is evidently arithmetical.<sup>42</sup>

Taken together, arithmetic increases in food production and geometric increases in population mean the level of food per capita will decline over time. For Malthus, this is unimaginable over any prolonged period. For this reason, Malthus writes:

By the law of our nature which makes food necessary to the life of man, the effects of these two unequal powers [growth in food and population] must be kept equal.

This implies a strong and constantly operating check on population from the difficulty of subsistence. This difficulty must fall some where [sic]; and must necessarily be severely felt by a large portion of mankind.<sup>43</sup>

As is well known, Malthus delineates two “great checks” to population: the “preventive” check and the “positive” check.<sup>44</sup> The preventive check acts to curb population growth by limiting the birth rate, as persons delay or even forswear marriage, aware of the difficulties in providing for a family. The positive check, on the other hand, acts to curb population growth by directly reducing the population through physical hardship and starvation, thereby working

---

<sup>42</sup> Malthus, 21–22. Much is left implicit in this scenario. Assuming that the agricultural employment rate (that is, the ratio of agricultural workers to population) and the capital-labor ratio for agricultural workers are held constant, then, for a given level of technology, Malthus’s scenario indicates that agricultural production is subject to decreasing returns to scale. Hence, Sandmo writes, “In a more modern formulation the food production hypothesis may be interpreted as an assumption that there are decreasing returns to scale in agriculture.” Agnar Sandmo, *Economics Evolving: A History of Economic Thought* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2011), 65. This is a straightforward way to read this scenario, given that Malthus seems to allow all the factors of production to vary, including land. Decreasing returns to scale results because the additional units of land brought into agricultural production are assumed to be less fertile than land already in agriculture use. Some formal models of Malthus’s schema, take land as fixed, and assume for a given level of technology, land is subject to diminishing returns. Paul A. Samuelson, “The Canonical Classical Model of Political Economy,” *Journal of Economic Literature* 16, no. 4 (1978): 1415–34. In this formulation, ongoing increases in population would result in positive but increasingly smaller increases in food production. Note, however, that Malthus holds that there is no absolute limit to the level of food production, thus he writes, “No limits whatever are placed to the productions of the earth; they may increase for ever and be greater than any assignable quantity.” Malthus, *First Essay on Population*, 1798, 26.

<sup>43</sup> Malthus, *First Essay on Population*, 1798, 14.

<sup>44</sup> Malthus, 99–100.

principally through an increase in the mortality rate.<sup>45</sup> In the *FE*, Malthus contends that “misery or vice” attend both the preventive and positive checks.<sup>46</sup>

A formal way to understand Malthus’s basic schema in the *FE* is in terms of a single good production model. In this set-up, once a country reaches its equilibrium where food per capita is at the subsistence level, any departure from it will set in motion forces that will propel a country back to the initial level of population, unless there is a permanent shift in agricultural technology, capital per agricultural worker, or the land available for agricultural production. For example, if a country were to experience a positive *temporary* shock to food production, say because it experienced a few consecutive seasons of favorable growing conditions, some families would have more children. When normal growing conditions returned, however, the positive check to population would begin to operate, since the level of food per capita would be below the subsistence level, thereby returning the country to its original equilibrium. Before the operation of the positive check, the preventive check would come into force, because some families, recognizing that the increase in food production is only temporary, would refrain from having more children. A *permanent* shift in the equilibrium population only occurs if there is a permanent shift in the level of agricultural technology, capital per agricultural worker, or the land available for agricultural production. For example, if agricultural technology advanced, thereby making agriculture more productive, then the country would be able to support a larger

---

<sup>45</sup> The birthrate would also likely be lower because, for instance, of difficulties in conceiving due to physical hardship and malnutrition.

<sup>46</sup> Although several commentators have noted that in Malthus’s second *Essay on the Principle of Population* that “moral restraint,” as a particular form of the preventive check, is no longer associated with either. For example, Santurri notes, “Moral restraint is thus distinguished by Malthus in the later work as a class of check apart from either misery or vice, and hence marks a decided departure from the first edition of the *Essay* in which he affirms that ‘every obstacle in the way of marriage must undoubtedly be considered as a species of unhappiness’.” Edmund N. Santurri, “Theodicy and Social Policy in Malthus’ Thought,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 43, no. 2 (1982): 318.

population at the given subsistence level of food per capita. Adjustment to this new stable equilibrium would result from the dynamic response of population to the initial increase in food per capita, owing to the advance in agricultural technology, and the operation of the preventive check as the country nears the new stable equilibrium. (The positive check would only come into force should the nation overshoot the new equilibrium).

Any permanent shift in the level of subsistence also requires a corresponding shift in the population. If a country is able to institute permanently a higher level of subsistence, then *ceteris paribus*, this will require a smaller population to maintain the higher level of food per capita. If, for example, a country were able to reduce its birthrate through greater sexual abstinence then a country would be able to support a higher level of food per capita. Along these lines, Waterman argues that within Malthus's *FE* there is a "sophisticated" account, albeit inchoate, of how the institutions of marriage and private property support a higher level of subsistence than a state in which these institutions were absent.<sup>47</sup> Malthus aims this sophisticated account against Godwin's utopia, which sought the abolition of marriage and the existing distribution of private property with a view to improving society.<sup>48</sup>

Malthus himself did not think that the subsistence level of consumption, for the vast majority of the population, would increase much beyond what the word subsistence typically denotes—that which is essential for human survival. This is especially his viewpoint in the *FE*. For this reason, as will be discussed shortly, Chapters XVIII and XIX of Malthus's *FE* are an attempt to give a theological justification as to why God created a world in which there is acute

---

<sup>47</sup> A. M. C. Waterman, *Revolution, Economics and Religion: Christian Political Economy, 1798-1833* (Cambridge University Press, 1991).

<sup>48</sup> This discussion also highlights that there is an internal tension within Malthus's schema between the operation of "moral restraint" and his claim that "the passion between the sexes is necessary, and will remain nearly in its present state." Malthus, *First Essay on Population*, 1798, 11.

food scarcity. Before turning to an examination of these chapters, it is worth noting how Malthus's portrayal of food scarcity is similar to the understanding of scarcity in common usage.

As noted in the previous section, when someone says, "Food is scarce," they usually mean there is not enough food available to satisfy human hunger. Similarly, for Malthus, scarcity is viewed in relation to the goods needed for human survival. One can define Malthusian scarcity as a situation in which the constitution of the world, including resource availability, is such as to be unable or just able to meet the basic needs for survival of a given human society. In contrast, Malthusian abundance would be a situation in which the constitution of the world, including resource availability, is such as to be more than able to meet the basic needs of those within a given human society.

Given what Malthus took to be the permanence of Malthusian scarcity, Chapters XVIII and XIX of the *FE* are an attempt to give a theological apology for Malthusian scarcity. They present a theodicy that attempts to reconcile a classical conception of God—who is viewed as perfectly good, powerful, and all-seeing—with a world that is characterized by food scarcity.<sup>49</sup> More recent scholarship has argued that these chapters are not simply "appendices," but rather an integral part of the *FE*, and part of the arsenal directed against William Godwin and his fellow perfectionists.<sup>50</sup> In these chapters, Malthus argues that God has created a world in which the "various impressions and excitements which man receives through life" are the process whereby

---

<sup>49</sup> Whether Malthus actually holds to the classical conceptions of divine goodness, knowledge, and power will be discussed in further detail in Chapter 3.

<sup>50</sup> Waterman, *Revolution, Economics and Religion*, 59. See D. L. LeMahieu, "Malthus and the Theology of Scarcity," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 40, no. 3 (1979): 467–74; John M. Pullen, "Malthus' Theological Ideas and Their Influence on His Principle of Population," *History of Political Economy* 13, no. 1 (1981): 39–54; Santurri, "Theodicy and Social Policy in Malthus' Thought"; M. B. Harvey-Phillips, "Malthus' Theodicy: The Intellectual Background of His Contribution to Political Economy," *History of Political Economy* 16, no. 4 (1984): 591–608; Waterman, *Revolution, Economics and Religion*, especially Chapter 3 "The First Essay on Population: theology."

the human mind is formed out of “chaotic” and “sluggish” matter.<sup>51</sup> Thus, Malthus envisions that “God is constantly occupied in forming mind out of matter, and that the various impressions that man receives through life, is the process for that purpose.”<sup>52</sup>

For Malthus, the formation of the human mind inevitably means the existence of both natural and moral evil, which he considers separately in Chapters XVIII and XIX of the *FE*. “The first great awakers of the mind seem to be the wants of the body,” argues Malthus, because “they are the first stimulants that arouse the brain of infant man into sentient activity.”<sup>53</sup> This can only occur in an environment in which humans are required to work in order to supply the wants of the body, “otherwise [they] would sink into listless inactivity.”<sup>54</sup> Indeed, Malthus contends that it is chiefly the difficulty associated with obtaining physical sustenance that is a great spur to the formation of mind because it results “in a greater quantity of exertion than any other want, bodily or mental.”<sup>55</sup> A world, then, in which there is permanent Malthusian scarcity fosters the greater good of the formation of the human mind, albeit that it also entails the “partial evil” of malnutrition, starvation, and even death. Malthus writes:

The Supreme Creator might, undoubtedly, raise up plants of all kinds, for the use of his creatures without the assistance of those little bits of matter, which we call seed, or even without the assisting labour and attention of man. The processes of ploughing and clearing the ground, or collecting and sowing seeds, are not surely for the assistance of God in his creation; *but are made previously necessary to the enjoyment of the blessings of life, in order to rouse man into action, and form his mind to reason.*

To furnish the most unremitted excitements of this kind, and to urge man to further the gracious designs of Providence, by the full cultivation of the earth, it has been ordained, that population should increase much faster than food. *This general law, (as it has*

---

<sup>51</sup> Malthus, *First Essay on Population*, 1798, 353.

<sup>52</sup> Malthus, 355.

<sup>53</sup> Malthus, 356–57.

<sup>54</sup> Malthus, 357.

<sup>55</sup> Malthus, 360.

*appeared in the former parts of this essay) undoubtedly produces much partial evil; but a little reflection may perhaps, satisfy us, that it produces a great overbalance of good.*<sup>56</sup>

Moral evil is also “absolutely necessary” for the formation of the human mind.<sup>57</sup> Although the cultivation of intellectual “talents” is an important aspect of the mind’s development, it is not the only aspect.<sup>58</sup> Indeed, for Malthus, the development of a virtuous character seems more important than the development of intellectual talent. He notes, “There are many minds which have not been exposed to those excitements, that usually form talents, that have yet been vivified to a high degree, by the excitements of social sympathy.”<sup>59</sup> In contrast, those who have developed intellectual talents that they then put to evil “both reason and revelation seem to assure us... will be condemned to eternal death.”<sup>60</sup> Moreover, Malthus contends “while on earth these vicious instruments [have] performed their part in the great mass of impressions, by the disgust and abhorrence which they [have] excited.”<sup>61</sup> In doing so, they serve as necessary vicious counter-examples for those who are seeking to cultivate virtue. Hence, Malthus writes, “An ardent love and admiration of virtue seems to imply the existence of something opposite to it; and it seems highly probable, that the same beauty of form and substance, the same perfection of character, could not be generated, without the impressions of disapprobation which arise from the spectacle of moral evil.”<sup>62</sup> Food scarcity gives rise to partial moral evil—thus the vices that

---

<sup>56</sup> Malthus, 360–62. Emphasis added.

<sup>57</sup> Malthus, 375.

<sup>58</sup> Malthus, 373.

<sup>59</sup> Malthus, 373.

<sup>60</sup> Malthus, 374.

<sup>61</sup> Malthus, 374–75.

<sup>62</sup> Malthus, 376.



attend the preventive and positive checks on population—that, nevertheless, within Malthus’s wider schema contribute to the formation of mind. For this reason, Malthus concludes the *FE*:

The idea that the impressions and excitements of this world are the instruments with which the Supreme Being forms matter into mind; and that the necessity of constant exertion to avoid evil, and to pursue good, is the principal spring of these impressions and excitements, seems to smooth many of the difficulties that occur in a contemplation of human life; and appears to me, to give a satisfactory reason for the existence of natural and moral evil; and, consequently for that part of both, and it certainly is not a very small part, which arises from the principle of population... Evil exists in the world, not to create despair, but activity. We are not patiently to submit to it, but to exert ourselves to avoid it. It is not only the interest, but the duty of every individual, to use his utmost efforts to remove evil from himself, and from as large a circle as he can influence; and the more he exercises himself in this duty, the most wisely he directs his efforts, and the more successful these efforts are; the more he will probably improve and exalt his own mind, and the more completely does he appear to fulfil the will of his Creator.<sup>63</sup>

It will be necessary to return to Malthus’s theodicy in Chapter 3 when taking up the challenge of developing a contemporary theodicy that explains the threat and existence of Malthusian scarcity. For the purposes of this chapter, however, it is sufficient to note that Malthus’s economic analysis of scarcity gives inadequate attention to the ability of technological change to drive agricultural productivity growth in excess of population growth, thereby increasing the level of food per capita. This has drawn sharp criticisms from various commentators. Notably, Paul Samuelson’s acerbic wit finds full expression when, in deriding the classical economists for “overplaying the law of diminishing returns and underplaying the counterforces of technical change,” he jabs, “They lived during the industrial revolution, but scarcely looked out from their libraries to notice the remaking of the world.”<sup>64</sup> He then strikes

---

<sup>63</sup> Malthus, 394–96. It is not just the principle of population that fosters the formation of mind. Malthus also mentions the great variety in nature and the degree of metaphysical “obscurity” that attends the world as additional factors that facilitate the formation of mind. Malthus, 378–81. For example, Malthus writes, “The constant effort to dispel this darkness, even if it fail of success, invigorates and improves the thinking faculty. If the subjects of human inquiry were once exhausted, mind would probably stagnate; but the infinitely diversified forms and operations of nature, together with the endless food for speculation which metaphysical subjects offer, prevent the possibility that such a period should ever arrive.” Malthus, 380–81.

<sup>64</sup> Samuelson, “The Canonical Classical Model of Political Economy,” 1428.

out again—this time specifically at Malthus—commenting that “whatever the warrant for geometric progressions in biological reproduction, Malthus never had any plausible reasons behind his gratuitous effusions about arithmetic progressions.”<sup>65</sup>

Indeed, Hutchison argues the inability of the classical population theory to explain both increases in population and living standards increasingly called into question the robustness of this paradigm in the latter part of the nineteenth century. Hutchison writes:

The 1850’s and 1860’s saw such a great increase in population accompanied by such a palpable rise in living standards that the classical population theory, and its law of ‘natural’ subsistence-wages, could only in some degree be saved by putting the main emphasis on those qualifications (already rather vaguely introduced by Malthus and Ricardo) which robbed the doctrine of almost all its sting and content... Once a permanent rise in working-class standard became accepted as an accomplished fact, the entire notion of a ‘subsistence’ level became extremely nebulous, and what might have been regarded as the one fairly firm anchor for the classical account of distribution was removed.<sup>66</sup>

This was an important spur in the search for alternative paradigms to analyze economic phenomena.

“English marginalism” is a term used to describe the thought of a diverse range of thinkers, who emerged in the latter part of the nineteenth century, as the classical economic paradigm was increasingly questioned, who were united in their use of mathematics to examine phenomena, and particularly the use of calculus to investigate *marginal* changes in various “economic” quantities (hence the *nomenclature*). It is also widely recognized that English marginalism was not simply characterized by the introduction of mathematical techniques, but also by a shift in the level at which economic analysis tended to be carried out, and a shift in the focus of study (e.g., toward consumer demand and exchange). For example, Creedy comments, “Instead of the

---

<sup>65</sup> Samuelson, 1429.

<sup>66</sup> Terence Hutchison, *A Review of Economic Doctrines 1870-1929* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1953), 13.

concentration by the classical economists on the great themes of growth and development, and the important and highly sophisticated monetary debates associated with the numerous banking crises of the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the emphasis of the neoclassical economists was on the nature of exchange.”<sup>67</sup> Linked with the emergence of English marginalism is a shift in the conception of scarcity, implicit at first, from that held by Malthus. Work taking place on the continent also reflected this new conception of scarcity. In what follows, attention is given to the work of English economists William Stanley Jevons and Philip Wicksteed in delineating this conception of scarcity.<sup>68</sup>

Jevons’s *The Theory of Political Economy* is seen as marking the beginning of English marginalism, although, as Jevons himself increasingly came to understand, the ideas presented in the first edition of this work were not as novel as he first thought.<sup>69</sup> *The Theory of Political Economy* illustrates a shift in the conception of scarcity that implicitly underpins the analyses of the allocation and exchange of goods.

---

<sup>67</sup> John Creedy, “English Marginalism,” *The University of Melbourne Department of Economics*, Working Paper Series, September 2010, 4.

<sup>68</sup> The reasons for choosing Jevons and Wicksteed are twofold. First, these figures stand in the English tradition of economic thought and had a significant influence on Robbins’s own economic thought, both directly through his engagement with their economic writings and indirectly through the tradition of economic thought that he learned while studying economics as an undergraduate at the London School of Economics. Indeed, Robbins wrote essays on the significance of these figures for the development of political economy and economics. Second, because Jevons’s *The Theory of Political Economy* and Wicksteed’s *The Common Sense of Political Economy* stand at both ends of the period of English marginalism, these works can be used to highlight other important shifts that occur between 1871 and 1910. In choosing to focus on three figures within this section—Malthus, Jevons, and Wicksteed—in order to examine shifts in the understanding of scarcity, this section lays no claims to being a comprehensive history or genealogy of the concept of scarcity. Rather, the more modest goal is to highlight important shifts in the conception of scarcity, which culminates in Robbins’s articulation of scarcity in *ENSES*, and to use this work to develop a basic framework to be used in subsequent analyses in this dissertation.

<sup>69</sup> This is evident from Jevons’s extensive discussion in the preface to his second edition of *The Theory of Political Economy* published in 1879. See PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION in William Stanley Jevons, *The Theory of Political Economy*, 5th Edition (New York: Augustus M. Kelley, Bookseller, 1965), xi–lii. On this connection, Sandmo comments, “This recognition [that others had arrived at similar insights] is mixed with disappointment at having discovered that his own work had turned out to be less original than he first believed, but he is nevertheless very generous in giving forerunners credit for their contributions.” Sandmo, *Economics Evolving*, 174.

Jevons's economic analysis is based on the principle of utility in which human beings are understood to maximize pleasure and minimize pain. As Jevons puts it himself, "To satisfy our wants to the utmost with the least effort—to procure the greatest amount of what is desirable at the expense of the least that is undesirable—in other words, *to maximize pleasure*, is the problem of Economics."<sup>70</sup> Jevons illustrates the application of this principle throughout *The Theory of Political Economy*. Take, for instance, the following scenario in which Jevons asks his reader to consider how a community, family, or individual might go about allocating a single good across different possible uses:

There are articles which may be employed for many distinct purposes: thus, barley may be used either to make beer, spirits, bread or to feed cattle; sugar may be used to eat, or for producing alcohol; timber may be used in construction, or as fuel; iron and other metals may be applied to many different purposes. Imagine, then, a community in the possession of a certain stock of barley; what principles will regulate their mode of consuming it? Or, as we have not yet reached the subject of exchange, imagine an isolated family, or even an individual, possessing an adequate stock, and using some in one way and some in another.<sup>71</sup>

Jevons suggests the optimal allocation of a single resource, say barley, results when a community, family, or individual allocates barley so that the "final degree of utility" (marginal utility) across the consumption goods produced by barley is equalized.<sup>72</sup> If this were not so, then barley could be reallocated from a use that generates a lower level of marginal utility to a use that generates a higher level of marginal utility, thereby increasing total utility.<sup>73</sup>

---

<sup>70</sup> Jevons, *The Theory of Political Economy*, 37. Emphasis added.

<sup>71</sup> Jevons, 59.

<sup>72</sup> It is not until Wicksteed, that the term "marginal utility" is first used. This result of Jevons is still taught in intermediate microeconomics courses—and sometimes introductory economics courses—to this day, usually by starting with the case of two goods, and generalizing from there. This result, however, is not based on the utilitarian anthropology of Jevons (as will be discussed in further detail below).

<sup>73</sup> Assuming "that the degree of utility varies with the quantity of commodity, and ultimately decreases as the quantity decreases." Jevons, *The Theory of Political Economy*, 53. That is, the law of diminishing marginal utility must hold.

But why should Jevons focus on the allocation of goods in the first place? The answer is because limited goods are scarce relative to their different possible uses. Barley has multiple uses—to make beer, spirits, bread, and so on. In addition, the amount of barley available is insufficient to fully meet all demands for it. Thus, when barley is allocated, at least some demands for it will go unsatisfied. What gives Jevons’s description of allocation its significance—its bite—is the fact that goods are scarce.<sup>74</sup>

The implicit conception of scarcity underpinning Jevons’s description of economic allocation, then, is Robbinsian. Barley, for example, is a scarce good because it is limited, capable of different uses, and can be used in service to different ends. Because of this, opportunity costs are present when determining how to allocate barley. More beer means less bread, and so on. Even in the situation in which a community, family, or individual is able to meet basic needs, scarcity, as defined by Robbins, is still present. Jevon’s work, then, contains a different understanding of scarcity in comparison to Malthus’s work. Rather than the focus on an absolute standard as to whether there are sufficient goods to meet human needs, Jevon’s focus is on the relative use of goods.

Although the implicit conception underpinning scarcity in *The Theory of Political Economy* is that of Robbins’s, there are two important respects in which the framework within which Robbins develops his conception of scarcity differs from Jevons’s framework (within which the Robbinsian conception of scarcity is implicit). These can be brought into clear view by comparing Jevons and Wicksteed on the scope of economics and, in doing so, showing how Wicksteed’s work stands as a bridge between Jevons and Robbins.

---

<sup>74</sup> While in the case in which all goods were abundant enough to fully meet all demands, it would also be true that marginal utility would be equalized across consumption goods in Jevons’s framework, Jevons’s scenario illustrates that this is not the general situation he has in mind.

For Jevons, economics is concerned with wealth or the allocation of goods in order to supply the “ordinary wants” of humanity.<sup>75</sup> Jevons writes in *The Theory of Political Economy*:

My present purpose is accomplished in pointing out this hierarchy of feeling and assigning a proper place to the pleasures and pains with which the Economist deals. *It is the lowest rank of feelings which we here treat. The calculus of utility aims at supplying the ordinary wants of man at the least cost of labour.* Each labourer, in the absence of other motives, is supposed to devote his energy to the accumulation of wealth.<sup>76</sup>

In other words, the scope of economic inquiry is concerned with the material goods that contribute to material wealth or welfare. On this front, Jevons shows broad continuity with the earlier classical economists with their focus on wealth and the basic needs of humans for food, clothing, shelter, and so on. In addition, it is broadly in line with the material welfare school.<sup>77</sup>

Cooter and Rappoport write about this school that:

[It] made a distinction among types of satisfactions that could be derived from goods. Indeed, goods, the motivations for acquiring them and the satisfactions yielded by their consumption were arranged in a hierarchy that proceeded from the “purely economic” or “material” at one end to the purely noneconomic or nonmaterial at the other. It was stressed that there was no hard-and-fast line separating the economic part of the scale from the noneconomic, although the extremes were clearly distinguishable. The material end of the hierarchy was concerned with survival and health. The goods that fell most securely within the purview of material welfare economics were food, “clothing, house-room and firing,” followed by rest.<sup>78</sup>

---

<sup>75</sup> Jevons, *The Theory of Political Economy*, 27.

<sup>76</sup> Jevons, 26–27. Emphasis added.

<sup>77</sup> Robbins’s analysis of this school in *ENSES* will be discussed later in this chapter.

<sup>78</sup> Robert Cooter and Peter Rappoport, “Were the Ordinalists Wrong About Welfare Economics?,” *Journal of Economic Literature* 22, no. 2 (1984): 513. Jevons differs from the later material welfare school in one important respect, namely interpersonal utility comparisons. Cooter and Rappoport argue, “*When economists of the material welfare school thought about interpersonal comparisons of utility, they thought in terms of comparing the material well-being of people...* The comparison of needs, not the comparison of subjective desires, was what they usually meant by comparing utilities of different people.” Cooter and Rappoport, 516. Emphasis original. Jevons, on the other hand, as Cooter and Rappoport recognize, was concerned with desire satisfaction and the “feelings” that were generated as a result. This meant that Jevons was skeptical of interpersonal utility comparison, albeit that his economics was concerned with the material goods that satisfied the “ordinary wants” of humans. Jevons writes, “The reader will find, again, that there is never, in any single instance, an attempt made to compare the amount of feeling in one mind with that in another. I see no means by which such comparison can be accomplished. The susceptibility of one mind may, for what we know, be a thousand times greater than that of another... Every mind is thus inscrutable to every other mind, and no common denominator of feeling seems to be possible.” Jevons, *The Theory of Political Economy*, 14.

In comparison, for Wicksteed, economics is not restricted to the study of material goods. For him, economics is “a study of the principles of administration of resources and selections between alternatives, conceived without any formal or conventional limitations. Therefore, *we shall not exclude from our studies* the consideration of ends and of those general purposes and impulses which determine the drift and flow of our energies.”<sup>79</sup> On this, Robbins follows Wicksteed in refusing to restrict the scope of economics to the study of material goods.

Jevons’s view that economics focus on the “ordinary wants of man” is bound to his view that it is the feelings of pleasure and pain that are lower in the “hierarchy of feeling” that are of interest to the economist.<sup>80</sup> Wicksteed, in comparison, uncouples economics from the necessity that it commit to an utilitarian anthropology. It is not necessary to assume that humans are motivated solely by the desire for pleasure and the avoidance of pain, although this need not be ruled out either, because “the economic relation is entered into at the prompting of the whole range of human purposes and impulses, and rests in no exclusive or specific way on an egoistic or self-regarding basis.”<sup>81</sup> What is necessary for the study of economics is that there exists “general “scales of preferences” or “relative scales of estimates” on which all objects of desire or pursuit (positive or negative) find their place, and which registers the terms on which they would be accepted as equivalents or preferred one to the other.”<sup>82</sup> This is necessary, for if economics is to study “the general principles of the administration of resources” there needs to be a general

---

<sup>79</sup> Philip Henry Wicksteed, *The Common Sense of Political Economy, and Selected Papers and Reviews on Economic Theory*, ed. Lionel Robbins (George Routledge and Sons, 1933), 17. Emphasis added.

<sup>80</sup> Jevons, *The Theory of Political Economy*, 74.

<sup>81</sup> Wicksteed, *The Common Sense of Political Economy, and Selected Papers and Reviews on Economic Theory*, 169.

<sup>82</sup> Wicksteed, 33.

ranking of preferences to which scarce resources are being allocated.<sup>83</sup> In this, Robbins also follows Wicksteed in positing that persons are capable of ordering their preferences for different ends into a “hierarchy” and that this hierarchy does not presuppose that persons are motivated simply by the desire for pleasure and the avoidance of pain.<sup>84</sup>

Robbins was well aware that his conception of scarcity was not, in fact, new to him and that it had significant implications for the scope of economics. Thus he records in his autobiography:

Gradually it dawned on me that the idea of material welfare was an *ignis fatuus* in this connection; that the underlying fact which made so many different activities and relationships susceptible to economic analysis was the scarcity of the means with which they were concerned and not the materiality of the objectives. There was nothing especially original about this conception. I was deep in the study of marginal utility theory of value at the time, especially the works of the Austrians and Philip Wicksteed. Even if they did not say in so many words what I was beginning to say to myself, my formula followed naturally from their explanations. What was it all about if not the behaviour of people disposing of goods and services which in the last analysis were in some way limited in supply rather than freely available – in short, conduct influenced by scarcity?<sup>85</sup>

Notwithstanding that Robbins was not the first to conceive of scarcity in the way he did, this dissertation will use the label Robbinsian scarcity for the conception of scarcity found within *ENSES*. This seems fitting given the precise delineation of scarcity within *ENSES*, that Robbins

---

<sup>83</sup> Wicksteed, 17.

<sup>84</sup> Robbins, *An Essay*, 14.

<sup>85</sup> Lionel Robbins, *Autobiography of an Economist* (London: Macmillan, 1971), 146. Howson argues, based on meticulous archival work (especially of Robbins’s lecture notes and other notebooks) that “by the end of 1928 Robbins had found his basic definition of the subject matter of economics, after brooding about it for some years,” adding that “it owed more to Wicksteed and there was nothing particularly “Austrian” about it.” Susan Howson, “The Origins of Lionel Robbins’s Essay on the Nature and Significance of Economic Science,” *History of Political Economy* 36, no. 3 (2004): 426. Howson goes on to note that even though there are references to Mises and other Austrian economists “scattered throughout the book... almost none of these references are to be found in the lecture notes [where the scarcity definition was first developed], where almost all of the references are to English economists.” Howson, therefore, concludes, “The appearance of the work is thus much more “Austrian” than the underlying content.” Howson, 441.



is the first to explicitly define economics on the basis of scarcity in the English speaking world, and the prominence that this definition comes to have in mainstream economics.

### *A Basic Framework*

The foregoing discussion has identified and described two types of scarcity, Malthusian scarcity and Robbinsian scarcity. Counterpart abundance concepts can also be delineated. Malthusian scarcity (MS) arises if the constitution of the world, including resource availability, is such as to be unable or just able to meet the basic needs for survival for those within a given human society. Malthusian abundance (MA) arises if the constitution of the world, including resource availability, is such as to be more than able to meet basic human needs within a given society. In comparison, Robbinsian scarcity (RS) arises if the constitution of the world is such that resources are insufficient to fully meet all demands for them. As a result, resource allocation entails opportunity costs. Robbinsian abundance (RA) arises if the constitution of the world is such that resources are sufficient to fully meet all demands for them. In this world, there would be no opportunity costs.<sup>86</sup>

The above definitions are possible descriptions of general states of the world. *If* the constitution of the world is unable to meet basic human needs, *then* the world is characterized by Malthusian scarcity, and so on. As possible descriptions, the Malthusian states are not mutually exclusive with the Robbinsian states. For example, Malthusian scarcity is compossible with Robbinsian scarcity. This would be a world in which all essential human needs could not be met and in which resource allocation entails opportunity costs. Likewise, Malthusian abundance is

---

<sup>86</sup> There are important similarities between the basic framework outlined in this section and the “typology of scarcity” outlined by Barrera in Barrera, *God and the Evil of Scarcity*, 205–8. Further discussion of these similarities—as well as some differences—will be taken up in Chapter 2.

compossible with Robbinsian scarcity. Indeed, there are four combinations of compossible Malthusian and Robbinsian states. These are detailed in matrix form in Figure 1.

**Figure 1: Robbinsian and Malthusian States**

		Robbinsian States	
		Scarcity	Abundance
Malthusian States	Scarcity	II RS, MS	I RA, MS
	Abundance	III RS, MA	IV RA, MA

The world of Quadrant I is characterized by Robbinsian abundance and Malthusian scarcity. It would be a rather strange world. For this quadrant to be an accurate description of reality resources would need to be person, use, and time specific (in terms of duration of time within which they could be consumed once “produced”). Transformation of some raw resources into goods for final consumption would be possible. The capital used in this transformation, however, would need to be resource specific and laboring would not entail opportunity costs. Consumption goods would likely only exist for short periods or, if durable consumption goods existed, a fixed level of consumption would only be possible in any period, such that it would be impossible to economize through time. In other words, it would be a world in which there was no substitutability across persons, uses, and time, so that there would be no opportunity costs. Yet, despite that lack of substitutability, there would be insufficient or just sufficient person-specific, use-specific, and time-specific resources to satisfy human essential needs. It is hard to imagine anyone wishing to live in this world. One might desire to share her person-specific

apple with another, but what would be the point given that he has no use for it? The hammer used to build Jill's house could not be used to build Jack's house nor could it be used to build Jill's box for picking up her person-specific food supplies which would need to be eaten within a hour of getting them. Moreover, everyone would go hungry. This is similar to Israel's world in the wilderness where God provided manna, but with two important differences. First, manna would be person specific. It would be impossible for someone else to eat another's manna. Second, the provision of person-specific manna would be insufficient to satisfy human hunger. Although, this sounds like a world from a science-fiction novel, it is discussed here for the sake of completion.

Quadrant II is a world of both Robbinsian scarcity and Malthusian scarcity. This is the state of the world that Malthus believed he was depicting in the *FE*. It is a world in which basic human needs are just satisfied, or may even go partly unsatisfied. For Malthus, this world exists because of the human need for food, human sexual proclivity, and the nature of agricultural production. But it is also a world of Robbinsian scarcity, because allocating more resources to increase the production of one particular good, such as corn, means decreasing the production of other goods, such as coal and clothing. In other words, it is a world where there are opportunity costs.

The world of Quadrant III is one characterized by Robbinsian scarcity and Malthusian abundance. The world is constituted so that basic human needs can be more than fulfilled, but where resource allocation entails opportunity costs. This is the world that the English marginalists thought they were living in—to be more precise, the England they thought they were living in—as economic growth outpaced population growth and real wages increased. It was, therefore, the world that shaped their concerns and the analytic tools they developed. It was

also the world that Robbins thought he lived in. That said, one imagines Jevons, Wicksteed, and Robbins readily acknowledging that some human societies find themselves in the world of Quadrant II. Indeed, Robbins's ongoing concern about the dangers of unfettered population growth meant that he thought it was possible for some societies to find themselves in Quadrant II. Therefore, within the basic framework depicted within Figure 1, Robbins's own position is best viewed as one in which the states of Malthusian scarcity or abundance are nested within a state of Robbinsian scarcity. Robbinsian abundance never obtains as a general description of the world and, therefore, Quadrants I and IV are never accurate descriptions of the world for Robbins.

Finally, Quadrant IV is a world of both Robbinsian abundance and Malthusian abundance. This world is constituted so that not only all basic human needs can be met but also all human wants. The supply of resources is sufficient to fully satisfy *all* human demands at zero resource prices. There is no economic problem because agents do not face opportunity costs.<sup>87</sup>

Although Robbinsian and Malthusian states have been used to delineate four possible states of the world, the Robbinsian states are the more general states within which the Malthusian states represent the absolute level of resource provision. To see this, note that one can think about degrees of Robbinsian scarcity and Robbinsian abundance. For instance, Robbinsian scarcity can be more or less severe depending on the constitution of the world. Where the supply of resources is greater relative to demand, there will be fewer opportunity costs. What the shift from Malthusian scarcity to Malthusian abundance marks is the point where the degree of

---

<sup>87</sup> For Robbins, this is a world in which technique becomes the sole concern in transforming resources to satisfy human ends. Robbins writes, "It is out of the interplay of the given systems of ends on the one side and the material and technical potentialities on the other, that the aspects of behaviour which the economist studies are determined. Only in a world in which all goods were free goods would technical considerations be the sole determinants of the satisfaction of given ends. But, in such a world, by definition, the economic problem would have ceased to exist." Robbins, *An Essay*, 36.

Robbinsian scarcity changes from being able to just meet human needs, to being more than able to meet human needs.

This framing also helps to explain the relationship between the technical, economic understanding of scarcity and popular understandings of scarcity. When the degree of Robbinsian scarcity is such that human needs go unmet, then goods are scarce in the popular sense of the term, *i.e.*, they are insufficient to meet human need. An example of where these two understandings of scarcity are used is in John Maynard Keynes's famous essay *Economic Possibilities for Our Grandchildren*. In this essay Keynes argues "assuming no wars and no important increase in population, the *economic problem* may be solved, or at least be within sight of solution, within a hundred years."<sup>88</sup> In making this claim, what Keynes means by the economic problem is the the fulfilment of absolute needs (which he compares to relative needs).

Keynes writes:

Now it is true that the needs of human beings may seem to be insatiable. But they fall into two classes—those needs which are absolute in the sense that we feel them whatever the situation of our fellow human beings may be, and those which are relative in the sense that we feel them only if their satisfaction lifts us above, makes us feel superior to, our fellows. Needs of the second class, those which satisfy the desire for superiority, may indeed be insatiable; for the higher the general level, the higher still are they. But this is not true of the absolute needs—*a point may soon be reached, much sooner perhaps than we are all of us aware of, when these needs are satisfied in the sense that we prefer to devote our further energies to non-economic purposes.*<sup>89</sup>

Thus, when Keynes speaks of the economic problem being solved, he does so in relation to the Malthusian states. There will come a point in which humans will have all their absolute needs fulfilled. Nevertheless, because Keynes thinks there are relative needs that seem to be insatiable, he affirms the continued existence of Robbinsian scarcity, even in a world in which

---

<sup>88</sup> John Maynard Keynes, *Essays in Persuasion* (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1952), 365–66. Emphasis original.

<sup>89</sup> Keynes, 365. Emphasis added.

human societies have moved well beyond the threshold of Malthusian abundance. In other words, Keynes is imagining a Quadrant-III world. Keeping these two conceptions of scarcity in mind will be important in subsequent chapters because these concepts are oftentimes confused.

Note, too, that alternative absolute points could be introduced to mark a change in the degree of Robbinsian scarcity or abundance. For example, John Rawls in *A Theory of Justice* takes “moderate conditions of scarcity” as part of his circumstances of justice.<sup>90</sup> This is a situation in which needs and some human wants can be met. Thus, one could reformulate the basic framework herein in terms of Rawlsian scarcity and abundance.

Despite various possible formulations, the basic framework with its four possible states, delineated in terms of Robbinsian scarcity and abundance and Malthusian scarcity and abundance, will be used throughout the dissertation. It will be used to help discuss, *inter alia*, the various ways thinkers consider scarcity and abundance, and will help to frame theodicies of scarcity in Chapter 3. In doing so, the basic framework will mitigate the risk of misunderstanding that arises from the failure to recognize that the terms “scarcity” and “abundance” are sometimes being used in different ways.

### *Scarcity and the Definition of Modern Economics*

Based on the conviction that his own delineation of scarcity is an accurate description of the world, in which humans engage in economizing behavior by allocating scarce resources to some ends but not to others, Robbins offers his definition of economics: “Economics is the science which studies human behaviour as a relationship between ends and scarce means which

---

<sup>90</sup> John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, Original Edition (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press, 1971), 127.

have alternative uses.”<sup>91</sup> Robbins argues for this definition by comparing it to two alternative definitions that were prominent at the time he was writing *ENSES*. These are the material welfare and the social (or exchange) definitions of economics. Paying attention to Robbins’s discussion of these definitions, and especially what he sees as their main limitations, is instructive in seeing not only why he prefers his own scarcity definition of economics, but also in highlighting some important aspects of the argument that he deploys in presenting his case.

The material welfare definition of economics, which Robbins notes had the “most adherents” at the time he was writing, views economics as “the study of the causes of material welfare.”<sup>92</sup> Robbins associates this definition with Edwin Cannan, Alfred Marshall, Vilfredo Pareto, and J.B. Clark. Given that Robbins took Cannan’s two-year Principles of Economics course at the London School of Economics (LSE), as part of his B.Sc.(Econ.), and the importance of Marshall’s *Principles of Economics* for the English-speaking world, Cannan’s and Marshall’s definitions are given below as representative examples:

[Economics] deal[s] with the causes of the material welfare or wealth of human beings, considered both as a whole, and as individuals, and also in groups.<sup>93</sup>

and

Political Economy or Economics is a study of mankind in the ordinary business of life; it examines that part of individual and social action which is most closely connected with the attainment and with the use of the material requisites of wellbeing.<sup>94</sup>

Although Robbins acknowledges the *prima facie* appeal of the material welfare definition, he contends it arbitrarily excludes aspects that fall within the scope of economic analysis as it is

---

<sup>91</sup> Robbins, *An Essay*, 16.

<sup>92</sup> Robbins, 4.

<sup>93</sup> Edwin Cannan, *Wealth*, 3rd Edition (London: Staples Press, 1928), 5.

<sup>94</sup> Alfred Marshall, *Principles of Economics*, 8th Edition (London: Macmillan, 1920), 1.

actually undertaken. To make his case, Robbins considers two examples: the economic analysis of wages and the economic analysis of war. Any plausible economic theory of wages, Robbins argues, cannot be restricted to the study of material welfare.<sup>95</sup> This is true not only for the remuneration of particular kinds of work (Robbins gives the example of wages paid to orchestra members), but also for how wages are spent. Robbins, therefore, concludes, “A theory of wages which ignored all those sums which were paid for ‘immaterial’ services or spent on ‘immaterial’ ends would be intolerable.”<sup>96</sup> Robbins then turns to Cannan’s argument that economics should not concern itself with war on the grounds that it does not contribute to a society’s material welfare.<sup>97</sup> Robbins argues that this position is untenable given that “so far from Economics having no light to throw on the successful prosecution of modern warfare, it is highly doubtful whether the organizers of war can possibly do without it.”<sup>98</sup> The first example shows that the material definition of economics is inadequate because it would require economists to omit certain aspects from the analysis, thereby compromising the robustness of the economic analysis. The second example shows that the material definition of economics is inadequate because it would prohibit economists from analyzing particular topics, when, in fact, they have actually done so with beneficial results.

The other definition that Robbins considers is the social or exchange definition of economics. In this case, economics is defined based on “a certain type of social behaviour, the behaviour implied by the institutions of the Individualist Exchange Economy.”<sup>99</sup> Robbins

---

<sup>95</sup> Robbins, *An Essay*, 5.

<sup>96</sup> Robbins, 6.

<sup>97</sup> Robbins, 7.

<sup>98</sup> Robbins, 7.

<sup>99</sup> Robbins, 17.



associates this definition principally with Alfred Amonn and his work *Objekt und Grundbegriffe der theoretischen Nationalökonomie*. Like the material welfare definition, this definition suffers by excluding certain areas from economic analysis because they fall outside the activities of the exchange economy. Robbins considers two examples as counterpoints to demonstrate the inadequacy of this definition: the isolated human (who constitutes the so called Robinson-Crusoe Economy) and the communist society (where a market system for exchange is absent because production and distribution decisions are performed by the communist executive).<sup>100</sup> In both instances, Robbins argues that the isolated individual and the communist executive still have to allocate resources to production and consumption activities—activities whose study is generally considered as falling within the scope of economics.

This aspect of Robbins’s argument seemingly attempts to highlight the inadequacies of the material welfare and social definitions by showing how both definitions fail to include within their scope certain important aspects of economic analysis or areas of study that were widely considered as part of economics at the time Robbins was writing *ENSES*. For Robbins, however, it is not simply a definition’s ability to cover the field that is a measure of its success. A successful definition of economics must also describe in a meaningful way what its practitioners are actually doing and the contribution they are making as a result. Hence, while he concedes that it might be possible to “stretch” the material welfare definition of economics to include important non-material aspects, which would seem germane to economic analysis, he contends “in this form the definition may cover the field, but does not describe it.”<sup>101</sup> This is because “the final test of the validity of any such definition is... its capacity to describe exactly the ultimate

---

<sup>100</sup> Robbins, 18.

<sup>101</sup> Robbins, 21.

subject-matter of the main generalizations of the science.”<sup>102</sup> The material welfare and social definitions ultimately fail because they do not get to the heart of economic analysis and its significance, which, for Robbins, is about studying scarcity-constrained choice. Thus, it is telling that, just before Robbins argues for his own definition, he comes back to the failure of the material welfare definition—as represented by Cannan in this instance—to recognize the extent of the economic problem:

Let us accept Professor Cannan’s use of the terms “economic” and “non-economic” as being equivalent to conducive to material and non-material welfare respectively. Then we may say with him that the wealth of society will be greater the greater proportion of time which is devoted to material ends, the less the proportion which is devoted to immaterial ends. We may say this. But we must admit that, using the word “economic” in a perfectly normal sense, there still remains an economic problem for society and the individual, of choosing between these two kinds of activity—a problem of how, given the relative valuations of produce and leisure and the opportunities of production, the fixed supply of twenty-four hours in the day is to be divided between them. *There is still an economic problem of deciding between the “economic” and the “non-economic”*. One of the main problems of the Theory of Production lies half outside Professor Cannan’s definition.

Is not this in itself a sufficient argument for its abandonment?<sup>103</sup>

The argument, then, that Robbins deploys leaves his reader with the strong impression that he is simply describing what economists do and, for this reason, his definition succeeds, whereas the material welfare and social definitions fail, because the scarcity definition of economics is a more fitting description. This is certainly how some economists read *ENSES*. For example, Colander writes:

In my interpretation of Robbins’s essay, the definition he provided was not meant to be prescriptive in the sense that anything other than work that fit that definition should not be considered economic science. His definition was *descriptive*. It reflected what he believed economic theorists were then doing at the time when they did economic science.<sup>104</sup>

---

<sup>102</sup> Robbins, 4–5.

<sup>103</sup> Robbins, 11. Emphasis original.

<sup>104</sup> David Colander, “What Was ‘It’ That Robbins Was Defining?,” *Journal of the History of Economic Thought* 31, no. 4 (2009): 438. Emphasis original.

The one, and important, exception that Colander recognizes, when it comes to the prescriptive force of Robbins's definition of economics, is that, as a science, economics should exclude value judgments. Colander writes:

Robbins's prescriptive answer to whether value judgments belong to the "it" [that is, economic science] that he was defining is also clear; in Robbins's mind value judgments had no place in the "it" he was defining, no matter how "it" is defined. If you think you are doing "it" and doing "it" involves value judgments, then you are not doing "it."<sup>105</sup>

The next section of this chapter will discuss Robbins's prescription that economics should exclude value judgments, but what of Colander's interpretation that outside of this prescription Robbins's definition of economics was simply descriptive and he simply meant it to be so?

That it was not simply descriptive of what economic theorists were doing at the time or viewed as a descriptive definition can be adduced from contemporary reviews of *ENSES*.<sup>106</sup> For example, Peck contends, "Professor Robbins' exclusion of technical efficiency from the field of economics has caused him to overlook the relationship between the development of machine technology and the necessity of 'regimentation'."<sup>107</sup> Similarly, Fraser, in a sustained attack on what he perceived to be Robbins's problematic demarcation of economics, argues, "We need no longer demand the boundary line between economics and other fields of study should be capable of sharp demarcation," and, indeed, to attempt to do so excludes economists "at least in their professional capacity, [from] various topics which are important in themselves, and which only an economist can discuss with any real hope of reaching a successful outcome."<sup>108</sup>

---

<sup>105</sup> Colander, 438.

<sup>106</sup> For an excellent summary of the initial response to *ENSES* and the gradual acceptance of the scarcity definition by mainstream economics see Backhouse and Medema, "Defining Economics."

<sup>107</sup> Harvey W. Peck, "Review of Robbins (1932)," *American Economic Review* 26, no. 3 (1936): 496.

<sup>108</sup> Lindley M. Fraser, "How Do We Want Economists to Behave?," *The Economic Journal* 42, no. 168 (1932): 566.

Furthermore, those contemporary reviewers who interpreted *ENSES* as being prescriptive (including, but also going beyond, the prescription to refrain from value judgments) are justified in this interpretation based on certain passages of the *ENSES*. For instance, Robbins contends:

Economics, then, is in no way to be conceived as we may conceive Ethics or [Ae]sthetic, as being concerned with ends as such. It is *equally important* that its preoccupations *should* be sharply distinguished from those of the technical arts of production—with ways of using given means.<sup>109</sup>

Finally, even if one were to grant that Robbins was simply attempting to describe what economists were doing (within the chapter of *ENSES* in which he develops his scarcity definition of economics, in contradistinction to the material welfare and social definitions) part of the wider argument of *ENSES*, as its very title suggests, is an argument regarding the significance of studying scarcity-constrained choice. For this reason, Robbins concludes *ENSES* by stating:

Thus in the last analysis Economics does depend, if not for its existence at least for its significance, on an ultimate valuation—the affirmation that rationality and the ability to choose with knowledge is desirable. If irrationality, if the surrender to blind force of external stimuli and unco-ordinated impulse at every moment is a good to be preferred above all others, then it is true the *raison d'être* of Economics disappears.<sup>110</sup>

This is tantamount to saying that economics *should* study scarcity-constrained choice, if humans value rationality in decision-making. Moreover—and this is important—it is entirely consistent with Robbins's distinction between “is” and “ought” statements. Even if he did give an accurate depiction of what economists were doing when he wrote *ENSES*, because an “ought” can never follow solely from an “is,” on his own terms it cannot follow that economics should continue to

---

<sup>109</sup> Robbins, *An Essay*, 32. Emphasis added.

<sup>110</sup> Robbins, 157.

study “human behaviour as a relationship between ends and scarce means which have alternative uses,” simply by establishing that economics currently does so.<sup>111</sup>

Put this way, a crucial question comes into sharper focus, namely, what *should* economics study? Robbins’s answer, in a nutshell, is that economics should study scarcity-constrained choice given that: i) humans find themselves in a state of scarcity, wherein choices entail opportunity costs; and ii) human society ought to value rational decision making in a state of scarcity. But on this count, too, Marshall, as a representative of the material welfare definition of economics, could also offer a plausible answer to this question. Economics should study material welfare given that: i) humans spend a considerable part of their time acquiring material goods and, yet, a significant proportion of humanity still lives in material poverty; and ii) human society ought to eliminate poverty so that humans can escape the degradation of poverty and have the opportunities to fulfill their potential.<sup>112</sup>

This is one of the reasons why even though the scarcity definition of economics has come to be the standard definition of economics, there has always been a minority report within mainstream economics that has questioned the appropriateness of the scarcity definition and the demarcation of the field that Robbins thought followed from it. For example, Backhouse and Medema point out that Richard Lipsey has been uneasy with the scarcity definition of economics—an uneasiness that was reflected in his textbook *An Introduction to Positive Economics*.<sup>113</sup> Indeed, as an instance of this unease, in an essay that was originally presented at a conference to mark the seventy-fifth anniversary of the publication of *ENSES*, Lipsey rejects

---

<sup>111</sup> Robbins, 16. A further discussion of the is-ought distinction, particularly as it relates to Robbins’s demarcation of ethics, economics, and political economy is contained within Chapter 4.

<sup>112</sup> See Marshall, *Principles of Economics*, 1–3.

<sup>113</sup> Backhouse and Medema, “Defining Economics,” 812–13.

Robbins's view that the study of the technical arts of production should not fall within the purview of the economist, arguing instead that "technical change lies at the heart of long-term growth and that to understand such growth sufficiently to develop policies to influence its magnitude and direction requires a detailed knowledge of technologies and of how they change."<sup>114</sup>

Although in one way Robbins's definition restricts the scope of economics, it expands it in another. Robbins appears to have recognized this. He writes:

The conception [of economics] that we have adopted may be described as *analytical*. It does not attempt to pick out certain *kinds* of behaviour, but focuses on a particular *aspect* of behaviour, the form imposed by the influence of scarcity. It follows from this, therefore, that in so far as it presents this aspect, any kind of human behaviour falls within the scope of economic generalisations.<sup>115</sup>

For this reason, Backhouse and Medema suggest Robbins's definition is an early justification for the expansion of economics into otherwise unexplored areas, such as crime, marriage and child-rearing, and voting.<sup>116</sup> Expansion into these areas can be justified, based on Robbins's definition, as long as one can show that economizing behavior is present because of scarcity.

Chapter 4 and Chapter 5 of this dissertation will address the issue of the scope of economics, especially *vis-à-vis* scarcity and ethical evaluation. In addressing this issue, it is important to see that although Robbins's delineation of scarcity as a description of reality and the demarcation of economics on the basis of scarcity are related, it does not follow that those who reject the scarcity definition of economics are necessarily rejecting the notion of scarcity *per se*. In other words, it is one thing to argue that economics should not be restricted to the study of

---

<sup>114</sup> Richard G. Lipsey, "Some Legacies of Robbins' An Essay on the Nature and Significance of Economic Science," *Economica* 76 (2009): 853.

<sup>115</sup> Robbins, *An Essay*, 17.

<sup>116</sup> Backhouse and Medema, "Defining Economics," 813–14; Backhouse and Medema, "Retrospectives," 229–30.

resource allocation in the presence of scarcity; it is another to argue that humans generally do not find themselves in a world that requires scarcity-constrained choice. One is an argument about where the boundary of economics lies: what economics should study. The other is an argument about what kind of world humans inhabit. And while it would be invalid to argue in favor of the scarcity definition of economics while rejecting scarcity, it is valid to contest the scarcity definition of economics and the way it is used to demarcate the field, while simultaneously affirming the reality of scarcity and even the study of scarcity-constrained choice as an important (but not the only) concern of economics. This explains why Fraser, for instance, can “admit unhesitatingly that the problem of scarcity (or value) is one which lies at the very heart of the economist’s work” while also contesting Robbins’s demarcation of economics.<sup>117</sup> It also explains why those introductory economics textbooks that do not follow Robbins’s definition of economics, nevertheless affirm the reality of scarcity and the need for economic allocation.

Owing to the nesting of these issues, Chapter 2 first examines the robustness of the Robbinsian conception of scarcity, before Chapter 4 and Chapter 5 consider the scope of economics.

### *Economics and Value Judgments*

In defining economics on the basis of scarcity, Robbins asserts that economics is a *science*: the science that studies scarcity-constrained choice. A pithy justification as to why it is appropriate to call economics a science is found in Robbins’s *Richard T. Ely Lecture* before *The American Association of Economists*, given toward the end of his life, in which he reassesses the various arguments first put forward in *ENSES*:

---

<sup>117</sup> Fraser, “How Do We Want Economists to Behave?” 556.

Let me say at once that I see no reason for denying to the study of the activities and institutions created by scarcity the title of science. It conforms fundamentally to our conception of science in general: that is to say the formation of hypotheses explaining and (possibly) predicting the outcome of the relationships concerned and the testing of such hypotheses by logic and by observation.<sup>118</sup>

As already noted, associated with this appellation is Robbins's argument that as a science economics must strive for ethical neutrality or to be *Wertfreiheit* (to use the Weberian terminology to which Robbins acknowledges his intellectual debt in *ENSES*). Thus Robbins writes, "Economics is neutral as between ends. Economics cannot pronounce on the validity of ultimate judgments of value."<sup>119</sup> This prescription that economics should be a *wertfrei* science is bound up with the sharp distinction that Robbins draws between "facts" and "values". Factual statements, according to Robbins, are propositions about the world that have been scientifically verified by introspection and/or direct observations. In contrast, value statements are incapable of scientific verification. Based on this fact-value distinction Robbins (in)famously argues:

Economics deals with ascertainable facts; ethics with valuations and obligations. The two fields of enquiry are not on the same plane of discourse. Between the generalisations of positive and normative studies there is a logical gulf fixed which no ingenuity can disguise and no juxtaposition in space and time bridge over.<sup>120</sup>

O'Brien notes how Robbins's prescription that economic science should be *wertfrei* and, therefore, distinguishable from ethics, resulted in "misunderstandings by contemporary critics."<sup>121</sup> One major misunderstanding was that Robbins wished economists to abstain from commenting on economic policy. For example, in his review of *ENSES*, Fraser writes:

Economists cannot remain in the secluded contemplation of pure truth. If they are to help the community to solve its problems, they must themselves be counsellors and advocates,

---

<sup>118</sup> Robbins, "Economics and Political Economy," 2.

<sup>119</sup> Robbins, *An Essay*, 147.

<sup>120</sup> Robbins, 148.

<sup>121</sup> O'Brien, *Lionel Robbins*, 23.



perhaps administrators and statesmen. For the adequate fulfillment of this task they may have to equip themselves with an elaborate analytical technique. But to believe that this technique is the essence of economics, or that because economists ought to reason scientifically therefore they ought to do no more than reason scientifically, is to mistake the means for the end... Let us hope that economists in general will not forget that in the social studies the end of knowledge is action.<sup>122</sup>

The deep irony of this comment is that Robbins would wholeheartedly agree with Fraser on this point—an irony compounded by the fact that throughout his long career Robbins served as a counselor, advocate, administrator, and statesman *par excellence*.<sup>123</sup> Indeed, far from wanting economists to “remain in the secluded contemplation of pure truth”—shunning any public role—Robbins contends in *ENSES* that:

All this is not to say that economists should not deliver themselves on ethical questions, any more than an argument that botany is not aesthetics is to say that botanists should not have views of their own on the lay out of gardens. On the contrary, it is greatly to be desired that economists should have speculated long and widely on these matters, since only in this way will they be in a position to appreciate the implications as regards *given* ends of problems which are put to them for solution. Our methodological axioms involve no prohibitions of outside interests!<sup>124</sup>

Thus, as O’Brien summarizes:

The methodological position advanced [within *ENSES*]... did not amount to the proposition that the economist should not engage in controversy over matters of economic policy and welfare. Robbins was insistent on this, despite frequent misunderstanding in the early years after the publication of the book. But it did amount to the proposition that the economist must *not* claim a *scientific* basis for his value judgments.<sup>125</sup>

---

<sup>122</sup> Fraser, “How Do We Want Economists to Behave?,” 569–70.

<sup>123</sup> One only needs to consider his role as Professor of Economics at LSE, his work as the Head of the Economics Section during WWII, his role—alongside John Maynard Keynes—as an economic diplomat during and immediately after WWII, and his role in the production of the Robbins Report (a report discussing tertiary education in Great Britain). See Howson’s magisterial biography of Robbins. Susan Howson, *Lionel Robbins* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

<sup>124</sup> Robbins, *An Essay*, 133–34. Emphasis original.

<sup>125</sup> O’Brien, *Lionel Robbins*, 24. Emphasis original.

Backhouse argues that in developing this position, Robbins's broad concern is with "the interrelations of ethics and economic science."<sup>126</sup> Thus, although Robbins famously repudiates interpersonal utility comparisons as unscientific, based on the inability to verify equal capacity for satisfaction using either introspection or direct observation, Backhouse contends that this "is part of a broader argument in which clarity about ends and means, and hence about what can be seen as scientific, is central."<sup>127</sup> Further discussion of interpersonal utility comparisons, and how this class of value judgments relates to other normative judgments, will be discussed in further detail in Chapter 4. But, for now, it is sufficient to note that Backhouse's conclusion is correct; that Robbins's primary concern is not with interpersonal utility comparisons *per se*, but rather with the delineation of economics as a science and its relationship to the discipline of ethics.

This, then, brings one to a key concern of this dissertation, namely, the relationship between economics and (Christian) ethics. Robbins wishes to delineate economics as a science based on facts and, on this basis, to distinguish it from the discipline of ethics, which he sees as based on values. There are some knotty issues underpinning this delineation of economics and its distinction from ethics, chiefly based on Robbins's particular conception of "facts" and "values" and the relationship between them. Chapter 4 will return to these issues. But even without tackling these issues at this stage, one can still legitimately raise the question, why should economics exclude value judgments? Why not drop the label "science" and contend that economics is the study of scarcity-constrained choice that also includes the ethical evaluation of ends? This question is really just a particular instantiation of the more general question: what should economics study? Should it consider the ethical appropriateness of ends and the

---

<sup>126</sup> Roger E. Backhouse, "Robbins and Welfare Economics: A Reappraisal," *Journal of the History of Economic Thought* 31, no. 4 (2009): 474.

<sup>127</sup> Backhouse, 476.

allocation of scarce resources? On Robbins's own terms, one cannot answer this question by simple appeal to the present practice of economists. An "ought" needs to accompany the "is".

Robbins does have answers to these questions. However, to test the robustness of his answers and to evaluate these against other potential demarcations of economics, it is necessary to examine his demarcation of economics within his wider schema in which economics is set in relation to the disciplines of ethics and political economy. Robbins's conception of political economy has been underplayed, or not discussed at all, in some of the secondary literature that examines his demarcation of economics and its distinction from ethics, although it has begun to be retrieved as an important feature of Robbins's thought in some recent literature.<sup>128</sup> With an understanding of Robbins's notion of political economy, the stark distinction that he makes between ethics and economics within *ENSES* takes on a somewhat different complexion. Chapter 4 will introduce Robbins's notion of political economy and situate it within his wider schema. In contributing to the retrieval of Robbins's notion of political economy, albeit with some necessary adjustments, this dissertation will argue that (Christian) political economy is the discipline within which a robust integration of (Christian) ethics and economics should take place, without undermining the disciplinary integrity of either (Christian) ethics or the scientific component of contemporary economics. The culmination of this argument will occur in Chapter 5. Robbins's notion and advocacy of political economy, therefore, will have an important place in the overall argument of this dissertation.

---

<sup>128</sup> See, for example, Colander, "What Was 'It' That Robbins Was Defining?"; Ricardo F. Crespo, "Is Economics a Moral Science?," *Journal of Markets & Morality* 1, no. 2 (1998): 201–11; Fabio Masini, "Economics and Political Economy in Lionel Robbins's Writings," *Journal of the History of Economic Thought* 31, no. 4 (2009): 421–36.

## *Conclusion*

This chapter has discussed Robbins's delineation of scarcity, his scarcity definition of economics, and, finally, his contention that as a *wertfrei* science economics should remain ethically neutral with respect to ends. In doing so, this chapter has laid the foundation for the work that is to come.

In discussing Robbins's conception of scarcity, this chapter pointed out that the same notion of scarcity underpins the works of Jevons and Wicksteed. It also noted that Robbins's conception of scarcity differs from that found in the work of Malthus. Using these different historical conceptions of scarcity, a basic, if somewhat stylized, framework was developed that took conceptually compossible Malthusian and Robbinsian states of scarcity and abundance to generate four possible descriptions of the world. There will be recourse to this basic framework throughout the dissertation, particularly in Chapter 2, that will consider, *inter alia*, theological challenges to the notion of scarcity as a fitting description of the world. While there are potential drawbacks in using such a framework, such as consigning a particular thinker to a category that flattens out his or her thought, such a framework has the ability to bring greater precision to the discussion and to mitigate the risk of misunderstanding when, at times, the language of scarcity, abundance (or plentitude) are used in a somewhat loose manner.

This chapter also examined Robbins's argument for his scarcity definition of economics in relation to two other definitions that were prevalent when Robbins was writing *ENSES*, namely, the material welfare definition of economics and the social (or exchange) definition of economics. It argued that, in developing his scarcity definition of economics, Robbins was not simply describing what economists were doing at the time, despite what, *prima facie*, some passages of *ENSES* might indicate and how *ENSES* was interpreted by some. Rather, Robbins

also presents a normative argument as to why economics should study scarcity-constrained choice—an argument that, he thought, also entails certain restrictions on the scope of economics. This chapter highlighted how this then raises a more basic question: why favor Robbins's scarcity definition (and its accompanying circumscription of the scope of economics) over some other definition? This question will be addressed, *inter alia*, in Chapter 2 and Chapter 3.

Finally, this chapter considered Robbins's contention that economics is a *wertfrei* science and, therefore, economics should remain ethically neutral when it comes to evaluation of ends. This issue is germane to the dissertation because, on Robbins's construal, it orders economics and (Christian) ethics in a particular way. To take the full measure of Robbins's argument, however, for his particular arrangement of economics and ethics, it is necessary to evaluate this within his wider schema which demarcates ethics and economics, alongside the discipline of political economy. This will be a task taken up in Chapter 4. Chapter 5 will then outline a proposal for relating Christian ethics and economics.

This chapter, then, has distilled three nested questions that will be discussed in subsequent chapters. (1) Is scarcity an accurate description of the world? This will be the main focus of Chapter 2. (2) If scarcity (as defined by Robbins) is an accurate description of the world, how is this to be justified theologically, and what are the implications for the demarcation of economics? This question will be addressed in both Chapter 2 and Chapter 3. Finally, taking into account the answers to (1) and (2), (3) Is economics a *wertfrei* science, and, if it is, what are the implications for interdisciplinary dialogue? This question will be the concern of both Chapter 4 and Chapter 5.

## CHAPTER 2

### SCARCITY OR ABUNDANCE?

#### *Introduction*

For mainstream economists—even those who do not subscribe fully to the scarcity definition of economics—the concept of Robbinsian scarcity is a description of the world. This concept describes how humans are required to allocate scarce resources to different ends. In contrast to Robbinsian scarcity, Malthusian scarcity became more problematic as a description of the world with the unfolding of the Industrial Revolution. (Not, it should be stressed, that economists believe Malthusian scarcity is not a threat or cannot eventuate, but rather that it is not an inevitable outcome).

While Robbinsian scarcity remains unchallenged within economics, various challenges to Robbinsian scarcity have emerged from outside of economics. This chapter considers three challenges or objections from Christian theology and ethics to Robbinsian scarcity as a description of the world. The first challenge will be named the *nature-of-desire challenge*. In a nutshell, this challenge contends that economists have a faulty understanding of desire that leads them to construe human action as scarcity-constrained. This challenge takes various forms. For example, that economists normalize and encourage sinful desire, or that they are inattentive to the way that the advertising industry stokes desire for goods and services. This challenge has been brought by several well-known Christian theologians and ethicists, including Daniel Bell,

D. Stephen Long, M. Douglas Meeks, and John Millbank.<sup>129</sup> In the end, however, their arguments boil down to the same thing: economics has a faulty understanding of desire. For this reason, rather than engage with each of these thinkers individually, this chapter interacts with the thought of William Cavanaugh as a representative of this challenge (although engagement with some of the other thinkers will occur along the way in footnotes).

The second challenge will be named the *nature-of-goods challenge*. In a nutshell, this challenge contends that economists have a faulty understanding of goods, viewing them as competitive, which leads them to construe human action as scarcity-constrained. This challenge is unique to the work of Kathryn Tanner, at least in a well-developed form, and draws on the theme of non-competitive relations that permeates all her work. Although Tanner does not explicitly challenge the notion of Robbinsian scarcity, the challenge is implicit and is noted by other economists.<sup>130</sup>

The third challenge will be named the *incommensurability challenge*. In a way, this is a hybrid of the previous two challenges, picking up on the nature of human desire and the nature of goods. In a nutshell, this challenge contends that economists misunderstand the nature of human desire and the nature of goods in so far as the various human desires for different goods cannot and should not be compared. The chapter will engage this challenge by considering the arguments of D. Stephen Long.

---

<sup>129</sup> Daniel M. Bell, *Liberation Theology After The End of History: The Refusal To Cease Suffering* (London; New York: Routledge, 2001); D. Stephen Long, *Divine Economy: Theology and the Market*, Radical Orthodoxy Series (London; New York: Routledge, 2000); M. Douglas Meeks, *God the Economist: The Doctrine of God and Political Economy* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress Press, 1989); John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, Signposts in Theology (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990).

<sup>130</sup> For example, the economist Rowena Pecchenino notes, “While God gives, regardless of whether we are worthy recipients of the gifts, and can continue to give without constraint, human beings, all Tanner’s arguments to the contrary, do not have this luxury. There are constraints on what can be given and there are opportunity costs associated with giving that affects humans but not God. For humankind, *productive resources are scarce*.” Rowena Pecchenino, “On Tanner’s ‘Economy of Grace’: An Economist Responds,” *Irish Theological Quarterly* 72, no. 1 (2007): 102–3. Emphasis added.

The first three sections will consider each of these three challenges and, in response, will offer defenses of Robbinsian scarcity. To do so, it will draw on the discussion of the necessary and sufficient conditions for Robbinsian scarcity from the previous chapter. In addition, it will draw on the framework developed therein, in which the different combinations of Robbinsian and Malthusian scarcity and abundance were used to identify various possible descriptions of the world.

With the defense of Robbinsian scarcity in hand, the next section will offer a theological account of Robbinsian scarcity (which will be further developed in Chapter 3). The goal of this chapter, then, is not simply to defend Robbinsian scarcity in the face of the three theological challenges, but to go the next step and frame Robbinsian scarcity in terms more familiar to the Christian theologian and ethicist. In other words, a constructive argument is developed in this chapter—in terminology more familiar to the Christian theologian and ethicist—in order to remove the penumbra of suspicion that surrounds scarcity. This constructive endeavor is based on the conviction that if Robbinsian scarcity is an apt description of this world, then one should also be able to describe it in theological terms. If successful, this opens the way for a more constructive interdisciplinary dialogue.

*The Nature-of-Desire Challenge: William Cavanaugh and There Is Never Enough to Go Around*

William Cavanaugh frames his book, *Being Consumed: Economics and Christian Desire*, as a conversation between the disciplines of economics and theology.<sup>131</sup> “Some Christians,” writes Cavanaugh, “might be tempted to assume that economics is a discipline autonomous from

---

<sup>131</sup> William T. Cavanaugh, *Being Consumed: Economics and Christian Desire* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2008).



theology.”<sup>132</sup> “Many Christians, however, intuit that what we do with our money and our stuff should be directly informed by how we relate to God.”<sup>133</sup>

Turning to the issue of scarcity, Cavanaugh writes:

Economics, we are told, is the science that studies the allocation of resources under conditions of scarcity... Resources are scarce wherever the desires of all persons for goods or services cannot be met. In other words, *hunger is written into the conditions under which economics operates. There is never enough to go around.* But it is not simply the hunger of those who lack sufficient food to keep their bodies in good health. Scarcity is the more general hunger of those who want more, without reference to what they already have. Economics will always be the science of scarcity as long as individuals continue to want. And we are told that human desires are endless.<sup>134</sup>

This quote indicates that Cavanaugh sees one of the main problems with economics being that its discourse operates within a frame in which “there is never enough to go around.”

Moreover, Cavanaugh pinpoints the reason for this lack to the assumption that “individuals continue to want” or “that human desires are endless.” As he summarizes it:

The standard assumption of economists that we live in a world of scarce resources is not based simply on an empirical observation of the state of the world, but is based on the assumption that human desire is limitless. In a consumer culture we are conditioned to believe that human desires have no end and are therefore limitless.<sup>135</sup>

Cavanaugh does affirm that humans are desiring beings. Drawing on Augustine, he notes that “the constant renewing of desire is a condition of being creatures in time” and that “desire is not simply negative; our desires are what get us out of bed in the morning.”<sup>136</sup> However, our

---

<sup>132</sup> Cavanaugh, vii.

<sup>133</sup> Cavanaugh, vii. This quote illustrates what is a tendency among the three authors considered in this chapter to confound economics as a *discipline* with money, the economy or economic systems. This confuses the discussion as no distinction is made between economic phenomena and economics as a discipline that undertakes higher-order reflection on these phenomena.

<sup>134</sup> Cavanaugh, 90. Emphasis added.

<sup>135</sup> Cavanaugh, xii.

<sup>136</sup> Cavanaugh, 90.

desires are also inordinate and misdirected, continuing to “light on objects that fail to satisfy.”<sup>137</sup> As a result, we become “restless” and dissatisfied persons.<sup>138</sup>

Cavanaugh suggests that in modern economies this restlessness is continuously fueled by consumer marketing that “seeks to meet, create, and stoke new desires, often highlighting a sense of dissatisfaction with what one presently has and is.”<sup>139</sup> This is achieved by creating elaborate portrayals of the “good life” in which “self-esteem, love, sex, friendship, and success, are associated with products that bear little or no relationship to those goods [self-esteem, love, etc.]”<sup>140</sup>

Implicit in Cavanaugh’s critique of economics’s understanding of scarcity and its manifestations in economic life is the absence of a distinction between needs and wants. Thus, Cavanaugh notes that scarcity is associated “not simply [with] the hunger of those who lack sufficient food to keep their bodies in good health... [but also with] the more general hunger of those who want more, without reference to what they already have.”<sup>141</sup> In other words, the person who has a house, two cars, a boat, and eats whatever she desires faces a situation of

---

<sup>137</sup> Cavanaugh, 90.

<sup>138</sup> Cavanaugh, 90. Long develops a similar critique, arguing that mainstream economics “contains a complex metaphysics that assumes all human action takes place in a tragic world of scarcity.” Long, *Divine Economy*, 4. He argues that the understanding of scarcity is rooted in the sin of greed:

[The] metaphysical foundation for economics is consistent with what Christian theology has traditionally called sin, especially the vice of *pleonexia* (greed) where we have an infinite desire for finite goods. If scarcity is “THE economic problem” that generates economic analysis, then does it not depend upon the proliferation and perpetuation of the Christian vice of *pleonexia* for its viability? To that extent, economic analysis works against any understanding of holiness where we are to learn and cultivate a finite desire for finite goods and an infinite desire for the only infinite good—God. Modern economics does not merely assume sinfulness, it needs it. It would not work without the proliferation of disordered desire. D. Stephen Long, Nancy Ruth Fox, and Tripp York, *Calculated Futures: Theology, Ethics, and Economics* (Waco, Tex: Baylor University Press, 2007), 41–42.

<sup>139</sup> Cavanaugh, *Being Consumed*, 90.

<sup>140</sup> Cavanaugh, 17.

<sup>141</sup> Cavanaugh, 90.

scarcity as does a person who barely earns enough income to meet his physical needs for shelter and sustenance.<sup>142</sup> This is “tragic” for Cavanaugh not only because it “establishes the view that *no one* has enough” but especially because it “keeps us distracted from the desires of the truly hungry, those who experience hunger as life-threatening deprivation.”<sup>143</sup>

The solution to this mindset, suggests Cavanaugh, “is to cultivate a desire for God the Eternal, in whom our hearts will find rest.”<sup>144</sup> For Cavanaugh, the principal way this is effected is through the reception of God’s gifts of bread and wine, the body and blood of Christ, as persons participate in the Eucharist. In contrast to the understanding of scarcity perpetuated by economics, which Cavanaugh views as undergirding the system of capitalism, the “Eucharist tells another story about hunger and consumption. It does not begin with scarcity, but with the one who came that we might have life, and have it abundantly (John 10:10).”<sup>145</sup> In the Eucharist, the human person finds true satisfaction because the “insatiability of human desire is absorbed by the abundance of God’s grace in the gift of the body and blood of Christ.”<sup>146</sup> And because the gift of God’s self in the bread and wine is not a “scarce commodity”—a point signified by the fact that “the host and the cup are multiplied daily at thousands of eucharistic celebrations throughout the world”—no one who participates in the Eucharist will leave unsatisfied.<sup>147</sup>

---

<sup>142</sup> Barrera makes a similar point when, drawing on Pemberton and Finn, he points out that “many economists see no difference between family A’s lack of food and family B’s inability to buy a yacht; both are deemed to be similar instances of unfilled demand.” Barrera, *God and the Evil of Scarcity*, 207.

<sup>143</sup> Cavanaugh, *Being Consumed*, 91.

<sup>144</sup> Cavanaugh, 90.

<sup>145</sup> Cavanaugh, 94.

<sup>146</sup> Cavanaugh, 94.

<sup>147</sup> Cavanaugh, 94.

Cavanaugh contends the “eucharistic economy” has practical import. He argues when a person consumes the elements of the Eucharist he or she is consumed into the body of Christ. This eucharistic consumption “does not entail the appropriation of goods for private use” but rather “relativizes the boundary between what is mine and what is yours by relativizing the boundary between me and you,” the implication being that “we are no longer two individuals encountering each other either by way of contract or as active giver and passive recipient.”<sup>148</sup> Cavanaugh urges his readers not to “spiritualize” the union of Christians with Christ and with one another, but instead to take seriously the economic implications it presents to feed those who are members of the body of Christ and to see economic exchange with “members of the wider community as members of our own body.”<sup>149</sup>

Standing at the center of Cavanaugh’s critique of scarcity is the charge that economists have a faulty understanding of human desire, *viz.*, that it is infinite or endless. It is this faulty understanding of desire that causes the economist to construe the world as requiring humans to allocate scarce resources to various ends.

This critique pertains to the following three (of five) necessary conditions for Robbinsian scarcity to hold: N<sub>1</sub>: Ends are various; N<sub>2</sub>: Time and means are limited; and N<sub>5</sub>: Demand for time and means exceed their limited supply at zero resource prices. Contrary to how scarcity is sometimes presented in introductory economics text books (or introductory economics courses), these three conditions do not, in fact, state that human desire is infinite or endless for Robbinsian scarcity to obtain.<sup>150</sup> What must hold, though, is that ends are various and time and means

---

<sup>148</sup> Cavanaugh, 97.

<sup>149</sup> Cavanaugh, 97–99.

<sup>150</sup> This presentation is unfortunate because the assumption of unlimited desire is not required for scarcity to hold. Much better, then, is Mankiw’s framing of scarcity: “society has limited resources and therefore cannot produce all the goods and service people wish to have.” Mankiw, *Principles of Microeconomics*, 4.

limited such that the demand for the time and means to supply various ends is greater than the available time and means.

It is incontrovertible that there are various ends and that time and means are limited ( $N_1$  and  $N_2$  are fulfilled). What is, therefore, in dispute is  $N_5$ : Demand for time and means exceeds its limited supply at zero resource prices. For the critique to hold, one needs to demonstrate that the various ends that humans wish to achieve can at least be met by the available time and means. In other words, one needs to demonstrate that no human desire ever goes unmet.

At this stage Cavanaugh would seem to have an impossible task. Even a moment's introspection confirms that at times human desire is unmet or frustrated; humans are not able to realize all the ends that they desire to achieve. This shows that Cavanaugh has yet to demonstrate that Robbinsian scarcity is misconstruing the world. When put alongside the fact that human needs do go unmet, it would seem that humans do find themselves, at least at times, in a Quadrant-II world.

Based on his presentation, there are two potential recourses that Cavanaugh has in response to the rebuttal of his critique. The first is a recourse to sin: economics grounds scarcity in sinful desire; desire that is inordinate, disordered, and misdirected. This recourse will be examined using stylized examples to test whether it can overturn the foregoing rebuttal.

A simple version of this recourse is simply to view every occasion of unmet desire as being due to sin. In this case, every instance of unfulfilled desire is due to the fact that desire is inordinate, disordered, and misdirected. A simple response to this is to take it on the cheek and accept the contention: unmet desire is due to sin. This does not, however, repudiate  $N_5$ . Scarcity is still an accurate description of the world; all that has been established is that this description of the world is explained by sin. Furthermore, even if one holds that sinful desire is sanctified over

---

time, such that the degree of Robbinsian scarcity becomes less biting,  $N_5$  remains up to the point where there is an economy of perfectly sanctified sinners. Only an economy of saints would overturn Robbinsian scarcity, otherwise  $N_5$  still holds.

This also holds true with more sophisticated versions of the recourse to sin. Take, for example, the case of where some persons' desires go unfulfilled because of the sinful desires of others. In this case, not every instance of an individual's desire going unmet is due to his or her own sin; it could also be due to the inordinate, disordered, or misdirected desire of another. One person may, for example, have an inordinate desire for a particular good that means another person misses out in fulfilling his or her desire. Once again, a response to this more sophisticated version of the recourse to sin is simply to agree, but to then point out that this does not repudiate  $N_5$ . All that is established is that scarcity, which remains an accurate description of the world, is due to the inordinate, disordered, or misdirected desire of some that results in the legitimate desires of others going unfulfilled. Again, only an economy of saints would overturn Robbinsian scarcity on this account.

One can formulate a general result from the foregoing discussion, *viz.*, that the degree of Robbinsian scarcity for an economy will be less severe as the number of persons who are sanctified and the degree of personal sanctification increases, *ceteris paribus*. Only an economy of perfectly sanctified persons will overturn Robbinsian scarcity, if one accepts the starting assumption of the recourse to sin, that all unfulfilled human desire is ultimately due to sin.<sup>151</sup> The recourse to sin, then, cannot overturn the economist's view that  $N_5$  holds and Robbinsian scarcity is an accurate description of the world. Thus while "cultivating a desire for God" (one of

---

<sup>151</sup> As will be discussed later in this chapter, an account of Robbinsian scarcity can be offered without recourse to human sinfulness. There is, on the other hand, a need to incorporate human sinfulness into an account of Malthusian scarcity—something that will be done in Chapter 3.

Cavanaugh's constructive proposals) might reduce the degree of Robbinsian scarcity by sanctifying sinful desire, it will not eliminate Robbinsian scarcity unless the economy is comprised of perfectly sanctified sinners (again, assuming that all unfulfilled desire is due to sin one way or another).<sup>152</sup>

The second recourse is the recourse to need.  $N_5$  holds because economics lacks a distinction between needs and wants. If economics were to make a distinction between needs and wants, the necessary conditions for Robbinsian scarcity could be applied separately to needs and wants. In doing so, it would go some way to addressing Cavanaugh's concern that scarcity "is not simply the hunger of those who lack sufficient food to keep their bodies in health. Scarcity is the more general hunger of those who want more, without reference to what they already have."<sup>153</sup>

Cavanaugh is right to say that economics does not make a distinction between needs and wants, on the basis that this would be a violation of economics as a *wertfrei* science. A further discussion of this issue will need to wait until Chapter 4 and Chapter 5. For now, however, recall that a distinction between needs and wants is what underpins the conceptions of Malthusian scarcity and Malthusian abundance in Chapter 1. A world in which it is more than possible to meet all human need is a world of Malthusian abundance. A world in which human need is unable or just able to be met is a world of Malthusian scarcity.

Note, however, as soon as one admits a distinction between human needs and wants, one has already conceded that the world is characterized by Robbinsian scarcity. To contend there is a distinction between needs and wants is to reaffirm necessary condition  $N_1$ : that, at a general

---

<sup>152</sup> Cavanaugh, *Being Consumed*, 90.

<sup>153</sup> Cavanaugh, 90.

level, there are two ends, needs and wants. That time and means are limited ( $N_2$ ) is, again, taken as incontrovertible. Furthermore, one would expect those who are committed to making a distinction between needs and wants to go on to say that fulfilling human needs is more important than fulfilling human wants, therefore  $N_4$  (that ends have different importances) is also believed to be true. Finally, unless one believes resources are exclusively need-specific and exclusively want-specific, then  $N_3$  (time and means are capable of alternative application) also holds.

So what then of  $N_5$ ? Unless one believes in a world where it is possible to meet all human needs and all human wants, then it is straightforwardly the case that one has to allocate resources between needs and wants. This remains the case even if one thinks a failure to distinguish between needs and wants perpetuates a situation in which filling actual human need is sacrificed to fulfilling human wants. What would be required in this situation would be a reallocation of resources from humans wants to human needs; in a world where Malthusian scarcity threatens, resources will need to be reallocated away from satisfying human wants towards satisfying human need.

Turning now to Cavanaugh's constructive proposal—the Eucharistic economy—in relation to needs and wants, while participation in the Eucharist may “relativize the boundary between what is mine and what is yours by relativizing the boundary between me and you” this does not eliminate scarcity, but rather reminds one of the obligation one has to providing for the needs of fellow brothers and sisters in Christ.<sup>154</sup> Indeed, Paul's rebuke of the church at Corinth (1 Cor. 12:17-22) in its conduct of the Eucharist, where “one person remains hungry and another gets drunk” is *apropos* to this point: given the reality of Robbinsian scarcity, one has a Christian

---

<sup>154</sup> Cavanaugh, 97.



responsibility to make sure the bread and wine are made available to all. Otherwise, *contra* Cavanaugh, because the bread and wine are scarce goods, some will leave the Eucharistic meal unsatisfied if provision is not made for them.<sup>155</sup>

Thus, in the final analysis, neither the recourse to sin or the recourse to need is able to salvage the nature-of-desire challenge, and Robbinsian scarcity still stands as an apt description of the world.

### *The Nature-of-Goods Challenge: Kathryn Tanner and the Economy of Grace*

*Economy of Grace* (hereafter, *EG*) is Kathryn Tanner's first book-length foray into economics and the economy.<sup>156</sup> Consistent with her other work in Christian theology and ethics, this book is marked by an emphasis on non-competitiveness, an emphasis first seen in her book *God and Creation in Christian Theology*. That work outlined rules for a non-contrastive understanding of God's transcendence *vis-à-vis* creation and a non-competitive understanding of divine and human agency to ensure the coherency of Christian speech.<sup>157</sup> Given the continued importance of non-competitiveness for *EG*, this section will draw on Tanner's wider corpus in theology and ethics when discussing this theme.

Like Cavanaugh and, as will be seen, Long, Tanner frames *EG* as a "conversation between theology and economics."<sup>158</sup> Her approach to this conversation is a "method of *comparative* or

---

<sup>155</sup> Cavanaugh, 94.

<sup>156</sup> Kathryn Tanner, *Economy of Grace* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress Press, 2005).

<sup>157</sup> Kathryn Tanner, *God and Creation in Christian Theology: Tyranny or Empowerment?* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress Press, 1988).

<sup>158</sup> Tanner, *Economy of Grace*, 2005, x.

*general economy*.<sup>159</sup> For Tanner, what is commonly referred to as the economy—that is, the production, consumption, exchange, and so on, of goods and services which take place in a particular locale—can be compared with another type of economy: the theological economy.

Tanner writes:

The whole Christian story is a vision of economy, a vision of a kind of system of production and circulation of goods, beginning with God and extending to the world, from creation through redemption. In this way of looking at the Christian story, Christianity is every bit as much about economic issues as an account of the way prices are determined by marginal utilities. The Christian story, after all, is a story about God as the highest good, a God constituted by exchange among the persons of the Trinity, a God who aims, in creating and saving the world, to distribute to it the good of God's own life to the greatest degree possible. Fundamentally at stake in this story are principles for the production and circulation of the good and what they are to mean for human life in God's service.<sup>160</sup>

What makes Christian theology and economics amenable to dialogue, then, is the fact that they are both concerned with reflection on an economy.<sup>161</sup> Tanner's approach in *EG* is to first outline a theological economy—an economy of grace—and to compare this economy of grace with other economies that existed prior to capitalism or which are found outside the West, before finally using the economy of grace to identify weaknesses in global capitalism and alternative economic institutions and policies. Tanner is clear that her aim in “discussing theology and economics together is designed to allow for the *maximum possible contrast* between the economic principles the world follows and those involved in the Christian story of creation, fall, and redemption.”<sup>162</sup> This last point is critical: Tanner's intent is to describe an economy of grace,

---

<sup>159</sup> Tanner, x. Emphasis original

<sup>160</sup> Tanner, xi.

<sup>161</sup> Tanner notes that this is the opposite to the more common strategy which is to view the discipline economics as a religion. *Economy of Grace* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress Press, 2005), x.

<sup>162</sup> Tanner, *Economy of Grace*, 2005, xi.

and the principles that underpin it, and to put this to critical work elucidating what she takes to be the problematic principles of global capitalism.<sup>163</sup>

With the potential for a critique of the social, political, and economic *status quo* secured by her earlier work in theology and ethics, *EG* outlines a theological economy—an economy of grace—that is used to critique the *status quo* of global capitalism. Three features characterize the economy of grace. The first feature is unconditional giving. Tanner writes, “If human relations are structured in a way that reflects the character of God’s own giving, they should be marked by unconditional giving—that is, *giving that is not obligated by the prior performance of the recipients and that is not conditional upon a return being made by them.*”<sup>164</sup> Tanner contends that this is the type of giving that we see in God’s creation of the world, in the covenant that God established with Israel, and in the gifts offered in Christ.<sup>165</sup>

The second feature is universal giving. Tanner points out that God’s giving is universal in scope, “without restrictions to everyone and everything, for the benefit of all.”<sup>166</sup> On the basis of these two characteristics, Tanner suggests:

Humans should try to distribute the gifts of God as God does, without concern for whether they are especially deserved by their recipients. Without bothering themselves, for

---

<sup>163</sup> For this reason, Tanner’s project in *EG* aligns with her earlier work in *The Politics of God: Christian Theologies and Social Justice* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress Press, 1992) and *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress Press, 1997) in which particular theological resources from the Christian tradition are used to support a progressive agenda capable of critiquing the social, political, and economic *status quo*. For example, in *The Politics of God* Tanner employs “belief in God’s transcendence, an account of a free God’s world-encompassing providential agency, and a strong emphasis on sin” to support a progressive agenda capable of critiquing the *status quo*. Tanner, *The Politics of God*, 123. “The three together,” writes Tanner, “form a progressively unfolding focus for critique of established sociopolitical orders”:

If God is transcendent and human orders are therefore not themselves divine, these orders do not have the unconditional sanctity that characterizes God’s existence and nature. If human orders are what a free and sovereign God brings about, not only are they not sacred they are alterable and contingent. If the world is in sin, human orders not only *can* be altered, they *should* be. Tanner, 123. Emphasis original.

<sup>164</sup> Tanner, *Economy of Grace*, 2005, 63. Emphasis added.

<sup>165</sup> Tanner, 63–72.

<sup>166</sup> Tanner, 72.

example, with distinction between the “deserving” poor and the “undeserving” poor, human beings should give their full attention, instead, to the various needs of members of this worldwide community. They must offer special protections, moreover, as these become necessary, to those most likely to be left out of the community of concern at any point in time—the outcasts and strangers in their midst.<sup>167</sup>

Finally, Tanner suggests the economy of grace is characterized by “noncompetition in a community of mutual benefit.”<sup>168</sup> There are two aspects to Tanner’s understanding of non-competition as it relates to the economy of grace. First, “there is no competition in property or possession” and, second, “there is no competition between having oneself and giving to others.”<sup>169</sup> It is the third feature of the economy of grace—that is, noncompetitiveness—that provides the basis for the challenge to Robbinsian scarcity. For this reason, the discussion concerning the nature-of-goods challenge starts here. Nonetheless, the other two features of the economy of grace—which specify an ethos of giving—also have an important bearing on whether the world is accurately described by Robbinsian scarcity; therefore, in what follows, these features are not neglected.

Note that each of the two aspects of noncompetition specified by Tanner implies the other. If there is no competition in property or possession then it must be the case that there is no competition between having oneself and giving to others, and *vice versa*. If *Good A* being possessed by *Person 1* does not preclude *Person 2* from also possessing *Good A* (i.e., there is no competition in property and possession), then if *Person 1* has *Good A*, it must be the case that giving *Good A* to *Person 2* does not preclude *Person 1* also having *Good A* (i.e., there is no competition in having oneself and giving to another). Or from the other vantage point: If *Person*

---

<sup>167</sup> Tanner, 75.

<sup>168</sup> Tanner, 75.

<sup>169</sup> Tanner, 76.

*I* has *Good A* and giving *Good A* to *Person 2* does not preclude her also having *Good A* (i.e., there is no competition in having oneself and giving to another), then it must be the case *Person 1* possessing *Good A* does not preclude *Person 2* also possessing *Good A* (i.e., there is no competition in property and possession). Of course, *Person 1* could choose not to give to *Person 2* if *Good A* allowed such exclusion (in other words, this person could refuse the ethos of unconditional and universal giving), however, this would not change the fact that there is no competition between having *Good A* for oneself and giving that good to another.

This makes clear that the economy of grace is comprised of goods whose nature means that one person's use does not preclude another person from using them. Economics has terminology for these sorts of goods: they are pure non-rival goods. The nomenclature is based on economics's understanding of rivalry as "the property of a good whereby one person's use diminishes other people's use."<sup>170</sup> A pure non-rival good, then, has a nature such that use by one person does not diminish other people's use at all. Contrast this with a pure rival good that has a nature such that its use by one person completely precludes its use by another. To generalize for an economy with  $S$  goods and  $M$  persons, the economy of grace is one in which there is no competition between  $M$  persons for all  $S$  goods because the nature of all  $S$  goods makes them non-rival goods.

To gain a deeper understanding of this economy, it will be helpful to offer some examples of (non-)rival goods and to discuss further the property of (non-)rivalry. An apple is an example of a rival good. If one person eats an apple, then this apple is not available to be eaten by another person. An apple, then, is a clear example of a good that violates Tanner's understanding of noncompetition; with an apple there *is* competition in property or possession,

---

<sup>170</sup> Mankiw, *Principles of Microeconomics*, 226.

between having and giving to others. Compare this to a new algorithm that calculates the average speed of someone going on a street run. The new algorithm is a non-rival good: one person's use of the algorithm does not preclude another person using the same algorithm.

What makes an apple a rival good and an algorithm a non-rival good? (Non-)rivalry is a property that emerges from the nature of the good and how the good relates to humans (which is also a function of their nature). An apple is a material good that is a food for humans. The particular bodies that humans have require them to digest food in the stomach via the mouth; therefore, when an apple is eaten it is not available to be eaten by another person. An algorithm on the other hand is a process that is used to solve a problem that humans set. It is disembodied (in the sense that it does not occupy space), therefore, its use in one setting does not preclude the same algorithm being used in another.

What about a good like a refrigerator? Is it a rival or non-rival good? Economists would see it as a rival good. Although it is true that multiple people can use a refrigerator, economists would say that a refrigerator is a rival good because once one person uses refrigerator space for her milk, it is unavailable as space for someone else to use. This illustrates, once again, that (non-)rivalry is a property that emerges from the nature of goods, the nature of humans, and the relationship between these two natures.

At this point, it is also worth noting that the production of non-rival goods will require rival goods in their production process. For example, to produce a new running algorithm will have required the rival goods of a desk and chair for the programmer, a computer, the programmer's skill and time, and so on.

The economy of grace, then, is a very, very different economy—comprised entirely of non-rival goods—when compared to an economy that produces goods and services for human

consumption which contains a large number of rival goods. Even at this point, however, the economy of grace will not necessarily be an economy of Robbinsian abundance. For this to be the case, based on Tanner's feature of noncompetition alone (that is, without invoking unconditional and universal giving), goods would also have to be non-excludable (i.e., a person who possess the good could not exclude another from using it). If all the *S* non-rival goods are also non-excludable, then this will be an economy of Robbinsian abundance. Economists will recognize this as an economy entirely comprised of pure public goods, because all *S* goods are both non-rival and non-excludable. Assuming the world has been provisioned to more than meet human need, this is a Quadrant-IV-world economy. In this economy, ends are various ( $N_1$ ) in the production of *S goods* and distribution across *M persons*, time and means limited and capable of alternative application ( $N_2$  and  $N_3$ ) in the production and distribution of *S goods* across *M persons*, and a ranking can be formed for the production of *S goods* across *M persons* ( $N_4$ ). The demand for time and means, however, does not exceed—one imagines by a considerable degree—the limited supply of resources at zero resource prices. This occurs for the simple reason that once a good is in circulation it never has to be produced again. Goods keep on giving; goods are never exhausted.<sup>171</sup>

Non-excludability, however, does not need to be invoked to have an economy characterized by Robbinsian abundance with noncompetition as long as the two additional features of the economy of grace are invoked, *viz.*, unconditional and universal giving.<sup>172</sup> Even

---

<sup>171</sup> This is true whether goods are capital or consumption goods.

<sup>172</sup> For this reason, Pecchenino is not technically correct in saying that for Tanner's noncompetitive principle "to be possible *all* nonhuman resources must have the characteristics of pure public goods, goods which all can use and use simultaneously without diminution of value—they are nonrival and nonexcludable." Pecchenino, "On Tanner's 'Economy of Grace,'" 103. Emphasis original and underlining added. It is the nonrival character of goods that underpins Tanner's noncompetitive principle. Technically the economy of grace is an economy of free goods. That said, when Tanner's two additional principles are invoked, the economy of grace would be *like* an economy of pure public goods.

if the *S* goods were excludable, universal and unconditional giving would result in Robbinsian abundance. Indeed, it would be very surprising if unconditional and universal giving were not to occur, even if goods were excludable, because there would be no real reason for persons not to share their goods with one another, given Tanner's specification of non-competition.

In the parlance of the economist, then, the economy of grace is an economy of free goods, where there is no economic problem because there is no need to allocate resources, as they are not scarce. One would be living in a Quadrant-IV world in which the only thing that would need to be considered is the technology associated with meeting various ends. Thus, as Robbins writes:

It is out of the interplay of the given systems of ends on the one side and the material and technical potentialities on the other, that the aspects of behaviour which the economist studies are determined. Only in a world in which all goods were free goods would technical considerations be the sole determinants of the satisfaction of given ends. But, in such a world, by definition, the economic problem would have ceased to exist.<sup>173</sup>

Not only is this a very, very different economy, when compared to an actual economy producing goods and services for human consumption, it is also a very, very strange economy.

At one level, Tanner seems to recognize this. At one point she writes:

Theological economy seems a singularly peculiar, wild and unworkable ideal. It is very hard to conceive in practical terms how this theological economy would work, *just because it doesn't correspond to anything with which we are already familiar*. It is simply very hard to picture what any of these theological principles might mean concretely. The sharp contrast between theological economy and any economy we know seems sufficient in and of itself, moreover, to dampen any promise of theological economy for today's world. Theological economy on my understanding of it appears to have nothing to do with the present structure of global capitalism and therefore to be offering a utopia: *a proposal for no place and no time of our reckoning, a proposal that must remain in the imagination, limited to an imaginary world*.<sup>174</sup>

---

<sup>173</sup> Robbins, *An Essay*, 36. This is the world that some futurists dream about creating.

<sup>174</sup> Tanner, *Economy of Grace*, 2005, 87. Emphasis added.



Although Tanner acknowledges how different and strange the economy of grace might seem—using vivid language such as “singularly peculiar”, “wild”, “unworkable ideal”, “utopian”, and “limited to an imaginary world”—one wonders if even Tanner has grasped how strange and “other” this economy is. For example, what does it mean to share goods unconditionally and universally—goods that are supposedly non-rival when separated by physical geography? How is the supposed non-rival computer that someone is writing a novel on in Auckland, New Zealand to be given unconditionally to a writer in Dallas, Texas (and, in fact, to every writer in the world)? At this point, one is simply not talking about human beings and this world any longer.

At this stage, Tanner could argue that her method of comparative or general economy is intended precisely “to allow for the *maximum possible contrast* between the economic principles the world follows and those involved in the Christian story of creation, fall, and redemption.”<sup>175</sup>

Moreover:

A theological economy, no matter how oppositional, is always formed in response to, in a kind of vis-à-vis with, the economy it contests. It only shows its meaning concretely, then, by being put into point-by-point conversation with what it opposes. When figuring out its practical import, isolated attention to the theological, and lack of reference to the complex workings of contemporary capitalism, only serve to make theological economy seem that much more will-o'-the-wisp... The distinctiveness of a theological economy is not bought by respecting the boundaries of the economy as it is presently constituted, leaving it in peace to define its own course. Theological economy encroaches on and enters within the territory of the economy it opposes for the purpose of transforming the operations of that field. Theological economy does not linger on the outskirts of the economy, waiting for it to die a natural death, but works from within it, to turn or convert it to different principles of operation.<sup>176</sup>

At this point, however, one has to question Tanner’s method of comparative or general economy and its application. To start with, it violates Tanner’s own rules for a non-contrastive

---

<sup>175</sup> Tanner, xi. Emphasis added.

<sup>176</sup> Tanner, 88–89.

understanding of God's transcendence *vis-à-vis* creation as first outlined in *God and Creation in Christian Theology*. It is, of course, true that "a God constituted by exchange among the persons of the Trinity" is not subject to Robbinsian scarcity. Thus, as Long notes, "God is not defined by lack; God is an original plenitude never able to be exhausted."<sup>177</sup> There is plenitude within the divine life if by that one means that it lacks nothing and, therefore, does not require completion. The divine plenitude is inexhaustible: not only can nothing add to the divine life to complete it; nothing can subtract from it because it is inexhaustible. Furthermore, one can affirm with Long "that our being participates in that fullness that makes our being possible, while at the same time that fullness is never exhausted nor diminished in our being."<sup>178</sup> But, at this point, one must be careful to talk about the mode of that participation, for as Tanner herself puts it in a later work, "human relations do not share in the relations among the persons of the trinity in an undifferentiated fashion – as if the trinity were simply a group of friends expanding their social circle to include new members."<sup>179</sup> For this and other reasons, Tanner has been critical of the work of the so-called social trinitarians (*e.g.*, John Zizioulas, Miroslav Volf, and Leonardo Boff) where "what the trinity is like is thought to establish how human societies should be organized; the trinity is taken to be the best indicator of the proper relationship between individual and community; and so on."<sup>180</sup> For Tanner, the "chief complication" of this approach "is how to move from a discussion of God to human relationships" given the differences.<sup>181</sup>

---

<sup>177</sup> Long, *Divine Economy*, 146.

<sup>178</sup> Long, 146.

<sup>179</sup> Kathryn Tanner, *Christ the Key* (Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 244.

<sup>180</sup> Tanner, 207.

<sup>181</sup> Tanner, 221.

Yet, arguably, this is precisely what Tanner herself does in *EG*. To move from an understanding of God and God’s relation to the world, where there is no competition in property or possession, or having and giving, to talk about intra-world relationships in this way is to fall subject to her own criticism. It also gives rise to the second problem with the method of general or comparative economy and its application, which is to think that one can disconnect—or, more modestly, loosen the connection—between the principles of the actual economy and the natures of the goods and persons that comprise it. On this point, Nelson begins to put her finger on the problem:

Where the book [*EG*] takes a wrong turn, in my opinion, is in assuming that economies are defined by “principles” rather than by actual relations, and then setting up a false dualism with presumably sinful competition involving exclusive-in-use private goods on one side, and presumably virtuous relations based on public goods on the other. This ignores the fact that various real-world economic relations will be characterized by the existence or non-existence of exclusivity quite irrespectively of what “principles” we might try to apply. As exclusivity is apparently part of (God’s) creation, it seems to me that the appropriate question is not how to get rid of it, but how to deal with it. Acknowledging that acting in a more sharing attitude toward others usually *does* involve some immediate cost to ourselves, would seem to me to be a more useful and honest starting point.<sup>182</sup>

The principles that underpin the different economies emerge, then, from the nature of beings and their relationships with each other. Or, to put it even more strongly, the nature of beings and their interrelationships determine the principles that attempt to encapsulate the nature of beings and their interrelationship. This statement will need to be filled out and nuanced in particular ways in the remainder of this dissertation—lest it be misunderstood—but, for now, note how this is the case with reference to a particular example. Because the persons of the Trinity share the divine nature, the goods common to this nature are aptly described as noncompetitive. There is *no* competition in property or possession, between having and giving

---

<sup>182</sup> Julie A. Nelson, “Economy of Grace. By Kathryn Tanner. Fortress Press, 2005. 158 Pages.,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 74, no. 3 (2006): 783–84. Emphasis original; underlining added.

within the Godhead. In comparison, humans are corporeal beings, bound by time and space. Particular goods are required to sustain humans as corporeal beings, such as food, which are also bound by time and space. Thus, the nature of humans, the nature of the good of food, and the relationship between humans and food means that food *is* a competitive good. What this foreshadows (for discussion in the last section of this chapter) is that competitive relations are saying something about the created order (prior to making allowance for sin) that is created and sustained by God. The reason, then, Tanner’s economy of grace seems so far-fetched compared to the actual world—and the reason, therefore, Tanner’s method of comparative economy is ineffectual—is because it ignores the non-contrastive stricture between God and the world (which characterizes other aspects of her work).<sup>183</sup> To try, then, to “turn or convert” the actual human economy “to different principles of operation” may ironically do the opposite of what Tanner hopes, namely move the actual human economy “in the direction of life... [rather than] in the direction of death.”<sup>184</sup>

Thus, although the nature-of-goods challenge, mounted via Tanner’s economy of grace, is not an explicit challenge to Robbinsian scarcity as a description of the world, it is, nevertheless a challenge because Tanner believes the world of Robbinsian scarcity can be overturned by adopting the principles of noncompetition. From the foregoing analysis, it should hopefully be clear that this would involve *fundamentally* changing the nature of humans, the nature of goods, and the relationships between them, to the point where one wonders whether we are actually talking about a human world anymore—or another world entirely.

---

<sup>183</sup> Indeed, even if one does not subscribe to Tanner’s conception of transcendence and abide by her non-contrastive stricture, the deployment of analogy in some way is required when relating the divine economy and the human economy, otherwise similar problems will arise to those that characterize Tanner’s approach.

<sup>184</sup> Tanner, *Economy of Grace*, 2005, 88–89.

*The Incommensurability Challenge: D. Stephen Long and the Tragic World of Scarcity*

*Divine Economy: Theology and the Market* (hereafter, *DE*) is Long's first book-length treatment of the relationship between theology and economics. A subsequent book-length treatment, *Calculated Futures: Theology, Ethics, and Economics*, written with Nancy Fox and Tripp York, contains a number of previously published articles, as well as some new material.

At the outset of *DE* Long states:

This work is fundamentally a comparison of theology with economics as theoretical disciplines. I do not deny that theory and practice are inseparable. Thus, I attempt to make references throughout to the concrete practices such theories assume and reproduce. Nevertheless, the fundamental question this work raises deals with the relationships between the discourses assumed and perpetuated by the modern discipline of economics and those present in contemporary theology.<sup>185</sup>

Although Long claims that *DE* is “fundamentally a comparison of theology with economics as *theoretical disciplines*” that “deals with the relationships between the discourses assumed and perpetuated by the modern discipline of economics and those present in contemporary theology,” the actual discussion of economics as a theoretical discipline, mainstream or otherwise, is rather meager.<sup>186</sup>

---

<sup>185</sup> Long, *Divine Economy*, 6.

<sup>186</sup> Long, 6. Emphasis added. In particular, there is no direct engagement with any major work of economic methodology—mainstream or heterodox—from the twentieth century. Indeed, *DE* is really about how various theological ethics relate to the *economy* and *economic systems* (capitalism and socialism)—and, to a lesser extent, also how economics relates to these—than it is about how these theological ethics and economics relate to each other. Take, for example, Part I of *DE*, which sets out to examine the “dominant theological tradition,” the theological themes of which are viewed as “most consistent with marginalism and the fact-value distinction.” Long, 6. Here, one might have expected a sustained discussion of how the various theological ethics of those in the dominant tradition relate to mainstream economics. Instead, Long's principal concern is with how the various theological ethics relate to capitalism. For this reason, Waterman's comments on this book are entirely justified: To say that he has had few opportunities of acquainting himself with our discipline [economics] would be the most charitable way to excuse his performance. More fundamentally “economics” is entirely irrelevant to his—strictly theological—project of criticizing “capitalism” as a Christian heresy. Had he never mentioned the word “economics” from beginning to end, this would have been a shorter, better and more useful book. A. M. C. Waterman, “Review of *Divine Economy: Theology and the Market*,” *International Journal of Social Economics* 29, no. 3 (2002): 252.

Long begins his discussion of scarcity in *DE* by considering a “popular textbook example” in which the reader is asked to consider the case of Mrs. Harris, a practicing psychologist who earns \$50 per hour for her consulting services. When asked, “What are the opportunity costs involved in her preparing the family meal?” Long notes the answer is \$50. This is, indeed, correct if the next best opportunity forgone by Mrs. Harris in preparing the family meal is the opportunity to earn \$50 per hour as a consulting psychologist. Long then writes:

This seems a harmless enough question. The situation is a nice way of explaining that for every action chosen, another opportunity is sacrificed. The *facts* seem incontestable. No matter what our *values* might be concerning family, work, religion, politics, etc., when Mrs. Harris makes dinner she foregoes the opportunity of generating \$50.

But this description is misleading. While it appears to give us merely facts, it gives us much more. It invites us to construe our lives, primarily as family members, in terms of the activities of producers and consumers. The family meal loses all incommensurable status with other consumable objects. All such objects are placed before the individual and he or she is asked ‘Which objects will you forgo for the sake of the others? How long will you continue to exchange until you have sufficient *x*s and adequate *y*s? How many *x*s will you forgo for the sake of how many *y*s?’ The question assumes a form of rationality, known as marginalism, that inevitably reduces all forms of life to ‘utility’ and ‘interest.’<sup>187</sup>

From his analysis of this example, Long then concludes:

This putatively harmless example contains a complex metaphysics that assumes all human action and language takes place in a tragic world of scarcity. The ability to ask this question entails acquiescence to that metaphysics. Any action that I take will be inscribed in a world of lack wherein my choice is made possible only by the other options I choose against. Rather than viewing human action as arising out of plentitude, this metaphysics assumes it is ensconced in scarcity. Death, violence, and antagonism become the source and end of such a metaphysics.<sup>188</sup>

---

So also Oslington’s comments:

Other frustrations stem from Long’s lack of familiarity with economics... Long’s knowledge of economics derives from a single American introductory text, a small number of general works on economics by non-mainstream economists, some reading of Adam Smith, and Milbank’s chapter on Political Economy. Paul Oslington, “Review of ‘Divine Economy: Theology and the Market’ by D. Stephen Long,” *Journal of Markets & Morality* 4, no. 1 (2012): 137–38.

<sup>187</sup> Long, *Divine Economy*, 4. Emphasis original.

<sup>188</sup> Long, 4.

This quotation contains two main objections to scarcity. First, that goods are treated as commensurate, and, second, that this results in a distorted understanding of human action in the world.

Before turning to Long's incommensurability challenge to scarcity in more detail, it is instructive to understand how economics views the commensurability of goods. As now formulated, mainstream economics does not require that goods be treated as commensurate in the sense that they need to be *measured by the same standard*. When marginal analysis was first being introduced into economics, it was the case that some economists thought that goods could and should be measured by the same standard. For example, Jevons thought that goods could be treated as commensurate using the feeling of pleasure that was derived from them as the common standard, such that utility was seen as a quantity.<sup>189</sup> However, other economists did not concur with or follow Jevons (and others) on this point. Thus, as was discussed in Chapter 1, Wicksteed rejected Jevons's utilitarian anthropology, which lay at the foundation of his economic analysis, opting instead for an analytical construction in which humans are seen to have a "general scale of preferences" where "all objects of desire or pursuit (positive or negative) find their place, and which registers the terms on which they would be accepted as equivalents or preferred to one another."<sup>190</sup> In formulating things this way, goods may be incommensurate (in that they cannot be measured using the same standard), however, they can be compared in the sense that they can be ranked relative to one another. What really matters, from this perspective,

---

<sup>189</sup> Deaton and Muellbauer write, "When utility theory was first used by economists in the mid-nineteenth century, writers such as Gossen, Jevons, Menger, and Walras undoubtedly regarded goods as actually generating psychic pleasure, the measurement of which was accomplished by a cardinal utility function so that utility could be assessed in the same way as, for example, temperature." Angus Deaton and John Muellbauer, *Economics and Consumer Behavior* (Cambridge University Press, 1980), 28. Although as already noted in Chapter 1, Jevons was skeptical about the possibility of inter-personal comparisons of cardinal utility.

<sup>190</sup> Wicksteed, *The Common Sense of Political Economy, and Selected Papers and Reviews on Economic Theory*, 33.

is the ordinal ranking of preferences. This was the position adopted by Robbins within *ENSES* and was fully taken up by mainstream economics in the twentieth century.<sup>191</sup> As an analytical construction, it allows for the possibility that the process of actually ranking ends may be quite complex. Nevertheless, as Robbins puts it, “in the last analysis it reduces to this, that we can judge whether different possible experiences are of equivalent or greater or less importance to us.”<sup>192</sup>

This understanding of commensurability is what underpins  $N_4$  for Robbinsian scarcity, the condition that states ends have different importances such they can be ordered into a hierarchy. Is Long, then, suggesting that humans lack the capacity to order various goods into a hierarchy, or that the nature of goods means that some cannot or should not be compared?

It seems that it is the latter—that some goods cannot or should not be compared—that is central to his incommensurability challenge, rather than humans’ lack of capacity to order goods into some sort of hierarchy (which is implicit in some of Long’s discussion). For example, elsewhere Long writes:

MacIntyre also reminds us the cooperative internal goods of virtues only exist within institutional structures where some goods are competitive and therefore scarce. While the virtues of knowledge and wisdom are non-competitive, they are often cultivated in institutional contexts where funding is competitive. There are inevitable limits we discover even in our pursuit of non-competitive goods... Even though we need not capitulate to the basic premise of the economists that every good is intrinsically scarce and, thus, the first

---

<sup>191</sup> In this, *ENSES* played an important role. So did an important article written during the 1930s (comprised of two parts), by two colleagues of Robbins at the London School of Economics, John Hicks and Roy Allen, that reformulated the theory of value from the ordinal perspective. Much of the terminology introduced by Hicks and Allen is now standard in intermediate microeconomic textbooks. J. R. Hicks and R. G. D. Allen, “A Reconsideration of the Theory of Value. Part I,” *Economica* 1, no. 1 (1934): 52–76; J. R. Hicks and R. G. D. Allen, “A Reconsideration of the Theory of Value. Part II. A Mathematical Theory of Individual Demand Functions,” *Economica* 1, no. 2 (1934): 196–219. Hicks and Allen cite the First Edition of *ENSES* in Part I of their article (Hicks and Allen, “A Reconsideration of the Theory of Value. Part I,” 54.) and Robbins cites Hicks and Allen in the Second Edition of *ENSES* (Robbins, *An Essay*, 56 & 75.)

<sup>192</sup> Robbins, *An Essay*, 75.



task of the economist is the efficient distribution of scarce goods, we must nevertheless recognize that limits exist.<sup>193</sup>

Thus, even in the pursuit of noncompetitive goods, this quote suggests that competitive funding must be ordered (implying that humans have the capacity to order goods). But what this quote also suggests is that one does not need to capitulate to the economist's basic paradigm where "every good is intrinsically scarce and, thus, the first task of the economist is the efficient distribution of scarce goods."<sup>194</sup>

But already this quote leaves Long's pronouncements—about economics misconstruing human action and the world that leads to death, violence, and antagonism—in a precarious position.<sup>195</sup> If, as Long acknowledges in the above quote drawing on MacIntyre, some goods are competitive and competitive goods are used in the production of noncompetitive goods, are we not in a world characterized by Robbinsian scarcity, a Quadrant-III world, if one takes as a given that the world has been provisioned to more than meet human needs? Long's critique of scarcity, then, hinges on him demonstrating that goods are *generally* incommensurate (in the Robbinsian sense), or perhaps that they *should be* treated as such (even if they are commensurate).

It is instructive, then, to consider another example that Long uses to develop his argument about incommensurability. In this example, Long returns to the life of Mrs. Harris:

Let us suppose that Mrs. Harris engages in sexual intercourse with her husband. And let us suppose that he could hire a prostitute at fifty percent of the opportunity costs incurred for the time they spend together. Although our *values* might be shocked by such a calculation, the economic *facts* are clear. It costs this couple \$25 per hour for sexual intercourse. If he utilized the services of a prostitute and she worked the hour, the economic index of productivity would increase by \$75.<sup>196</sup>

---

<sup>193</sup> Long, Fox, and York, *Calculated Futures*, 199–200.

<sup>194</sup> Long, Fox, and York, 200.

<sup>195</sup> Long, *Divine Economy*, 4.

<sup>196</sup> Long, 4–5. Emphasis original.

Surely, then, the mainstream economist is wrong to treat sex with a prostitute and sex between a husband and wife as commensurate goods. For this reason, Long writes:

The principle of formal substitutability treats all human action as if it were a disconnected or isolated event. The fact of the matter is not that Mrs. Harris' husband saved the family \$25 and increased productivity by \$75. The fact is that he committed adultery and thus denied God's purposes for marriage. The fact has much more concrete or empirical reality than the putative facts mentioned. We can point to the concrete historical embodiment of something called 'adultery' much more readily than something called 'opportunity cost'.<sup>197</sup>

What this example makes clear is that Long's critique is not based on the incommensurability of goods *per se*, but what seeing human action in this way leads to. Odious as this example might be, it does not, in fact, demonstrate that goods cannot be compared and put into a hierarchy. What becomes clear, then, is that Long's critique of scarcity is based on the assertion that some goods *should not* be compared, otherwise, humans will "construe [their] lives... in terms of the activities of producers and consumers."<sup>198</sup> If this happens "the family meal loses all incommensurable status with other consumable objects."<sup>199</sup> Put more generally, Long is arguing that economics, which at times he confounds with global capitalism, tells us to treat goods as commensurate, thereby construing human life in a particular way:

The socially formative power of a catholic or global market secures... the reality of living in a world where our 'values' have little relation to the 'facts.' This has arisen because all things can now be given a value and made subject to exchange. The *logoi* of formal equivalence and substitutability rule us.<sup>200</sup>

---

<sup>197</sup> Long, 5. Emphasis original. Long is also incorrect to suggest that the formal principle of substitutability means that human action is treated as a disconnected or isolated event. As discussed in Chapter 1, Robbinsian scarcity relates to the nexus of goods and their relationship to each other (as encapsulated in the concept of opportunity cost).

<sup>198</sup> Long, 4.

<sup>199</sup> Long, 4.

<sup>200</sup> Long, 4.

At this point, one might now conclude and say the incommensurability challenge has not overturned Robbinsian scarcity as an accurate description of the world, regardless of whether or not Long is correct in his contention that comparing goods, when set alongside the other conditions that give rise to Robbinsian scarcity, invites human to see their lives as producers and consumers. Long has not shown that any of the necessary conditions  $N_1$ -  $N_5$  does not obtain, hence the incommensurability challenge has not overturned Robbinsian scarcity as an accurate description of the world.

Nevertheless, there is benefit at this stage in investigating Long's contention that some goods *should not* be compared (even if they are, in principle, commensurate) because this results in humans construing their lives as producers and consumers. In doing so, the remainder of this section will foreshadow some of the issues that will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 4.

To recap: on Long's reading, economics's delineation of human action *vis-à-vis* Robbinsian scarcity causes humans to see their lives as producers and consumers and their action as production and consumption.

Now it is the case that the economist *qua* economist does view humans as consumers and producers in the allocation of scarce resources. But what, one may ask, is particularly objectionable about that? Is it not the case that humans produce and consume things, such as the income from working as a consulting psychologist and sitting down to eat a meal with the family? What gives Long's critique any traction, then, are the suggestions (at times more implicit than explicit) that, first, economists want to deploy economics such that all human activity is *reduced* to the aspect of production and consumption; and second, to *universalize* this viewpoint so that "the *logoi* of formal equivalence and substitutability rule us [all]."<sup>201</sup> In other words,

---

<sup>201</sup> Long, 4.

economists are charged with reductionism and wanting to universalize this reductionist account of human action.

The first charge stands if economists believe or want to believe that scarcity-constrained choice provides a *full* explanation of human action. In this case, no other discipline would be necessary to give an account of human action. This would be analogous to the biologist contending that biological science provides a full account of why people fall in love! Although some argue that the goal of mainstream economics is to explain all human action in terms of scarcity-constrained choice, the study of scarcity-constrained choice does not *necessarily* preclude the study of other aspects of human action, any more than the biological study of human attraction precludes other approaches to studying the phenomenon of falling in love.<sup>202</sup> Robbins himself is very clear on this: economics, as he defines it, is focused on *one* aspect of human behavior (*viz.*, economizing activity); and that, as will be discussed in Chapter 4, other intellectual disciplines are needed if a fully orbbed account of human experience is to be offered. Hence, there is no necessity between the study of scarcity-constrained choice and the preclusion of other aspects of human experience, such as the physical, moral, or aesthetic. So when it comes to Long's example of sex with a prostitute versus sex between a husband and wife, that the economist might view this through the lens of scarcity-constrained choice in no way invalidates the ethical and theological evaluation that Long offers. In fact, for the Christian theologian, ethicist, or economist one might expect, in this example, for the ethical and theological evaluation to come to the foreground, and the economic evaluation to recede into the very distant background.

---

<sup>202</sup> Although, of course, some economists have gone down this path substantially, perhaps most notably, Gary Becker. See, for example, *The Economic Approach To Human Behavior* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976).

What about the second charge? Once again, the economist *qua* economist is concerned with human action *vis-à-vis* the disposal of scarce resources for production and consumption, in the same way that the physicist *qua* physicist is focused on human action in terms of mass, force, velocity, acceleration, and so on. It does not follow from this, however, that economists are on some universalizing mission to ensure that every person views human action from this standpoint, anymore than the physicist is on a mission to have every human view human action in terms of mass, force, velocity, acceleration, and so on. Granted the incentive for both the economist and physicist to do so will increase as the explanatory power of their respective disciplines increases both generally and in relation to a particular situation. This is different, however, from contending that practitioners of these disciplines are necessarily trying to convert others to their disciplinary viewpoint, especially to the exclusion of other views.<sup>203</sup> So in the case of sex with a prostitute versus sex between a husband and wife, although it is possible to examine this example in terms of scarcity-constrained choice, the economist may simply refrain from doing so, because the ethical evaluation has greater explanatory power than the economic evaluation.

What this discussion points towards is the validity and value of various disciplines and their practitioners focusing on different aspects of human experience (or the world more generally) in such a way that the deliverances of these respective disciplines are complementary, in so far as, together, they build a greater understanding of human experience and the world.<sup>204</sup>

---

<sup>203</sup> Indeed, it would be strange and inconsistent for the economist to do so given his or her understanding of scarcity.

<sup>204</sup> This is not to rule out the possibility, either, of different disciplines challenging each other.

### *Conceptions of Scarcity, the Finitude of Creation, and the Human Vocation*

Although, Cavanaugh, Tanner, and Long all seek to challenge the concept of Robbinsian scarcity, they do not want this to be understood as a denial that there are limits to the created world, both human and non-human. So, for example, Long writes:

Even though we need not capitulate to the basic premise of economists that every good is intrinsically scarce and, thus, the first task of the economist is the efficient distribution of scarce goods, *we must nevertheless recognize that limits exist*. To learn to live within those limits, even while pursuing limitless goods like God's own goodness, is to become a moral subject.<sup>205</sup>

A discussion as to precisely what those limits are and how they might differ from those delineated in the concept of Robbinsian scarcity is never taken up; instead, all three authors are content to state in general terms that there are limits.

Given that each of the three challenges failed to overturn Robbinsian scarcity as an accurate description of the world, the final section of this chapter follows a different course, namely, to take the necessary conditions that give rise to scarcity, and to frame them in terminology familiar to the Christian theologian and ethicist. In addition, this section will also offer an account as to why these conditions make sense when set within a theology of the human vocation. This task is undertaken based on the conviction that although Robbinsian scarcity is not framed in theological terminology, if the necessary conditions that give rise to it are an accurate description of the world, then it should be possible to describe these conditions in terminology that the Christian theologian and ethicist can more readily grasp. In doing so, this section will go some way to removing one of the impediments to interdisciplinary dialogue.

A foundational distinction made by theologians is the distinction between the Creator and the Creator's creatures. The Creator is an infinite being, but the Creator's creation is finite and

---

<sup>205</sup> Long, Fox, and York, *Calculated Futures*, 200. Emphasis added.

subject to various limits. In particular, it is subject to the limits of space and time, whereas God is not.<sup>206</sup> Humans are corporeal beings, whose bodies take up space in the non-human world, and are required to relate to the non-human world in particular ways that place certain limits on their activities. For instance, human bodies are reliant on the non-human world for survival, from the oxygen they require to live, to the materials used to clothe and shelter them. These bodies cannot walk through brick or glass walls, although they can see through the latter, but not the former. They can float on water, but not on air; they require food and water to sustain their activity, but eventually conscious activity must cease for a period while they are asleep.

Not only are humans corporeal beings, they are also temporal beings. As such, they are subject to the limits of time. They experience time as a sequential series of experiences, events, and so on, which, remarkably, humans are able to recall through the faculty of memory; and human bodies—at least in their current configuration—only function for a limited period of time in this world; the ultimate reminder that humans are temporal beings.

Likewise, the non-human world is also subject to the limits of space and time. These limits differ depending on what part of the non-human world (animal and inanimate) one is talking about; and for this reason, humans relate to various parts of the non-human world differently. The particular properties of an apple means that it can provide physical sustenance for humans, but that once one person consumes an apple, it is not available to be consumed by another. Fire, in contrast, is not used for physical sustenance, but can be used to cook an apple.

Robbinsian scarcity as a concept encapsulates the limits of the human and non-human world *vis-à-vis* purposeful human action. Humans are taken to be purposeful in that they want to achieve a range of goals (even when that action is less conscious because habituated) and they

---

<sup>206</sup> Of course, not all Christian theologians agree on this point, for instance, process theologians and open theists.

are able to order these goals into some sort of ranking. N<sub>1</sub> (ends are various) and N<sub>4</sub> (ends have different importances) relate to the purposeful action of human beings. N<sub>2</sub>, N<sub>3</sub>, and N<sub>5</sub> speak to different aspects of limitation in the created order. N<sub>2</sub> states that time and means are limited. As temporal beings, humans have a finite amount of time available to be allocated to various activities. Likewise, the means that can be used to achieve the range of goals that humans have are also limited. N<sub>3</sub> relates to a different aspect of limitation in the created order, *viz.* substitutability. Robbins puts this positively: time and means are capable of alternative application. Time and means, however, are not perfect or complete substitutes. It is not costless to switch one's time from achieving one goal to another; and sometimes the means used to achieve one end (water in order to bathe) cannot be substituted to achieve another end (fuel to keep a fire going). Finally, N<sub>5</sub> (demand for time and means exceed their limited supply at zero resource prices) specifies the limitation that humans cannot achieve all they want. These conditions make it clear that purposeful human action is constrained by finite and imperfectly substitutable resources.

Because Robbinsian scarcity speaks to the finitude of the human and non-human world, Barrera uses the term *antecedent* or *existential scarcity* for what herein is being described as Robbinsian scarcity.<sup>207</sup> Barrera writes:

Human beings are corporeal and temporal by nature. As corporeal beings, they require the use and consumption of material inputs that come from the finite fruits of the earth. As temporal beings, they cannot be occupied simultaneously in an unlimited number of activities. Thus, human beings face a constant multifaceted need to allocate—choosing between competing activities they could undertake and between alternative goods or services they could produce, procure, or consume in pursuit of their ends. Put in another way, humans face a surfeit of goals and of alternative means to reach their chosen ends. They simply have to make choices in allocating their time and limited resources.

---

<sup>207</sup> Barrera and his book, *God and the Evil of Scarcity*, are important for the discussion of scarcity, both Robbinsian and Malthusian. There is a discussion of this work in Chapter 3.



*Understood as the need to allocate, scarcity is part of the human condition; it comes with human nature and could thus be appropriately called antecedent or existential scarcity.*<sup>208</sup>

Christians affirm that the world created and sustained by God is a good world. This affirmation includes the limits that are part of the created order. That humans have different desires for various goods, such as food, clothing, shelter, familial care and affection, the desire to educate their offspring, to make a contribution to the community, and so on, is a good thing. But so, too, is the fact that the time and means that are required to fulfill these desires are not perfect substitutes. For this reason, it is a distortion to view unfulfilled desire for human wants—unfulfilled need is a different case—as an evil. A creature by definition is subject to limitation. The particular limitations of God’s creatures in this world means that some human desires will go unmet.<sup>209</sup>

The limitations of the human and non-human world encapsulated by the concept of Robbinsian scarcity cohere with an understanding of the general human vocation in which humans are called by God to care for and cultivate the world within which they have been placed. Stackhouse writes of this vocation:

All human beings are called by God to fulfill the creation commandments... We are to worship God, seek each other’s best interests, and care for the rest of creation. There is no one who is exempt from these commandments, nor are there activities that are legitimate beyond these commandments.<sup>210</sup>

---

<sup>208</sup> Barrera, 205–6. Emphasis added. Likewise, Danner writes that scarcity and, therefore, the economic problem are “rooted in the nature and being of the human person as embodied spirit.” Peter L. Danner, “Personalism and the Problem of Scarcity,” *Forum for Social Economics* 25, no. 1 (1995): 31.

<sup>209</sup> Unmet human desire on this reading would be classed by Leibniz as metaphysical evil: evil which “consists in mere imperfection.” Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *Theodicy*, 1710, §21. For Leibniz, this class of evil is delineated by considering “there is an *original imperfection in the creature* before sin, because the creature is limited in its essence; whence ensues that it cannot know all, and that it can deceive itself and commit other errors.” Leibniz, §20. This nomenclature has the potential to lead to misunderstanding—for instance, that creaturely limitation is not, in fact, a good thing; therefore, it is not adopted throughout.

<sup>210</sup> John G. Stackhouse, *Making the Best of It: Following Christ in the Real World* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 223.

Foundational to an understanding of the human vocation is the theological claim that humans have been created in the image of God (*imago Dei*). Genesis 1:26-28 records:

Then God said, “Let us make human beings in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea, and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.”

So God created human beings  
in his own image,  
in the image of God he created them;  
male and female  
he created them.

God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground.”

There has been considerable debate as to what constitutes the image of God, the three main contenders being a substantial, relational, and functional understanding of the *imago Dei*.<sup>211</sup> However, Middleton notes that “a virtual consensus has been building among Old Testament scholars concerning the meaning of the *imago Dei* in Genesis, and this view is quite distinct from the typical proposals found among systematic theologians.”<sup>212</sup> The consensus is this: “Genesis 1 portrays God as king presiding over ‘heaven and earth,’ an ordered and harmonious realm in which each creature manifests the will of the creator and is thus declared ‘good.’ Humanity is created *like* this God, with the special role of representing or imaging God’s rule in the world.”<sup>213</sup>

Middleton writes further:

Careful exegesis of Genesis 1:26-28, in conjunction with an intertextual reading of the symbolic world of Genesis 1, suggests that the *imago Dei* refers to human rule, that is, the exercise of power on God’s behalf in creation. This may be articulated in two different,

---

<sup>211</sup> For a helpful review, see Marc Cortez, *Theological Anthropology: A Guide for the Perplexed* (New York; London: T&T Clark International, 2010).

<sup>212</sup> J. Richard Middleton, *The Liberating Image: The Imago Dei in Genesis 1* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Brazos Press, 2005), 25.

<sup>213</sup> Middleton, 26. Emphasis original.

but complementary, ways. Said one way, humans are *like* God in exercising royal power on earth. Said in another way, the divine ruler *delegated* to humans a share in his rule of the earth. Both are important ways of expressing the meaning of the *imago Dei*. The first expression—the notion of likeness to the divine ruler—suggests the image as “representational,” indicating a *similarity or analogy* between God and humans. The second expression—the delegation sharing in, God’s rule—suggests that as “representative,” designating the responsible *office and task* entrusted to humanity in administering the earthly realm on God’s behalf. But these expressions are not simply alternative; they are integrally connected. It is precisely *because* the representational aspect of the image consists in a functional similarity or analogy between God and humanity, specifically concerning the exercise of (royal) power, that the image can be articulated also as representative, referring to the human office or representing God’s rule/power in the world. A royal-functional reading of the *imago Dei* is therefore essentially confirmed.<sup>214</sup>

If one takes seriously the functional understanding of what it means to be created in the image of God, then basic to human identity and vocation is the task of caring for and cultivating the world—both its human and non-human elements—in order to make something of it.

Middleton notes, helpfully, again:

The human task of exercising communal power in the world, initially applied to agriculture and the domestication of animals, results in the transformation of the earthly environment into a complex sociocultural world. Thus Gen. 4 reports the building of the first city (4:17) and mentions the beginnings of cultural practices and inventions, such as nomadic livestock herding, musical instruments, and metal tools (4:20-22). This transformation of the world (the so-called cultural mandate) accomplished by God’s human image on the earth is a holy task, a sacred calling, in which humanity reflects the Creator’s own lordship over the cosmos.<sup>215</sup>

For this vocation to be meaningful for human beings as we know them, one would expect the following. First, humans would possess agency in the most general sense, *viz.*, the capacity to act. Second, this agency would be generally efficacious. Human action would, in general, achieve its intended result, otherwise there would be no incentive for human agents to continue to perform particular actions; at times, it might be ineffective in achieving particular ends, but it

---

<sup>214</sup> Middleton, 88. Emphasis original.

<sup>215</sup> J. Richard Middleton, “Image of God,” *Dictionary of Scripture and Ethics* (Baker Academic, November 1, 2011), 395.

must have some positive probability of succeeding. Finally, human agency would not only be generally efficacious, but also free.<sup>216</sup>

The necessary conditions for Robbinsian scarcity cohere with a world in which humans possess the agency to act, in which agency is generally efficacious, and where human agency is free. In particular, it would make sense that humans face choice between alternative ends, which arises whenever the demand for time and means exceeds their available supply (i.e., whenever  $N_5$  holds), for human decisions to be meaningful. Indeed, consider a world where this were not the case: it would not matter what particular course of action a human or human community pursued because there would always be time and means to pursue others. In what way would the human vocation be meaningful in this sort of world?

A world, then, in which there is Robbinsian scarcity coheres with an understanding of the human vocation in which humans are called by God to care for and cultivate the world—a world in which the various modes of limitation in the human and non-human world give meaning to the human vocation, both individually and corporately. Moreover, a world of this sort would be characterized by three important features or goods. First, the development of human persons and communities that comes from deliberating between alternative ends, planning to achieve the ends chosen, and then marshalling the resources and developing the virtues and skills needed to realize these ends. Second, the development of a sense of responsibility for one's own life and the lives of others. One begins to recognize that one's choices matter for one's own life and the

---

<sup>216</sup> In this, I follow Swinburne's suggestion that human agency is radical, libertarian agency (in which there are bad states within the choice set):

The pursuit of the good should result from a free choice of the agent between equally good actions, that is one resulting from the exercise of (libertarian) free will. It is a good for any agent to have such a free choice; for that makes him an ultimate source of the way things happen in the Universe... But the good of freely forwarding the good is better if the agent has a free choice between a greater and lesser good; better still if he has a free choice between the good and the bad, and even more so if the possibility of doing bad includes the possibility of doing wrong. Richard Swinburne, *Providence and the Problem of Evil* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 84.

lives of others, especially those of dependents, and therefore there should be a growing sense of responsibility for how one uses one's time and resources.<sup>217</sup> Finally, there would be a developing sense of dependence (the obverse of responsibility). This would include one's ultimate dependence on God for the gift of life and all that that entails. But also, one's dependence on the world and others, through whom God sustains one's life and makes possible the fulfillments of one's human vocation. The human vocation is realized, in other words, in relationship with others. There is interdependence between humans and between humans and the non-human world.<sup>218</sup>

At this point, there has been no recourse to human sin in order to explain a world characterized by Robbinsian scarcity. Thus, *contra* Cavanaugh, it is not necessary to deploy an account of sin in order to make sense of why humans find themselves in a world characterized by Robbinsian scarcity; a theological account of finitude and the human vocation is sufficient for the task.

That said, a theological account of finitude and the human vocation is *insufficient* to account for the degree of Robbinsian scarcity. Given that Robbinsian scarcity is a relative concept, a theological account of finitude and the human vocation is insufficient to explain why the constitution of human beings and the provisioning of the non-human world means that Malthusian scarcity threatens and sometimes becomes a reality. Why is it the case that this world

---

<sup>217</sup> For a vivid portrayal of the responsibility one has for one's choice—given the reality of scarcity—and the tragedy that sometimes result from poor choices see Vivian Walsh, *Scarcity and Evil* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1961).

<sup>218</sup> One can, of course, envisage a world in which these three goods are absent. One can conceive of creatures that do not need to deliberate, or who do not have a sense of responsibility and dependence on others (although, from a Christian standpoint, one cannot conceive of these creatures, having creaturely independence from God). But are we then talking about human beings made in the image of God, or some other kind of creature?

is at times also characterized by Malthusian scarcity (given Robbinsian scarcity)? Why did God create and why does God sustain a world where human need, at times, goes unmet?

One potential response to this situation is to augment the account of finitude and human vocation with a particular account of human sin, in which there was once a time in which humans existed in some original state where there was no Malthusian scarcity, from which they then fell. In this state, humans still acted to fulfill their desires by pursuing particular goods, using the (substitutable) resources at their disposal (i.e., they found themselves in a state characterized by Robbinsian scarcity), however, their needs were never unmet. The reason, then, why humans *now* find themselves in a situation in which human needs, at times, go unmet is because humans “fell” from this original state because of the disobedience of the first humans.

This particular account of human sinfulness is an integral element to what Hick has named an Augustinian theodicy.<sup>219</sup> Because the first humans disobeyed God, resulting in the corruption of all human beings from that time forward, Malthusian scarcity threatens and sometimes eventuates. This is because human desire is corrupt and is now misdirected, disordered, and inordinate.

There are a number of problems—theological, philosophical, and scientific—associated with deploying this *particular* account of human sinfulness to account for Malthusian scarcity.

Hick succinctly details these as follows:

We know today that the conditions that were to cause human disease and mortality and the necessity for man to undertake the perils of hunting and labours of agricultural building, were already part of the natural order prior to the emergence of man and prior therefore to any first human sin, as were also the conditions causing such further ‘evils’ as earthquake, storm, flood, drought, and pest. And, second, the policy of punishing the whole succeeding human race for the sin of the first pair is, by the best human moral standards, unjust and does not provide anything that can be recognized by these standards as a theodicy. Third, there is a basic and fatal incoherence at the heart of the mythically based

---

<sup>219</sup> J. Hick, *Evil and the God of Love* (New York: Springer, 2010).

‘solution’. The Creator is preserved from any responsibility for the existence of evil by the claim that He made men (or angels) as free and finitely perfect creatures, happy in the knowledge of Himself, and subject to no strains or temptations, but that they themselves inexplicably and inexcusably rebelled against Him. But this suggestion amounts to a sheer contradiction. It is impossible to conceive of wholly good beings in a wholly good world becoming sinful. To say that they do is to postulate the self-creation of evil *ex nihilo*!<sup>220</sup>

For these reasons, the “solution” of suggesting that there was some original state in which humans were not subject to the threat or eventuality of Malthusian scarcity, is untenable.

Nevertheless, recourse to human sinfulness is necessary to explain why humans find themselves in a world where Malthusian scarcity is a threat and sometimes a reality. This is the task that waits in Chapter 3, that is, explaining how belief in a good, omnipotent God is consistent with a world in which humans are faced with Malthusian scarcity.

### *Conclusion*

This chapter has considered three challenges to Robbinsian scarcity as an accurate description of the world: the nature-of-desire challenge; the nature-of-goods challenge; and the incommensurability challenge. Each challenge views economics’s portrayal of some aspect of the world to be flawed. So, for example, the nature-of-desire challenge holds that economics has a faulty understanding of human desire that results in it construing human action in terms of scarcity-constrained choice. After consideration, each of these challenges was seen to fail to overturn the reality of Robbinsian scarcity as an accurate description of the world.

With the notion of Robbinsian scarcity secured as an accurate description of the world against different challenges, this chapter subsequently discussed Robbinsian scarcity in terms more familiar to the Christian theologian and ethicist. This part of the chapter noted how the necessary conditions that give rise to Robbinsian scarcity detail different limitations that

---

<sup>220</sup> Hick, 249–50.

characterize the human world, the non-human world, and the interaction between these. Furthermore, this part of the chapter suggested that Robbinsian scarcity coheres with a theological understanding of the human vocation.

With the work of this chapter in hand, it is now time to turn to a discussion of Malthusian scarcity. Given that Robbinsian scarcity is a relative concept, why is the constitution of human beings and the provisioning of the non-human world such that Malthusian scarcity threatens and, at times, becomes a reality. Why, in other words, could God not have created a world in which the degree of Robbinsian scarcity was less severe and, therefore, where Malthusian scarcity was a distant threat? In taking up this question in Chapter 3, the discussion therein will further the theological account of Robbinsian scarcity in relation to the limits of creation and the human vocation.



## CHAPTER 3

### GOD, SCARCITY, AND VOCATION

#### *Introduction*

The finitude of *any* world follows from the basic Creator-creature distinction. No matter what world God created, it would be characterized by limitation. The last chapter ended by arguing that Robbinsian scarcity describes certain limits relating to humans, the non-human world, and the relationship between humans and the non-human world that characterize *this* world. In addition, it went on to contend that these particular limits cohere with an understanding of the human vocation in which humans are called by God to care for and cultivate this world, including themselves as part of it; a world—using the parlance of the economist—in which humans are called upon to make decisions about how to allocate scarce resources.

What has been offered so far, then, is a theological account as to why humans find themselves in a world characterized by Robbinsian scarcity from the standpoint of the Christian understanding of the human vocation. Given the overall goals of this dissertation, this removes a critical impediment to interdisciplinary dialogue between the Christian theologian or ethicist and the economist: there is no need for the former to dismiss the concept of Robbinsian scarcity as an accurate description of the world from a Christian standpoint. This opens up the possibility for interdisciplinary exchange for those who are convinced by the arguments of Chapter 2 in which humans are viewed within the discipline of economics as engaging in scarcity-constrained choice.

It also lays the ground work for a Christian understanding of the vocation of the economist—something that will be discussed at the end of this chapter—and, importantly, a fuller exploration for how Christian ethics might relate to economics and *vice versa* (a task undertaken in Chapter 4 and Chapter 5).

The work presented thus far, while outlining Robbinsian scarcity in terms familiar to the Christian theologian and ethicist and offering an account as to why humans find themselves in a world characterized by Robbinsian scarcity, has not accounted for why humans find themselves in a world in which the degree of Robbinsian scarcity is such that Malthusian scarcity threatens and sometimes results. Recall that Malthusian scarcity is a state in which human needs are unable or just able to be met. Why is it, then, that some individuals and communities experience starvation, inadequate shelter, and lack access to basic education and health services, while other individuals and communities have plenty of food, adequate shelter, and access to basic education and health services, with additional resources available to meet other human wants? In other words, why is a Quadrant-II world a reality for some individuals and communities?

For the economist who subscribes to the Robbinsian definition and scope of economics, this question is strictly beyond the scope of economics. Explaining why the degree of Robbinsian scarcity is such that Malthusian scarcity threatens and is a reality for some is strictly not the remit of the economist *qua* economist. It does, however, fall within the remit of the theologian. To see this, it is instructive to turn to the problem of evil.

There is a long tradition that has questioned the existence of a good and powerful God based on the existence of evil.<sup>221</sup> If one takes Malthusian scarcity as an instance of evil, then one can frame the problem of evil for the existence of a good and powerful God as follows:

---

<sup>221</sup> The classic statement of the problem in the modern period is in Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* in which Philo restates Epicurus's questions: "Is he [God] willing to prevent evil, but not able? then he is

P<sub>1</sub>: If God exists, God is perfectly good and powerful.  
 P<sub>2</sub>: A perfectly good God will never allow evil.  
 P<sub>3</sub>: Unmet human need (Malthusian scarcity) is an evil.  
 P<sub>4</sub>: Unmet human need exists.  
 Conclusion: Therefore, there is no God.<sup>222</sup>

This is a valid deductive argument; however, its soundness is dependent on the truth of each of the four premises (P<sub>1</sub>- P<sub>4</sub>). Although it is legitimate to question the truth of P<sub>1</sub> by, for example, suggesting that God is some mixture of good and evil or that God is not omnipotent, this would no longer be the God of Christian theism, hence, this premise is taken as given.<sup>223</sup> P<sub>3</sub> and P<sub>4</sub> are also taken to be true; there is no reason to question that unmet human need is an evil or that unmet human need exists—that some humans starve and die is evidence enough for these.<sup>224</sup>

The one remaining possibility for challenging the soundness of this deductive argument is P<sub>2</sub>: A perfectly good God will never allow evil. An investigation of the sound of this premise falls within the scope of theology, *viz.*, to offer an account as to why a perfectly good and

---

impotent. Is he able, but not willing? then is he malevolent. Is he both able and willing? Whence then is evil?" David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion and Other Writings*, ed. Dorothy Coleman, Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy (Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p.74.

<sup>222</sup> The type of evil defined in this deductive argument, then, is narrower than that outlined in the standard argument against the existence of God from the existence of evil. Hence the discussion that follows will have a narrower compass than a discussion that needs to consider a wider range of evils.

<sup>223</sup> On the latter point, process theologians depart. Thus as McGrath writes: Process theology locates the origins of suffering and evil within the world in a radical limitation upon the power of God. God has set aside the ability to coerce, retaining only the ability to persuade. Persuasion is seen as a means of exercising power in such a manner that rights and freedoms of others are respected. God is obliged to persuade every aspect of the process to act in the best possible manner. *There is, however, no guarantee that God's benevolent persuasion will lead to a favourable outcome. The process is under no obligation to obey God.* Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, 5th Edition (Chichester, West Sussex, U.K.; Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 227. Emphasis added.

<sup>224</sup> Sometimes a fifth premise is added, namely, "A perfectly powerful God can prevent evil." This premise is added on the basis that it is not logically possible for God to create a world in which there are no evils. As Swinburne notes, however, "This challenge does look very plausible; it does look as if it is logically possible to make a beautiful world in which the only conscious beings are predetermined to live lives of unalloyed pleasure; and then surely there would be no bad states." Swinburne, *Providence and the Problem of Evil*, 8.

powerful God creates and sustains a world that allows for the possibility and actuality of Malthusian scarcity. This task stands at the centre of this chapter. In other words, this chapter will offer a theodicy for why God created and sustains a world that allows for the possibility and actuality of Malthusian scarcity. This chapter, then, can be viewed as offering a theodicy as to why humans find themselves in a world in which the degree of Robbinsian scarcity is such that Malthusian scarcity is a possibility and sometimes an actuality. This will help to facilitate interdisciplinary dialogue in so far as it removes any impediment for the economist who finds it difficult to engage with a theologian who believes in a perfectly good and powerful God.<sup>225</sup>

To undertake this task, it will be helpful to define some terms from the outset. By “God” this chapter (and the dissertation more generally) means the God of Christian theism. This God is taken to be a perfect being—perfect in power, knowledge, goodness, justice, and so on; the greatest possible being that can be thought of.<sup>226</sup> What makes this God distinctly “Christian” is that this God has been revealed in the incarnate Jesus Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit, as the *triune* God who is the creator, sustainer, and redeemer of all things.<sup>227</sup> Given the concerns of this dissertation, and this understanding of God, there would be no need to question the existence

---

<sup>225</sup> This dissertation is, therefore, not simply paving the way for interdisciplinary dialogue, but is also engaging substantially in that task: Chapter 2 offers an account of Robbinsian scarcity in terms more familiar to the Christian theologian and ethicist; Chapter 3 can be viewed as offering an account to the economist as to why the degree of Robbinsian scarcity is such that Malthusian scarcity is a possibility and an sometimes an actuality.

<sup>226</sup> On this point, there is agreement with Morris:

Perfect being theology, capturing as it does the most majestic conception of God imaginable, rightly provides a leading method for our thinking and a touchstone for our employment and integration of the procedures of all the other plausible methods for thinking about the nature of God. In its intuitive and integrative force, I think, it is without parallel and thus properly establishes for us priorities in conceiving of God. God is to be thought of as a being without any limitations that imply imperfection or inferiority. God is to be thought of as the greatest possible being. And he is to be conceived as the greatest possible creative source of being. Thomas V. Morris, *Our Idea of God: An Introduction to Philosophical Theology* (Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 2002), 43–44.

<sup>227</sup> There is no intention here to defend or justify the existence of this “God” more generally; rather the existence of this God is taken as given for the development of the argument presented in this chapter.

of God if human need was *always* more than met. Although there would be opportunity costs associated with human choice, with some human wants going unmet, there would never be an instance of unmet human need and, therefore, no reason to question whether God is perfectly powerful and good on this basis.

In what follows the word evil follows Swinburne in referring to “bad states of affairs,” and not just very bad states of affairs (as is often the case in common speech) *vis-à-vis* scarcity.<sup>228</sup> Moreover, the discussion makes the common distinction between moral and natural evil. Moral evils are those states of affairs that “result from the intentions or negligence of moral agents.”<sup>229</sup> In contrast, natural evils are “bad states of affairs which do not result from the intentions or negligence of moral agents.”<sup>230</sup> Although the analytic distinction between moral evil and natural evil will be used throughout, it is oftentimes difficult to say whether some bad states of affairs are due to moral evil or natural evil, hence, the question asked by Waterman, “If famine in Ethiopia is partly caused by the wickedness and folly of government in face of harvest failure, is that ‘natural’ or ‘moral’ evil?”<sup>231</sup> In addition, some of the thinkers examined in the next section

---

<sup>228</sup> Swinburne, *Providence and the Problem of Evil*, 4. Thus, evil is not limited to those things which are “profoundly immoral and wicked.” (OED). Swinburne hence writes, “Although the problem with which we are concerned is called ‘the problem of evil’... it is really the problem of the existence of bad states of affairs, such that (it is claimed) it would be bad for an agent who could prevent them to allow them to occur.” Swinburne, 4.

<sup>229</sup> Todd Calder, “The Concept of Evil,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, Winter 2016 (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2016), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/concept-evil/>.

<sup>230</sup> Calder.

<sup>231</sup> Waterman, “Review of God and the Evil of Scarcity: Moral Foundations of Economic Agency by Albino Barrera,” 61. The word “moral”, within discussions about the problem of evil, can also mean the overall goodness (or not) of a particular state of affairs. Swinburne writes:

While the adjective ‘moral’ in front of the word ‘evil’ thus distinguishes a certain kind of bad state from others, there is a wider sense in which all the ‘good’ and ‘bad’ states with which we are concerned... are morally good or bad. In this wider sense... the ‘moral’ is the ‘overall’ or ‘overriding’. A morally good act is one which is overall a good act... The morally best act for me to do is the one which is overall the best act, the one whose goodness overrides that of the goodness of other acts... A morally bad act is one which is overall bad; and among such acts are ones which are wrong, i.e. obligatory not to do... I shall mean by saying of some state of affairs that it is morally good, that it is good (on balance overall) that it occur; and by

also discuss evil under the head of civil evil. Evils that fall under the head of civil evils are those that result because humans have formed themselves into societies. Sumner gives the example of servitude as an instance of civil evil.<sup>232</sup>

With these definitions in hand, this chapter proceeds as follows. The next section considers three eighteenth- and nineteenth-century theodicies that attempted to grapple with the reality of Malthusian scarcity, starting with Thomas Malthus himself and then moving to William Paley and John Bird Sumner. The following section then looks at a contemporary theodicy worked out in relation to Malthusian scarcity—that presented by Albino Barrera in his book *God and the Evil of Scarcity* (hereafter, *GES*). The presentation and evaluation of these four theodicies provide important context for the presentation of a theodicy of Malthusian scarcity. This section grapples with the question, from the standpoint of Christian theism, why has God created and why does God sustain a world that allows for the possibility of Malthusian scarcity? Or, why does God allow human need to go unmet? The theodicy offered in response to this question builds on the discussion of finitude and human vocation outlined in Chapter 2. The final section of this chapter offers concluding thoughts that anticipate the discussion within Chapter 4 and Chapter 5.

### *Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Theodicies*

The three theodicies presented in this section—those of Malthus, Paley, and Sumner—are developed within the parameters of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century natural theology, where, as

---

saying that it is morally bad, that it is bad overall that it occur. Natural evils are thus morally bad states. Swinburne, *Providence and the Problem of Evil*, 5.

<sup>232</sup> John Bird Sumner, *A Treatise on the Records of the Creation, and on the Moral Attributes of the Creator: With Particular Reference to the Jewish History, and to the Consistency of the Principle of Population with the Wisdom and Goodness of the Deity* (London : J. Hatchard, 1833), 299.

Malthus puts it, one attempts to “reason from nature up to nature’s God.”<sup>233</sup> At the center of these endeavours to reach conclusions about God and God’s providential workings in the world by observation and reflection upon the natural world, is the argument from design (*a posteriori* argument), in which final causation was taken to be evident from the created order. Thus, as LeMahieu writes of Malthus, “When Malthus pondered the final cause of his law of population, he was engaged in a procedure familiar to intellectuals of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries... [in which] the argument from design provided a legitimacy for their work which they exploited without reluctance or apology.”<sup>234</sup> Indeed, as will be seen in what follows, what Malthus, Paley, and Sumner each take to be the final cause evident from the created order critically frames their respective discussions concerning the existence of Malthusian scarcity.

### **Thomas Malthus**

As noted in Chapter 1, Chapters XVIII and XIX of Malthus’s *FE* attempt to offer an account of how the dynamics of population and food production cohere with “our ideas of the power, goodness, and foreknowledge of the Deity.”<sup>235</sup> Malthus sets this discussion within a frame in which he contends “God is constantly occupied in forming mind out of matter.”<sup>236</sup> The final cause, then, that Malthus takes to be evident from the created order is the formation of mind (not, as he makes explicit, the formation of human beings for a future world *via* a state of trial in this world). Malthus writes:

---

<sup>233</sup> Malthus, *First Essay on Population*, 1798, 350. Although, as we shall see, Sumner was also comfortable to draw on the arguments of “revealed religion” to support his conclusions.

<sup>234</sup> LeMahieu, “Malthus and the Theology of Scarcity,” 467.

<sup>235</sup> Malthus, *First Essay on Population*, 1798, 349.

<sup>236</sup> Malthus, 355.

I should be inclined... to consider the world and life as the mighty process of God, *not for trial, but for the creation and formation of mind*, a process necessary to awaken inert, chaotic matter into spirit, to sublimate the dust of the earth into soul, to elicit an ethereal spark from the clod of clay. And in the view of the subject, the various impressions and excitements which man receives through life may be considered as the forming hand of his Creator, acting by general laws, and awakening his sluggish existence, by the animating touches of the Divinity, into a superior enjoyment. The original sin of man is the torpor and corruption of the chaotic matter in which he may be said to be born.<sup>237</sup>

In Chapter XVIII, Malthus discusses how the dynamics of population and food production—dynamics which leave at least some of the population experiencing Malthusian scarcity—are a catalyst for the formation of mind. For example, Malthus writes:

The Supreme Creator might, undoubtedly, raise up plants of all kinds, for the use of his creatures, without the assistance of those little bits of matter, which we call seed, or even without the assisting labour and attention of man. The processes of ploughing and clearing the ground, of collecting and sowing seeds, are not surely for the assistance of God in his creation, but are made previously necessary to the enjoyment of the blessings of life, *in order to rouse man into action, and form his mind to reason.*<sup>238</sup>

Such a world will be occasioned by evils such as malnutrition and starvation, however, they are necessary evils in the formation of mind, because even for God “a certain process may be necessary, a certain time (or at least what appears to us as time) may be requisite, in order to form beings with those exalted qualities of mind which fit them for his high purposes.”<sup>239</sup> The

---

<sup>237</sup> Malthus, 353–54. Emphasis added. Waterman argues that Malthus’s formation-of-mind argument emerges from his reading of Abraham Tucker and is deployed to rebut Godwin’s arguments: “It was, I believe, Godwin’s conception of the development of mind which determined his choice of a particular Tuckerian form of theodicy. It was essential to show that inequality is a perennial requirement of human intellectual and spiritual development.” Waterman, *Revolution, Economics and Religion*, 100–101. Santurri notes that a key aspect of Malthus’s formation-of-mind theory is the mind’s capacity to be able to reason from cause to effect. Santurri writes:

For Malthus there is an intrinsic relationship between developed mind and the ability to reason from cause to effect. In the realm of human agency this ability manifests itself as a capacity for acting on the basis of a determination of consequences. Inasmuch as God’s purposes involves mind’s creation, then, it also involves the generation of prudential habits among men. As society encourages its inhabitants to exercise moral restraint in its attempt to restrict population growth, it thereby plays a decisive role in the fulfillment of the divine telos. Santurri, “Theodicy and Social Policy in Malthus’ Thought,” 327.

<sup>238</sup> Malthus, *First Essay on Population*, 1798, 360–61. Emphasis added.

<sup>239</sup> Malthus, 352. This is from the passage where Malthus appears to question the omnipotence of God: And, unless we want to exalt the power of God at the expense of his goodness, ought we not to conclude that even to the great Creator, almighty as he is, a certain process may be necessary, a



“exertions” that attend the provision of food, clothing, and shelter, then, are a spur to the formation of mind, as humans learn the general laws at work in nature, as they cultivate the earth and thereby develop the faculty of reason.<sup>240</sup>

In Chapter XIX Malthus turns to moral evil. At the beginning of Chapter XIX he writes:

The sorrows and distresses of life form another class of excitements, which seem to be necessary, by a peculiar train of impressions, to soften and humanize the heart, to awaken social sympathy, to generate all the Christian virtues, and to afford scope for the ample exertion of benevolence. The general tendency of an uniform course of prosperity is rather to degrade than exalt the character. The heart that has never known sorrow itself will seldom be feeling alive to the pains and pleasures, the wants and wishes, of its fellow beings. It will seldom be overflowing with that warmth of brotherly love, those kind and amiable affections, which dignify the human character even more than the possession of the highest talents.<sup>241</sup>

The cultivation of virtue, then, is also another key aspect of the formation of mind for Malthus. Indeed, Malthus seems to prize this more than the development of human talent.

The dynamics of population and food production, which give rise to Malthusian scarcity, provide a context for the formation of human virtue in two ways. First, as evident from the quote above, the “distresses of life” associated with Malthusian scarcity directly cultivate virtue by softening the human heart, awakening sympathy towards one’s fellow humans, and so on. This is a version of the “higher-order-goods defense” against the problem of evil, the idea that particular goods can only be realized when certain evils exist.<sup>242</sup> And, second, the state of

---

certain time (or at least what appears to us as time) may be requisite, in order to form beings with those exalted qualities of mind which will fit them for his high purposes? Malthus, 352.

<sup>240</sup> Malthus, *First Essay on Population*, 1798, 357–58.

<sup>241</sup> Malthus, 372–73.

<sup>242</sup> Swinburne writes that the higher-order-goods defense “draws to our attention the good of performing certain sorts of good action, namely those done in the face of bad states, and of having the opportunity freely to choose to do such actions. The structure of this ‘higher-order-goods’ defence is as follows. A particular natural evil, such as physical pain, gives to the sufferer a choice: whether to endure it with patience, or whether to bemoan his lot. His friend can choose whether to show sympathy towards the sufferer, or whether to be callous. The pain makes possible these choices, which would otherwise not exist. There is no guarantee that the actions directed towards the

Malthusian scarcity also indirectly provides a context for virtue formation by providing vicious counter-examples of persons whose response to Malthusian scarcity has been one of vice. Such counter-examples Malthus views as necessary, thus he writes:

Both reason and revelation seem to assure us that such minds [i.e., vicious minds] will be condemned to eternal death, but while on earth, these vicious instruments performed their part in the great mass of impressions, by the disgust and abhorrence which they excited. It seems highly probable that moral evil is absolutely necessary to the production of moral excellence. A being with only good placed in view may be justly said to be impelled by a blind necessity... Upon this idea, the being that has seen moral evil and has felt disapprobation and disgust at it is essentially different from the being that has seen only good.<sup>243</sup>

Both natural and moral evils, then, are *necessary* for Malthus for they are *required* to form the human mind. Malthusian scarcity gives rise to natural evils (like malnutrition and starvation)—or at least the threat of these—which provokes humans out of their natural laziness, thereby facilitating the formation and development of mind; moreover, the distress and suffering that are part of Malthusian scarcity foster particular virtues, such as courage (when one is personally experiencing Malthusian scarcity) and sympathy and benevolence (towards others who are experiencing Malthusian scarcity). In addition, those who act viciously in a world of Malthusian scarcity, for instance by being sexually promiscuous, become vicious counter-examples, who, through disapprobation, spur others on to virtue. Thus, as Waterman succinctly

---

pain will be good ones, but the pain gives agents the opportunity to perform good actions.” Swinburne, *Providence and the Problem of Evil*, 162.

<sup>243</sup> Malthus, *First Essay on Population*, 1798, 374–76. Within Chapter XIX Malthus also briefly discusses other factors that contribute to the formation and development of mind, which are not directly linked to the dynamics of population and food production, including the great diversity of nature (a large area for intellectual inquiry), the obscurity associated with many of the subjects that pique human interest (“the darkness that surround these interesting topics of human curiosity may be intended to furnish endless motives to intellectual activity and exertion.” Malthus, 380), and the difficulties with Scripture. Malthus, 378–87.

puts it: “Scarcity is the cause of moral as well as natural evil; natural evil is a necessary stimulus to intellectual development; moral evil is a necessary stimulus to moral development.”<sup>244</sup>

There are two further points that are integral to Malthus’s theodicy. First, “the partial pain... that is inflicted by the supreme Creator, while he is forming numberless beings to a capacity for the highest enjoyments, is but as the dust of the balance in comparison of the happiness that is communicated.”<sup>245</sup> In other words, the good produced in the process of the formation of mind, far outweighs the evil that is necessary for it. Second, “we have every reason to think that there is no more evil in the world than what is absolutely necessary as one of the ingredients in the mighty process [of the formation of mind].”<sup>246</sup> In other words, the evil necessary to the formation of mind is kept to a minimum.

Recalling the argument against the existence of God from the existence of evil from the introduction to this chapter, Malthus’s  $P_2$  ( $P_2^M$ ) based on the forgoing discussion can be specified as follows:

$P_2^M$ : A perfectly good and powerful God, whose goal is the formation of mind, must: i) allow the natural evil associated with scarcity as it is necessary for the formation of mind; ii) allow the moral evil associated with scarcity as it is necessary for the formation of mind by a) allowing for the formation of some virtues and b) providing a vicious counter-example; iii) ensure that the good associated with the formation of mind far outweighs evil; and iv) ensure that evil is limited to the minimum necessary for the formation of mind.

When  $P_2^M$  is substituted for  $P_2$  it is apparent that it contradicts  $P_1$ . If God is perfectly powerful, there is no logical reason why natural and moral evil are necessary for the formation of mind, even if those evils are far outweighed by much good and are kept to a necessary minimum for the formation of mind. This is the chief defect of Malthus’s theodicy. It is not possible for

---

<sup>244</sup> Waterman, *Revolution, Economics and Religion*, 105.

<sup>245</sup> Malthus, *First Essay on Population*, 1798, 391.

<sup>246</sup> Malthus, 391.

God to create and sustain a world, where the formation of mind is the goal, without natural and moral evil being necessary instruments. This restricts God's freedom and power.<sup>247</sup> For this reason, Barrera comments:

Malthus binds God to such a necessary process in preparation for his thesis on the role of the principle of population in the formation of the human mind... [But] God cannot be bound to any one process since it is God who creates and sets these in place to begin with. Moreover, God cannot be restricted by any binding, immutable process because God only enjoys absolute existence and freedom. If God were obligated to conform to a particular operation, then such a process must have an existence independent of and, perhaps, even prior to God.<sup>248</sup>

The other perceived inadequacies of Malthus's theodicy are well rehearsed in the secondary literature. For example, LeMahieu notes the ambiguity and oddity of Malthus's notion of original sin as the "torpor and corruption of the chaotic matter", his neglect of Jesus Christ, and his denial of hell.<sup>249</sup> Similarly, Waterman notes Malthus's denial of the resurrection of the body and

---

<sup>247</sup> As already noted elsewhere, Malthus appears to question the God's omnipotence (thereby calling into question the soundness of P<sub>1</sub>):

And, unless we want to exalt the power of God at the expense of his goodness, ought we not to conclude that even to the great Creator, almighty as he is, a certain process may be necessary, a certain time (or at least what appears to us as time) may be requisite, in order to form beings with those exalted qualities of mind which will fit them for his high purposes? Malthus, 352.

This illustrates what Waterman has described as the "self-contradiction and confusion" of Malthus's theodicy in the *FE*. Waterman, *Revolution, Economics and Religion*, 107.

<sup>248</sup> Barrera, *God and the Evil of Scarcity*, 9. A potential counter-argument to what is being described, here, as the chief defect of Malthus's theodicy—*viz.*, the limiting of God's perfect freedom and power, thereby contradicting P<sub>1</sub>—is to consider whether, in fact, Malthus's argument is actually a restriction of God's freedom and power, or rather a logical restriction that follows from God's decision to create humans in a state of torpor and, from that state, to bring about the formation and development of their minds. This argument would be based on the sound premise that God cannot do the logically impossible (e.g., God cannot create a square circle) and that this should not be viewed as a limitation of God's freedom and power. For this argument to succeed one would need to demonstrate that the formation of mind from a state of torpor logically requires the natural and moral evils that accompany scarcity, in the same way that the formation of a quadrilateral requires four sides. That God could have created a world in which humans moved from a state of torpor to fully developed mind, without Malthusian scarcity and the natural and moral evils that attend it, is possible. For example, God might have created a world in which humans awake from their torpor, motivated simply from the delight of cultivating the natural world and moral virtue, without the natural and moral evils that accompany Malthusian scarcity. Thus, even given Malthus's protology and teleology, it is not a logical necessity for there to be Malthusian scarcity and the evils that accompany it.

<sup>249</sup> LeMahieu, "Malthus and the Theology of Scarcity," 470.

Malthus's Pelagian tendencies.<sup>250</sup> Santurri discusses Malthus's "heterodox abandonment of the idea of eternal punishment."<sup>251</sup> Finally, Barrera discusses the problems with Malthus's view of original sin and the incompleteness of humans at creation, his abandonment of a "fall", the neglect of Jesus Christ, and his departure from traditional understandings of divine judgment and punishment.<sup>252</sup> Although, from the standpoint of this dissertation, some of these defects are non-trivial, it is the restrictions that Malthus places on God's freedom and power that are most problematic.<sup>253</sup>

### **William Paley**

It initially fell to William Paley to rectify Malthus's theodicy, by placing Malthus's principle of population within a state-of-trial or state-of-probation theodicy, and by skirting some of the odd and unorthodox elements that had characterized Chapters XVIII and XIX of the *FE*.

LeMahieu writes, "It can be said without exaggeration that Paley's *Natural Theology* provides the most consistent and searching statement of the teleological argument in the English language."<sup>254</sup> Published in 1802, around four years after Malthus's *FE*, Paley, as arguably the greatest natural theologian of his generation, discusses Malthus's principle of population in Chapter XXVI of this book in a chapter entitled THE GOODNESS OF THE DEITY.

---

<sup>250</sup> Waterman, *Revolution, Economics and Religion*, 110–12.

<sup>251</sup> Santurri, "Theodicy and Social Policy in Malthus' Thought," 321.

<sup>252</sup> Barrera, *God and the Evil of Scarcity*, 3–5, 7–8.

<sup>253</sup> Waterman notes that by the time Malthus published the second *Essay on Population*, Malthus himself had already started to address some of the deficiencies of the *FE*. Waterman notes that "the method of vindicating the 'goodness of the Deity' [was] brought more into line with the requirements of contemporary orthodoxy." Waterman, *Revolution, Economics and Religion*, 146.

<sup>254</sup> D. L. LeMahieu, *The Mind of William Paley: A Philosopher and His Age* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1976), 58.

The immediate context for Paley’s mention of Malthus’s principle of population is in a discussion about evil. After discussing the “refractoriness” of the world—“a world, furnished with advantages on one side, and beset with difficulties, wants, and inconveniences, on the other, [which] is the proper abode of free, rational, and active natures, being the fittest to stimulate and exercise their faculties”—Paley comes to a discussion of Malthus’s principle of population under the heading “Civil evils.”<sup>255</sup> Paley notes that “mankind in every country *breed up* to a certain point of distress” and that “the order of generation proceeds by something like a geometrical progress... [whereas] the increase of provision, under circumstances even the most advantageous, can only assume the form of an arithmetic series.”<sup>256</sup> The outcome, Paley points out, is “what we call poverty, which necessarily imposes labour, servitude, restraint.”<sup>257</sup>

This is simply a recapitulation of Malthus’s principle of population and its effects. Where Paley goes with this, however, is first to discuss how this contributes to the “perpetuity and multiplication of the species,” which, consistent with his utilitarianism, is no bad thing.<sup>258</sup> Paley writes:

It need not however dishearten any endeavours for the public service, to know that population naturally treads upon the heels of improvement. If the condition of a people be meliorated, the consequence will be, either that the *mean* happiness will be increased, or a greater number partake of it; or which is more likely to happen, that both effects will take place together. There may be limits fixed by nature to both, but they are limits not yet attained, nor even approached, in any country of the world.<sup>259</sup>

---

<sup>255</sup> William Paley, *The Works of William Paley, D.D.: Natural Theology* (Joshua Belcher, 1810), 342.

<sup>256</sup> Paley, 342–43. Emphasis original.

<sup>257</sup> Paley, 343.

<sup>258</sup> Paley, 343.

<sup>259</sup> Paley, 343–44. Emphasis original.

Already, this is a positive appropriation of Malthus's principle of population: it considers a growing population to add to overall happiness; and it holds out the possibility of an increase in mean happiness (an increase per capita provision), albeit that Malthusian scarcity still exists. Moreover, Paley is quick to add there are things that add to human happiness, which are not subject to the same limits as the "provisions for animal wants," like "those which flow from a mild, contrasted with a tyrannical government, whether civil or domestic; those which spring from religion; those which grow out of a sense of security; those which depend upon habits of virtue, sobriety, moderation, order; those, lastly, which are found in the possession of well-directed tastes and desires, compared with the dominion of tormenting, pernicious, contradictory, unsatisfied, and unsatisfiable passions."<sup>260</sup>

Paley then takes the evil of Malthusian scarcity, as well as the other evils that he discusses in Chapter XXVI of his *Natural Theology*, and sets them within a state-of-probation theodicy. Whereas Malthus had argued in the *FE* that the world should not be viewed as a trial—but rather as a stage for formation of mind—Paley contends, "Of all the views under which human life has ever been considered, the most reasonable, in my judgment, is that which regards it as a *state of probation*."<sup>261</sup> Paley argues:

The mind... which contemplates the works of nature, and in those works, sees much of means directed to ends... a mind... drawn into the habit of thought which these observations excite, can hardly turn its view to the condition of our own species, without endeavoring to suggest to itself some purpose, some design, for which the state in which we are placed is fitted, and which it is made to serve. Now we assert that the most probable supposition to be, that it is a state of moral probation; and that many things in it suit with this hypothesis, which suit no other... It accords much better with the idea of its being a condition calculated for the production, exercise, and improvement of moral qualities, with a view to a future state in which these qualities, after being so produced,

---

<sup>260</sup> Paley, 344.

<sup>261</sup> Malthus, *First Essay on Population*, 1798, 353; Paley, *The Works of William Paley, D.D.*, 356. Emphasis added.

exercised, and improved, may, by a new and more favouring constitution of things, receive their reward, or become their own.<sup>262</sup>

That the world is geared towards human moral development is consistent with Paley's view that humans are created as "free agents" and that this free agency gives rise to the possibility of moral evil, for "free agency, in its very essence, contains a liability to abuse."<sup>263</sup> This argument is a form of the free-will defense, the idea "that the bad state caused (or negligently allowed to occur) by human beings results from their own free choice; and that it is such a good thing that humans should have free will that it is worth the risk that they will abuse it in various ways."<sup>264</sup> Paley contends that if one were to "deprive man of his free agency, you subvert his nature... You put an end to his moral character, to virtue, to merit, to accountableness, to the use indeed of reason."<sup>265</sup> Therefore, Paley concludes "even the bad qualities of mankind have an origin in their good ones."<sup>266</sup> Moral evil arises from human freedom; the possibility of evil—in this case moral evil—from a good (free human agency).

Paley also notes that the existence of particular virtues (for instance, patience and courage) depend on the existence of particular evils—the example of which he gives, *viz.*, a sick parent, would be classified as a natural evil; again, a version of the higher-order-goods defense. For this reason, Paley writes:

In human beings, relative virtues form a large part of the whole. Now relative virtue presupposes, not only the existence of evil, without which it could be no object, no material to work upon, but that evils be, apparently at least *misfortunes*; that is, the effects

---

<sup>262</sup> Paley, *The Works of William Paley, D.D.*, 356–57.

<sup>263</sup> Paley, 347.

<sup>264</sup> Swinburne, *Providence and the Problem of Evil*, 33.

<sup>265</sup> Paley, *The Works of William Paley, D.D.*, 347.

<sup>266</sup> Paley, 347.



of apparent chance. It may be in pursuance, therefore, and in the furtherance of the same scheme of probation, that the evils of life are made so to present themselves.<sup>267</sup>

At this point, one can specify Paley's  $P_2$  ( $P_2^P$ ) as follows:

$P_2^P$ : A perfectly good and powerful God, whose goal is moral formation of persons in the present state for a future state: i) allows natural evil because it contributes to moral formation in the present state; ii) a) must allow the possibility of moral evil because God has given humans free agency and b) allows it because it contributes to moral formation in the present state; iii) ensures that the good associated with the moral formation in the present state far outweighs evil; and iv) ensures that evil is limited to the minimum necessary for the moral formation of persons in the present state for the future state.

Not only does  $P_2^P$  encapsulate the state-of-probation theodicy, it also highlights some other differences with Malthus's theodicy as presented in the *FE*. First, while Paley grants that God *allows* natural evil because it *contributes* to moral formation, he does not insist, like Malthus, that it is *necessary* for moral formation. In this specification, then, the freedom and omnipotence of God are preserved, because natural evil is not necessarily required for moral formation, thereby overcoming the chief defect of Malthus's theodicy. Second, although God must allow the possibility of moral evil (and would have foreseen that it would eventuate), this is the logical outcome of God creating and sustaining humans with free agency. If a necessary condition for human moral agency is that for agency to be truly free a bad state of affairs must be within the choice set, then it follows that God must allow the possibility of moral evil. If one grants that this is a necessary condition for free moral agency, then God must allow the possibility of moral evil, and this should not be viewed as restricting the freedom or omnipotence of God, once God has made the decision to grant humans free moral agency. Third, Paley offers a further reason why God allows moral evil *viz.*, that it gives rise to other virtues. Thus, in addition to a free-will defense, Paley offers a higher-order goods defense for the existence of both natural and moral

---

<sup>267</sup> Paley, 361–62. Emphasis original.

evil.<sup>268</sup> Finally, although Paley does not explicitly mention conditions iii) and iv), as does Malthus, they are in accord with the Christian utilitarianism that underpins the rest of *Natural Theology* and also his other work (e.g., *The Principles of Moral and Political Philosophy*).

Paley's theodicy, then, has advantages over the theodicy presented by Malthus in the *FE*. By situating the discussion of evil within a state-of-probation framework, he is able to offer an account for the existence of natural and moral evils, drawing on versions of the free-will defense and the higher-order goods defense. Furthermore, unlike Malthus, Paley avoids circumscribing God's freedom and power. Thus when  $P_2^P$  is substituted for  $P_2$ ,  $P_2^P$  does not contradict  $P_1$ . In addition, Paley avoids the oddity and ambiguity of Malthus's understanding of original sin and final judgment by skirting these topics altogether.<sup>269</sup>

Despite the advantages of Paley's account over Malthus's, there are lacunae and underdeveloped elements that make it vulnerable at several points. First, Paley leaves himself open to the charge of Pelagianism by emphasizing the role of human agency in preparing for the final state, in the absence of any discussion about the agency of God and the need for divine grace.<sup>270</sup> Second, while the state-of-probation theodicy offers an account for the existence of natural and moral evils, Paley fails to offer a rationale for this state of affairs over another. Why, for example, did God choose this arrangement over an arrangement in which humans find

---

<sup>268</sup> Note also that Paley, in contrast to Malthus, does not suggest humans need a vicious counter-example for the development of virtuous character.

<sup>269</sup> By the time Malthus publishes his second essay *On Population* in 1803, Malthus himself moves to Paley's position. Waterman writes:

In a fundamental sense the Essay of 1803 is no more and no less 'optimistic' than that of 1798. Only the method of vindicating the 'goodness of the Deity' has been brought more into line with the requirement of contemporary orthodoxy. We [can see this]... by attending to six theological features of the Second Essay: the treatment of 'mind', moral restraint, the divine injunction to 'replenish the earth', the state of probation, celibacy and religious education. Waterman, *Revolution, Economics and Religion*, 146.

<sup>270</sup> Although, it might be argued that this is an unfair objection for someone who is operating within the parameters of natural theology.

themselves in the equivalent of the final state from the outset? Finally, while Paley establishes the soundness of P<sub>2</sub><sup>P</sup> i), ii) and iii), like Malthus, he fails to establish that evil is limited to that necessary for moral formation in the present state for a future state. Could not God have constituted the world so that Malthusian scarcity was a non-existent threat?

### **John Bird Sumner**

In the writing of the evangelical John Bird Sumner—eventually the Archbishop of Canterbury—we reach the apotheosis of a theodicy that incorporates Malthus’s principle of population within the tradition of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century natural theology. In Sumner’s work *A Treatise on the Records of Creation, and on the Moral Attributes of the Creator* (hereafter, *TRC*), the state-of-probation theodicy is developed in detail against the backdrop of Malthus’s principle of population. In crafting his state-of-probation theodicy, Sumner is attentive to the preservation of divine freedom, the limitation of the free-will defense, and the need to head off the potential charge of Pelagianism. Moreover, in outlining the merits of the higher-order goods defense he develops the idea of the goods associated with the development of the human person and, therefore, begins to offer a rationale for why God has placed humans in the present state (which is a state of trial).

Within *TRC* Sumner notes the tendency of the population to press up against the food supply and how this provides a spur to improvement, aided by the division of property and rank.<sup>271</sup> In this, Sumner sees the hand of providence. He writes:

---

<sup>271</sup> Sumner summarizes:

From a brief statement of the laws which regulate population, that the instinctive principle which attaches the sexes to one another, and rears a family, keeps the inhabited districts of the world so continually full, as to call into action all their resources, and oblige them to economize the means of subsistence, by making them the reward of individual exertion. I have also traced the progress by which this principle necessarily leads to an inequality of ranks and fortunes, which effect, indeed, it has constantly and universally produced in a greater or less degree from the earliest date of history. For the primary agent is all along to be found in that

The Deity has provided, that by the operation of an instinctive principle in our nature, the human race should be uniformly brought into a state in which they are forced to exert and improve their powers... If, indeed, it were possible that the stimulus arising from this principle should be suddenly removed, it is not easy to determine what life would be except a dreary blank, of the world except an uncultivated waste. Every exertion to which civilization can be traced, proceeds directly or indirectly from its effects; either from the actual desire of having a family, or the pressing obligation of providing for one, or from the necessity of rivaling the efforts produced by the operation of these motives in others.<sup>272</sup>

Albeit that the principle of population requires human exertion, thereby developing the bodily and intellectual faculties, Sumner is quick to note that these are “accompanied with gratification.”<sup>273</sup> Indeed, this is evidence, for Sumner, that a good God creates and sustains a world “for the happiness of mankind” and that “the design of God, in creating man, is carried into execution generally by the medium of pleasure instead of the operation of pain; and that he has superadded gratifications to the exertion of all our faculties, without which his counsels might be fulfilled as completely, but less happily for mankind.”<sup>274</sup> On this, Sumner simply follows the “sanguine and cheerful mind” of Paley and his Christian utilitarianism.<sup>275</sup>

And yet Sumner is more sensitive to the misery and suffering that accompany the principle of population and, therefore, that “an opponent [of Paley] may fairly allege the irreconcilableness of such a wish [i.e., God created the world with human happiness in mind] with existing

---

original law, which multiplies the consumer of the fruits faster than the fruits themselves. The difference of men’s habits and powers would signify nothing, if food were so plentiful that it could be procured without a return of labour. Were it the law of the universe, no matter how brought into execution, that every man born into the world should find himself heir to indolence and plenty, then there need be no division of property, since no one could possibly, according to the supposition, possess what his neighbour wanted, or require what his neighbour had. Or if it had been appointed that all mankind should possess the same genius, the same powers of mind and body, and be exempt from physical evil, the division of property would not necessarily have been accompanied by inequality. Sumner, *A Treatise on the Records of the Creation, and on the Moral Attributes of the Creator*, 150–52.

<sup>272</sup> Sumner, 153–54.

<sup>273</sup> Sumner, 212.

<sup>274</sup> Sumner, 209 and 219.

<sup>275</sup> Sumner, 285.

appearance.”<sup>276</sup> For this reason, Sumner is attentive to the fact that it is not only the existence of evil that is problematic, but also the degree—the quantum—to which it is present.<sup>277</sup> For this reason, Sumner asks: “Why do we actually find so great a proportion of natural evil, in the shape of pain and privation; and of moral confusion, from the existence of vice, the consequences of which are destructive to happiness, and entail misery on the good as well as on the wicked?”<sup>278</sup>

Sumner begins his exploration of this question by considering a version of the free-will defense.<sup>279</sup> He suggests the existence of moral evil is “not completely answered by alleging that free-will is man’s most valuable quality; that the abuse of this power has introduced the disorders of the moral world; and that man, therefore himself the delinquent, cannot reasonably arraign the divine goodness for his own bad use of his distinguishing property.”<sup>280</sup> Sumner argues this is the case because, notwithstanding King (see footnote above), the current state of humanity is not “the most desirable state” given God’s intent to furnish humans with happiness.<sup>281</sup> Indeed, Sumner goes so far as to argue “it would appear infinitely better for mankind if they had possessed no opportunity of making a bad election, or had been determined invincible in favour of a good one, than that they should be exposed to the hazards of a contest where all are

---

<sup>276</sup> Sumner, 290. Sumner is acutely aware of the challenge that the existence *and degree* of evil poses for belief in the existence of the God of Christian theism (a God “just, and good, and righteous, and holy, as well as powerful and wise”), referencing both the ancient argument of Epicurus and the argument of one of his contemporaries, Lord Bolingbroke, concerning the problem of evil. Sumner, 206–8.

<sup>277</sup> Sumner, *A Treatise on the Records of the Creation, and on the Moral Attributes of the Creator*, 224–25.

<sup>278</sup> Sumner, 158, 220–21.

<sup>279</sup> The version of the free-will defense that Sumner engages with is that put forward by William King in *An Essay on the Origin of Evil* (Cambridge: W. Thurlbourn Bookseller, 1731).

<sup>280</sup> Sumner, *A Treatise on the Records of the Creation, and on the Moral Attributes of the Creator*, 225–26.

<sup>281</sup> Sumner, 227.

endangered, and so many are sure to fall irrecoverably.”<sup>282</sup> Here, then, one sees Sumner’s recognition that the free-will defense alone is insufficient given his understanding of God as a perfectly good being who wants the happiness of humankind. Yes, free will is a quality that contributes to humanity’s happiness, however, when the good that results from this quality is weighed against the evil resulting from its misuse, humanity currently finds itself in a suboptimal state (which God foreknew before putting the current state of affairs into being). For this reason, Sumner concludes, “Mankind is not, at present, in the best possible, or intelligibly conceivable state; and it must be equally conceded, that the Deity did not intend he should be.”<sup>283</sup> So, then, “why [did] the Deity, if his purpose was really benevolent... not at once create man capable of enjoying a state of perfect purity and holiness, and incapable of corrupting or forfeiting it”?<sup>284</sup>

In a nutshell, Sumner’s answer to this question is that if God had done so, God would have forfeited the good that comes from the development of human character—a good that is enhanced by placing humans in a state of trial or probation, which entails temptation and difficulty, before they partake of a future blessed state. A state of probation, in other words, provides the opportunity for the creation of additional goods, over and above those that attend the future state.

Various reasons and evidence are adduced in support of Sumner’s argument. Sumner takes it as incorrigible that the development of character formed in the absence of temptation and difficulty “would be all together different in kind from the virtue of one who has successfully resisted the temptations and overcome the difficulties to which a good man is exposed on

---

<sup>282</sup> Sumner, 226.

<sup>283</sup> Sumner, 230.

<sup>284</sup> Sumner, 236–37.

earth.”<sup>285</sup> A corollary of this idea is, of course, that temptation and difficulty are required for the formation and development of particular aspects of character. Sumner writes:

We ought to bear in mind that... vices give occasion to the exercise of the opposite virtues; that, if there were less violence, less provocation, less injury, there would be less room for meekness and forgiveness, less opening for those passive virtues, the excellence of which is proportioned to their rarity; which are rare because they find the strongest opposition from man’s inward nature, and least applause from the surrounding world. Trial, in fact, is supposed, in the first formation of the abstract idea of all the virtues.<sup>286</sup>

Once again, this is a form of the higher-order-goods defense, and is an integral component of Sumner’s state-of-probation theodicy for the existence of not only moral evil (as evidenced by the quote above), but also natural and civil evils. For example, Sumner contends that natural evil, such as the separation of friends through death, sickness and sufferings, and the trials of aging, have been “appointed to detach mankind from the pleasures, and occupations, and concerns which relate to this world only, and are ill fitted to prepare their minds for the superior state of which this is the forerunner.”<sup>287</sup> Likewise, the evils of civil life, poverty, servitude, and so on, also contribute to the development of character, in part by acting as deterrents. For this reason, it is unsurprising that Sumner would give more coverage to the preventive check to population than the positive check to population: not only does the preventive check help a population to avoid malnutrition and starvation, temperance (in the form of sexual restraint) and prudence (in the form of, say, restricting family size) are cultivated in its operation.

For Sumner, moral development, forged in the furnace of moral, natural, and civil evil, as preparation for the future state, finds an analogy in the early stages of human life. Sumner writes:

---

<sup>285</sup> Sumner, 237. Sumner goes on to note: “The one would have received [character], the other has acquired. The one would have succeeded to the possession, which the other has attained by victory.” Sumner, 238.

<sup>286</sup> Sumner, *A Treatise on the Records of the Creation, and on the Moral Attributes of the Creator*, 247–48.

<sup>287</sup> Sumner, 292.

In the outset of life, the helplessness of infancy is succeeded by the perverse waywardness of childhood; childhood is succeeded by the headstrong passions and follies of youth; and the process of education exhibits a continual conflict of indolence against exertion, of licentiousness against discipline, and extravagance against reason. Yet in the midst of this apparent lawlessness and confusion, the character is formed, and the individual is matured, and enters upon the duties of a more advanced period of his existence; which he discharges well or ill, and with good or bad consequences to himself, according to the use he has made of his early life and education.<sup>288</sup>

And finally, and definitively, for Sumner, revelation shows “what reason before showed them to be probable, that this earthly state of existence is preparatory to a superior state for which they are destined after its close: God having chosen... that mankind should display their characters in a previous state before they reached their final destination, and should attain the enjoyment of a future and more glorious existence by labour, exertion, and obedience.”<sup>289</sup>

Like Malthus before him, Sumner also suggests the good associated with human character outweighs evil and that evil is limited. Thus Sumner writes, “But in a system not pretending to be final or perfect, evil must be expected; it is sufficient for the wisdom of the Deity that evil is overbalanced by advantage upon the whole; and it is sufficient for his goodness, that it is limited in extent, and moderate in degree.”<sup>290</sup>

Thus, in the end, Sumner adopts a more nuanced Christian utilitarianism than Paley, arguing “the Deity wished the happiness of mankind in this world, *as far as it might contribute to their final happiness in another*... a proposition confirmed by the innumerable benevolent

---

<sup>288</sup> Sumner, 281.

<sup>289</sup> Sumner, 267. At one point Sumner even suggests that humans would actually choose to place themselves in a situation of trial, given the benefits of the future state: “It is every way probable, from our experience of man’s nature, that undismayed by the lamentable consequences of failure, he would actually make the choice here supposed, and place himself voluntarily in the same responsible situation in which, as things are constituted, God has placed him, if the great and unbounded prospect such as we conceive heaven to offer, were laid before him.” Sumner, 257.

<sup>290</sup> Sumner, *A Treatise on the Records of the Creation, and on the Moral Attributes of the Creator*, 301.



provisions by which the goodness of the Deity is maintained, and at the same time is consistent with the many instances of pain, privation, and sorrow, which abound on every side.”<sup>291</sup>

Sumner’s  $P_2$  ( $P_2^S$ ) can be specified as follows:

$P_2^S$ : A perfectly good and powerful God, whose goal is moral formation of persons in the present state for a future state: i) allows natural evil because it contributes to moral formation in the present state; ii) a) must allow the possibility of moral evil because God has given humans free agency and b) allows it because it contributes to moral formation in the present state; iii) ensures that the good associated with the moral formation in the present state far outweighs evil; and iv) ensures that evil is limited to the minimum necessary for the moral formation of person in the present state for the future state.

Even though this is the same as  $P_2^P$ —Paley’s  $P_2$ —there are a number of advantages to the way Sumner develops his argument. First, Sumner makes explicit iii) and iv), whereas it is implicit in Paley. Second, Sumner recognizes that while the free-will defense (ii) a)) can account for the existence of moral evil, it cannot account for the degree of moral evil. For this reason, Sumner, emphasizes the higher-order-goods defense that arises from moral evil, as well as natural evil. Third, Sumner is explicit about the need to preserve divine freedom and power. This is evident throughout *TRC*. For example, at one point he writes, “Here and throughout history, God appears to resolve, *independently of all restraint on necessity*, to create a world fit for the reception of the human race, to make them the sovereign or principal inhabitants of it, and at the same time to place them on their probation; their happiness being dependent on their obedience to prescribed commands, and their disobedience being threatened with punishment.”<sup>292</sup> Fourth, Sumner is sensitive to the charge of Pelagianism. He addresses this

---

<sup>291</sup> Sumner, 291. Emphasis added.

<sup>292</sup> Sumner, 235–36. Emphasis added. Sumner makes this statement to counter King and another writer Jenyns. Sumner writes:

This is said in opposition to the language of King, before cited, who speaks of “God being obliged to suffer these or greater evils;” and of Jenyns, who argues to the same purpose; “It is not at all difficult to conceive, that in every possible method of ordering, disposing, and framing the universal system of things, such numberless *inconveniences might necessarily arise*, that all that infinite wisdom could do, was to make choice of that method which was attended with the least and fewest; and this not proceeding from any defect

objection head on, acknowledging that while he “greatly respects the piety and humility of those Christians who think that this passage [which discusses the world as a state of trial] represents the future condition of man as depending too much on his own deserts”, nonetheless:

Nothing is so indispensable, in all practical discourses and exhortations, as to insist on the weakness of man’s endeavours, as his natural propensity is to magnify his deserts and trust to his own powers. But while the Scripture every where [sic] assures us, that no man’s merit can entitle him to heaven, it likewise leaves us to understand that “the gift of God, eternal life, through Jesus Christ,” is not an unconditional gift, any more than Paradise to Adam. So it is no less certain from St Paul, that fallen man cannot, without the aid of divine grace, form his own character to good: but it equally appears from the same source, that he must contribute to form it; and that the individuality of personal character remains, notwithstanding the “inward renewal” required of the Christian; as their peculiar style and habits of thinking remained to the inspired writers, supported, but not superseded, by inspiration.<sup>293</sup>

What this quote also reveals is Sumner’s willingness to allow the deliverances of his natural theology to be put in dialogue with the deliverances of revealed religion, including the person and work of Christ.

There are certain aspects of Sumner’s theodicy which will be drawn upon later in this chapter when offering a theodicy that builds on the account of human vocation outlined at the end of Chapter 2.

---

of power in the Creator, but the imperfection which is inherent in the nature of all created things.” The real extent of the *necessary imperfection* has been already stated. Sumner, 236.

The necessary imperfection, which Sumner refers to in the final sentence, is that which arises from the Creator-creature distinction (that was discussed in an earlier footnote in relation to Leibniz’s notion of metaphysical evil).

<sup>293</sup> Sumner, *A Treatise on the Records of the Creation, and on the Moral Attributes of the Creator*, 238.

*A Contemporary Theodicy: Albino Barrera and the Evil of Scarcity*

The theodicies of Malthus, Paley, and Sumner are all developed against the backdrop of the dynamics of population and food production, first articulated by Malthus in his *FE*.<sup>294</sup> As noted in Chapter 1, from the 1860s onwards Malthus's principle of population struggled to explain increases in both population and living standards and, therefore, arguably there was less need to develop theodicies that accounted for Malthusian scarcity. Furthermore, it is during this period that economics begins to emerge as a discipline in its own right, distinct from theology and moral philosophy, and, therefore those writing on economics would have felt little obligation—or no obligation at all—to give a theological defense of the presence of Malthusian scarcity. On the other hand, Malthusian scarcity still existed, and even Robbinsian scarcity in a world of Malthusian abundance is “grist for the mill” of theological reflection. Thus, it is somewhat surprising that few theodicies were developed from the mid-nineteenth century onwards.<sup>295</sup>

For this reason, Albino Barrera's work *GES* is a significant work. As Barrera himself notes:

Besides... early nineteenth-century scholarship, I am not aware of any other sustained analytical effort to address the puzzle of why economic privation is tolerated in divine

---

<sup>294</sup> This is less so the case for Paley. This can be explained by the proximity of the publication of Paley's *Natural Theology* (1802) to Malthus's *FE* (1798), and Paley's death in 1805. Contrast this with Sumner's *TRC*, which was published in 1816. As already noted, with Sumner's *TRC* one sees the full flowering of a theodicy that attempts to grapple with Malthus's principle of population and what that meant for one's understanding of God and God's purposes in the world.

<sup>295</sup> John Stuart Mill is the exception that proves the rule. Mill's conception of “God” is far from that of a perfect being of Christian theism; but rather, some hybrid from process theology and neoplatonism, perhaps even Manicheanism. Mill writes, “The indication given by such evidence as there is, points to the creation, not indeed of the universe, but by the present order of it by an Intelligent Mind, whose power over the material was not absolute, whose love for his creatures was not his sole actuating inducement, but who nevertheless desired their good. The notion of a providential government by an omnipotent Being for the the good of his creatures must be entirely dismissed.” John Stuart Mill, *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill, Vol X: Essays on Ethics, Religion and Society*, ed. J. M. Robson, F. E. L. Priestly, and D. P. Dryer (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1969), 482.

providence. Theology, philosophy, and economics have much more to offer on this issue.<sup>296</sup>

To be more specific, *GES* is a significant work because Barrera sets out to develop a theodicy of scarcity in a world that is quite different from eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Britain—a world in which there is still Malthusian scarcity, but where there is also much Malthusian abundance; a world which, frankly, Malthus, Paley, and Sumner would have found difficult to imagine. Thus, Barrera sets out to answer the following:

Why then did God, as omnipotent and omniscient Creator, not provision the natural world with bounteous supplies that would be more than sufficient to make up for the foreseen material shortages that chance, contingency, and definite effects (from definite causes) precipitate? God could have easily spared humans from the dismal lot of Malthus's principle of population, through a recalibration of the earth's initial endowments or a readjustment of creaturely frailties in that moment of eternity when God willed the world into existence... Instead, God created a world of mere *conditional material sufficiency* characterized by limited provisions, with a restricted "room for error," and with little "cushion" as to put humans on a precarious knife-edge balance between meeting needs or falling into material privation that can often be severe and prolonged. Why does God allow material want in human experience?<sup>297</sup>

Barrera starts at the place in which he sees Malthus, Paley, and Sumner as lacking, *viz.*, metaphysics:

Metaphysics is an essential starting point in examining scarcity because it is important to situate such a phenomenon within the nature and order of created goods. Moreover, created goods themselves have to be examined within the larger context of the whole order of the universe. Furthermore, one has to account for the conceptual linkages between the somatic nature of human beings, their competing claims over the same finite goods of the earth, and the nature of quantity as an accidental property of beings.<sup>298</sup>

Barrera develops his theodicy within a Thomistic framework. Following Thomas Aquinas, Barrera suggests there is a twofold order to the universe. First, there is an *external* order to the

---

<sup>296</sup> Barrera, *God and the Evil of Scarcity*, xi.

<sup>297</sup> Barrera, 16. Emphasis original and underlining added.

<sup>298</sup> Barrera, 13.

universe because God is the final end of all creatures and, therefore, all creatures find their perfection in God.<sup>299</sup> Moreover, because only God has necessary goodness “all creaturely perfections (including existence) are only *contingent*, that is a mere participation in the goodness of the Absolute Being (the only one that possesses necessary existence and from whom all perfections necessarily flow).”<sup>300</sup>

Although the universe as a “single entity” is oriented to God as its final end, there is also, second, an *internal* order to the universe in which the various creatures of the universe (that is, the different parts of creation) enable each other to reach their created perfection. Barrera writes:

[The] disparate and distinct “parts” of the universe (including human beings) interact with each other in the course of their activities according to their mode of being and operation. It is through such mutual interaction and activity that creatures reach the fullness of their respective complete created goodness.<sup>301</sup>

In this way the internal order of the universe “moves the whole (universe) to its end in God,” while the external order “provides an end to which the internal order and its parts are oriented.”<sup>302</sup>

From within the internal order of the universe “humans act to pursue and complete their created goodness according to the mode of being and operation (intelligent activity).”<sup>303</sup> The “economic sphere” is one sphere in which this takes place and, like other spheres, this sphere is “governed” by its “own unique and specific rules, dynamics, and requirements” (for example, the

---

<sup>299</sup> Barrera, 22.

<sup>300</sup> Barrera, 22. Emphasis added.

<sup>301</sup> Barrera, 22.

<sup>302</sup> Barrera, 23.

<sup>303</sup> Barrera, 23.

laws of supply and demand).<sup>304</sup> The three things that Barrera suggests the economic sphere gives to human beings are: i) “material provisions necessary for human flourishing”; ii) “an essential venue for growth in moral excellence through the personal effort and interpersonal cooperation required of economic activity”; and iii) a “setting within which humans are able to discharge their obligation of caring for the goods of the earth and each other.”<sup>305</sup>

Each of these relates to scarcity. The constitution of human beings and the quantity of the earth’s resources will determine the degree of material provisions that are available for human flourishing. The degree of material provisions will, in turn, have a bearing on the formation of moral excellence through personal effort and interpersonal cooperation. For instance, a higher degree of material provisions may reduce the incentive for personal effort and interpersonal cooperation—and the moral virtues that accompany these, such as diligence, prudence, fortitude, and beneficence—because it is easier to supply the goods that contribute to human flourishing. Likewise, the degree of provisions has a bearing on the ease with which humans can discharge their obligation of caring for other humans and the rest of creation.

Barrera contends that God has created a world of “material sufficiency”—a “world with an adequate provision of material means necessary for creatures, including human beings, to attain their final end, each according to their proper mode of being and operation.”<sup>306</sup> This is a world in which the resource endowments of the earth, plus the constitution of human beings, means

---

<sup>304</sup> Barrera, 23. Barrera’s use of “economic” in this discussion is somewhat in tension with his discussion of existential (Robbinsian) scarcity that means “human beings face a constant multifaceted need to allocate—choosing between competing activities they could undertake and between alternative goods or services they could produce, procure, or consume in pursuit of their ends.” Barrera, 205–6. The use of “economic” in this discussion relates to the “material” goods that are necessary for humans to flourish. As discussed in Chapter 1, relating the “economic” and “material” is problematic, hence Robbins’s designation of the “economic” to refer to an aspect of human experience, *viz.*, the allocation of scarce resources (material or otherwise) to different ends (material or otherwise).

<sup>305</sup> Barrera, *God and the Evil of Scarcity*, 24.

<sup>306</sup> Barrera, 24; 26.

that resources can be allocated in order to achieve Malthusian abundance.<sup>307</sup> Malthusian abundance, however, is not guaranteed; it is *conditional* on how humans respond within the economic sphere. For this reason, Barrera writes:

[The] jarring disparity between the foregoing a priori metaphysical arguments [for Malthusian abundance] and actual empirical evidence [for Malthusian scarcity] can only mean that *the material sufficiency of God's envisioned order of creation must be merely conditional*. And, indeed, this conditionality is revealed in economic life through secondary causes.<sup>308</sup>

Thus, although God has willed a world of material sufficiency (primary cause), God works through the secondary cause of human economic agency in which:

*God provides for creatures through other creatures using the very order of creation itself in a series of determinate causes and effects*. Thus while God's providence for creatures, indeed every creature, is immediate and direct, its implementation in divine governance employs secondary causes in sustaining and bettering creatures. Thus economic life is intelligible through the prism of secondary causality.<sup>309</sup>

An important implication of this set-up is that humans are solely responsible for the outcomes of economic life. God has created and sustains a world of material sufficiency, yet the decisions of human beings in allocating resources—as free, rational agents—determines whether

---

<sup>307</sup> In the typology of scarcity that Barrera develops (Barrera, 205–8) he defines *consequent scarcity* as that which “pertains to the aftermath of human allocative choices.” Barrera, 207. In other words, this is a state of affairs once humans have allocated resources. Barrera then distinguishes between two sub-types of consequent scarcity. First, *Malthusian scarcity*, which he defines “as a state of destitution in which essential needs go unfulfilled and people live in indigence, unable to secure the means for a decent, if not a full, human life.” Barrera, 207. Second, *frictional scarcity*, which he defines “as non-life threatening unfilled demand.” Barrera, 208. Barrera writes on Malthusian and frictional scarcity:

Malthusian scarcity is more severe compared to frictional scarcity. In the latter, demand exceeds available supplies; however, the unfulfilled demand is for nonessential wants. In the former, demand greatly exceeds supplies; moreover, the unmet needs encompass basic goods that are vital for survival, basic health, and human flourishing. Barrera, 208.

Barrera's scarcity typology can be mapped on to the typology developed in Chapter 1 as follows. Malthusian scarcity and Malthusian abundance are types of consequent scarcity in Barrera's typology. What is termed as Malthusian scarcity in Chapter 1 is almost identical to Barrera's specification of Malthusian scarcity, the key difference being that the concept of Malthusian scarcity in Chapter 1 includes situations in which human needs are just being met. Frictional scarcity is the counterpart type to that of Malthusian abundance in Chapter 1—a situation in which Robbinsian scarcity still remains but where at least some human wants are met.

<sup>308</sup> Barrera, *God and the Evil of Scarcity*, 27. Emphasis added.

<sup>309</sup> Barrera, 29. Emphasis original.

humans find themselves in a state of Malthusian scarcity or abundance. Thus, Barrera writes, “Since only humans are capable of rational operations, they bear *sole responsibility* for the character of economic life.”<sup>310</sup> In other words, Malthusian abundance is *conditional* on how humans exercise their economic agency. A corollary that follows is that a persistent state of Malthusian scarcity is the fault of human beings and, therefore, is primarily the result of moral evil.

God in Barrera’s schema, then, is not culpable for a state of Malthusian scarcity, when it results, because he has created and sustains a world of material sufficiency; humans, on the other hand, are because they demonstrate a failure to exercise properly their agency. In particular for Barrera, it reflects a failure on the part of humans to strive adequately for material provision, to work for the demands of restorative justice (especially through the transfer of economic resources), and to practice sacrificial sharing.<sup>311</sup> None of these activities are required in a world of *unconditional* material sufficiency; but they are in a world of *conditional* material sufficiency.

But why should God create a world in which humans need to strive, submit to the demands of justice, and sacrifice in the first place? Why not a world of unconditional material sufficiency, where these activities are not required, or a world of conditional material sufficiency, but where the endowments of the earth and the constitution of human beings, do not make the practice of them so exacting?

Barrera contends a world of conditional material sufficiency provides the context in which humans participate in the perfections of God (hence the *nomenclature*, participative theodicy).

Barrera writes:

---

<sup>310</sup> Barrera, 33. Emphasis added.

<sup>311</sup> See Barrera, 169–78.



God permits a world of material want in order to imbue humans with even greater perfections. Creatures participate in God's goodness through their proper operation. For humans, this is through intelligence and freedom [which undergird striving, submitting to the demands of justice, and sacrifice]; scarcity demands much of these faculties... Much deliberate effort is involved in seeking out, working for, and then sharing the good that is particular to the economic order. Relations are important because the reception and communication of God's goodness is mediated through the three-cornered relationship between God, the human person, and other rational beings. Indeed, economic agency is an avenue for participation in divine attributes and operation through secondary causality in divine governance. Unconditional material sufficiency (de facto inexhaustible material abundance) would have removed or dulled the efficacy of these venues for growth.<sup>312</sup>

Elsewhere Barrera gives participation in God's perfections a particularly christological flavor:

Scarcity presents the occasion for depriving ourselves voluntarily so that others may live; it is scarcity that magnifies the selfless character of any and all economic activities taken in response to divine initiative and invitation. The more severe the scarcity in the way God created the world to begin with, the greater the opportunity cost we incur in responding to God's invitation to reach out to others, even to the point of radical voluntary dispossession. The more sacrificial our act, the more Christ-like we become, and the more profound is our participation in God's holiness and righteousness.<sup>313</sup>

There is here in Barrera's schema, then, a weighing for God of competing goods. On the one hand, the good that comes from a well-endowed world that provides the necessities for human flourishing. On the other hand, there is the good of participating in the divine goodness through striving, participating in the demands of divine justice, sacrificial sharing, and so on. There is a trade-off between these goods: a greater-endowed world reduces the incentive for humans to participate in the divine goodness; a lesser-endowed world means that Malthusian scarcity is likely to result. Thus, it seems that God engages in some sort of calculus in creating a

---

<sup>312</sup> Barrera, 34–35.

<sup>313</sup> Barrera, 178. A point worth noting is that, for Barrera, a theodicy of conditional material sufficiency cannot simply be founded on human freedom. Barrera writes: "Since we are concerned with existential scarcity but with consequent scarcity (aftermath of human choice), can we not then simply base our theodicy of scarcity on God's desire to respect human freedom? We cannot. Economic scarcity is not a necessary condition for the genuine exercise of human freedom. God could have just as easily created a world with no consequent scarcity and still preserved the opportunities for an authentic exercise of human will." Barrera, 161.

universe that supplies the necessities for economic life, while at the same time creating a context that encourages humans to participate in the divine goodness through striving, sacrificial sharing, and so on.

That humans do not fully realize God's intention to provide the necessities for human flourishing and participation in the divine goodness, despite God creating and sustaining a world that allows them to do so (that is, a world of conditional material sufficiency) is because of original human disobedience and what follows from it. Thus, for Barrera, the presence and persistence of Malthusian scarcity is a "post Eden phenomenon."<sup>314</sup> Barrera writes:

Material scarcity due to nature is antecedent to original sin... That is, whatever impact original sin has on scarcity comes not via nature but through human beings and how they use or misuse such material goods. Original sin does not make nature niggardly in provisioning humans. Rather, original sin leads to a disordered reason and freedom, which cause work to be so toilsome and greed to be so satisfying.

Original sin is responsible for consequent scarcity through sins of omission or commission. The consequent scarcity that stems from physical evil is supposed to be corrected through intelligent secondary causes—human economic agency... Rational secondary causes—human beings—are responsible for effecting the divine benefaction of material sufficiency for every person. Such free and intelligent economic activity is an effect proper to their nature and mode of operation; it is these proper final effects that make human beings secondary causes rather than mere instruments. Of course, concomitant to this unique proper effect are responsibilities. Thus, at the very least, chronic Malthusian scarcity ultimately stems from the human sin of omission, that is, from people's failure to discharge their positive obligations such as requisite economic transfers to alleviate the unmet needs of others.<sup>315</sup>

What this quote reiterates is that, for Barrera, humans are ultimately responsible for Malthusian scarcity; thus "*only moral evil bears culpability for such a persistent unaddressed state of affairs.*"<sup>316</sup>

With the foregoing in hand, one is now in a position to specify Barrera's P<sub>2</sub> (P<sub>2</sub><sup>B</sup>):

---

<sup>314</sup> Barrera, *God and the Evil of Scarcity*, 157.

<sup>315</sup> Barrera, 157–58.

<sup>316</sup> Barrera, 157. Emphasis added.

P<sub>2</sub><sup>B</sup>: A perfectly good and powerful God, whose goal is that creatures participate in the divine perfections: i) must allow for the possibility of moral evil because it is the corollary of humans exercising their secondary agency necessary for participation in the divine perfections as free, rational beings; and ii) the constitution of human beings and the endowments of the world must balance material provision for human needs and an environment that encourages participation in the divine perfections through the exercise of humans' secondary agency.

What is striking about P<sub>2</sub><sup>B</sup> is that there is no real place for natural evil in Barrera's theodicy.

Natural evil has no part to play on its own terms in giving rise to Malthusian scarcity because within Barrera's framework what causes the physical world to be insufficient in supplying human need is not the niggardliness of the physical world itself, but rather sinful human nature. Thus, within the broad framework of what Hick describes as an Augustinian theodicy—which incorporates the notion that there was some original state prior to human sin—Barrera argues, “Original sin does not make nature niggardly in provisioning humans. Rather, original sin leads to a disordered reason and freedom, which cause work to be so toilsome and greed to be so satisfying.”<sup>317</sup> In other words, although Robbinsian scarcity describes the constitution of the world, it is the advent of human sinfulness that gives rise to Malthusian scarcity. This will be an important point for discussion in the next section.

Table 2 summarises the four theodicies from the last two sections. Each of the theodicies has varying degrees of strength and weakness. The chief problem with Malthus's theodicy is that it circumscribes divine freedom and power. This deficiency was addressed by Paley and Sumner, and especially Sumner who discusses the importance of preserving divine freedom and power. Sumner's theodicy is superior to Paley's in that he develops a more detailed account of

---

<sup>317</sup> Barrera, 157. For this reason, Waterman writes concerning *GES*, “Scarcity is good for us because it helps us to become more like God. It would seem to follow from this that Fr. Barrera prefers to view scarcity rather as a “moral” than a “natural” evil. God, because He is the kind of being we believe Him to be, i.e., *by definition*, makes sure there's always enough to go round. It's up to us to share it out fairly.” Waterman, “Review of God and the Evil of Scarcity: Moral Foundations of Economic Agency by Albino Barrera,” 62. Emphasis original.

the free-will defense and the the higher-order-goods defense. Furthermore, Sumner is willing to relate his natural theology to his understanding of “revealed religion,” and he is sensitive to the potential charge of Pelagianism. In situating their theodicies within a state of probation frame, both Paley and Sumner are able to relate the present state to the future state. That said, both are deficient by failing to offer an account of how the non-human world fits into their eschatology.

**Table 2: Summary of Theodicies**

Thinker	Final End	Natural Evil	Moral Evil	Other Important Feature	Comments
<b>Malthus (1798)</b>	Formation of mind	<i>Necessary</i> for the formation of mind by provoking humans out of laziness, etc.  Distress and suffering from natural evil means particular virtues can be cultivated (higher-order-goods defense)	<i>Necessary</i> to provide a vicious counter-example for formation of mind	Good must far outweigh evil  Evil is kept to a minimum for the formation of mind	Divine freedom is circumscribed
<b>Paley (1802)</b>	Moral formation of the human person for a future state	Suffering from natural evils allows for the cultivation of particular virtues (higher-order-goods defense)	The possibility of moral evil is a logical necessity (free-will defense)  Moral evil allows for the cultivation of particular virtues (higher-order-goods defense)	Implicit: Good must far outweigh evil  Implicit: Evil is kept to a minimum for the formation of mind	Divine freedom and power is preserved  Unorthodox features of Malthus’s theodicy skirted

---

<b>Sumner (1816)</b>	Moral formation of the human person for a future state	Suffering from natural evils allows for the cultivation of particular virtues (higher-order-goods defense)	The possibility of moral evil is a logical necessity, but insufficient to account for the extent of moral evil (free-will defense)	Good must far outweigh evil	Divine freedom and power is preserved
			Moral evil allows for the cultivation of particular virtues (higher-order-goods defense)	Evil is kept to a minimum for the formation of mind	Staves off the charge of Pelagianism
					Also talks about his theodicy in relation to revealed religion, including the place of Christ
<b>Barrera (2005)</b>	Human participation in the divine perfections		The possibility of moral evil is a logical necessity for humans to participate in the divine perfections		The constitution of human beings and the endowments of the world must balance material provision for human needs and an environment that encourages participation in the divine perfections

---

A further drawback of Paley’s and Sumner’s theodicies is that they follow an Augustinian paradigm (as delineated by Hick) in which Malthusian scarcity arises because humans “fall” from some original state owing to human disobedience. In addition to the philosophical and theological problems associated with the Augustinian paradigm, this approach is untenable given modern understandings of evolutionary biology. This is also a weakness of Barrera’s theodicy and helps to explain why natural evil is played down within his account. This, in turn, flows through to a particular christology emphasis, which focusses on self sacrifice.

The next section develops an alternative theodicy building on the account of vocation outlined in the previous chapter, and incorporating the strengths of the theodicies already

discussed, as well as addressing their weaknesses. Specifically, this section will develop an alternative theodicy that incorporates the following. First, an account of natural evil that sees it as part of the created order, which situates the theodicy within what Hick terms an “Irenaean” paradigm. Second, the incorporation of a higher-order-goods defense, alongside the free-will defense, as an integral aspect of a vocational account. Third, an eschatology that incorporates the non-human world as integral to the development of the human vocation. Fourth, an account of provision that goes beyond the material, to align with Robbins’s understanding of the economic aspect of human behavior. And, finally, a discussion of God as an agent who is seeking to defeat evil, and a widening of the christological (and pneumatological) implications beyond what is outlined in Barrera.

### *God, Scarcity, and the Human Vocation*

The Christian tradition does not shy away from the reality of evil. It recognizes that the non-human world oftentimes sparingly provides for human need. Indeed, it recognizes that the non-human world sometimes destroys human goods, such as when natural disasters strike. It recognizes that human nature is oftentimes parsimonious in providing for the needs of others; indeed, that sometimes humans destroy goods, such as when they engage in vandalism and theft. The Christian tradition acknowledges the reality of Malthusian scarcity; that, at times, human needs go unmet.

The question before us, however, is not simply: Does the Christian tradition acknowledge the existence of Malthusian scarcity? But rather: Is there an *explanation* as to why a good and powerful God permits Malthusian scarcity to materialize?

Some thinkers have suggested this might be the wrong issue to tackle. For example, N. T. Wright, in his book *Evil and the Justice of God*—which will be drawn on for its positive contribution to the later discussion in this section—writes, “I have also ruled out to the disappointment (I fear) of some, any immediate prospect of finding an answer to the question of where evil came from in the first place and what it’s doing in God’s good creation.”<sup>318</sup> For Wright, this is beside the point:

Evil isn’t simply a philosophers’ puzzle but a reality which stalks our streets and damages people’s lives, homes and property. A quest for a solution is not a quest for an intellectually satisfying answer in the first place. Rather, the quest for a solution to the problem of evil is a search for ways in which the healing, restorative justice of the Creator God himself—a justice which will one day suffuse the whole creation—can be brought to bear, in advance of that ultimate reality, within the present world of space, time, matter and messy realities in human lives and societies. Faced with that challenge, much of the agonizing over evil as a problem in philosophy or theology is exposed as displacement activity, as moaning over spilled milk instead of mopping it up.<sup>319</sup>

While understanding Wright’s desire to keep the focus on the practical task of addressing evil in the present age, the quote above (and other parts of his book) unhelpfully separates theory and practice. Reasoning as to why God allows natural evil may aid in the present task of addressing evil, albeit that reasoning from the biblical data and human experience may provide an incomplete picture. It might be worth inquiring as to why the milk keeps being spilt if that helps to ameliorate the moaning and helps with the task of mopping up. For this reason, Wright himself turns to narrative—both the past (what has happened) and the future (what will happen)

---

<sup>318</sup> N. T. Wright, *Evil and the Justice of God*, 5/31/13 edition (Westmont: IVP Books, 2013), 135.

<sup>319</sup> Wright also makes a similar point when discussing the book of Job: “The book of Job remains, in its own terms, as a monument not only to astonishing literary skill but to the theological pursuit of answers that refuse to be put off, the theological insistence that to ‘solve’ the problem of evil is to belittle it, and the theological celebration, in the teeth of the apparent evidence, of Israel’s God as Creator and Lord of the world.” Wright, 149.

to frame the present task, exhorting his readers to think “in [terms of] the narrative of God and the world... *the story of what God has done, is doing and will do about evil.*”<sup>320</sup>

This section, therefore, offers reasons as to why God allows for both the threat and, at times, the existence of Malthusian scarcity. Like Wright, who offers an account of evil within a narrative structure of Scripture, the theodicy in this section is set within the narrative of Scripture, building on Chapter 2. As already discussed in the previous chapter, humans, made in the image of God, have been called to the human task (vocation) to cultivate and care for the world. The picture offered is one of a *garden* that is cultivated and cared for such that it becomes a *garden city*. The first book of Scripture tells the story of a man and a woman who are placed in the garden, with the vocation to cultivate and care for it. The last book of Scripture tells the story of humanity comprised of all the nations assembled and walking before God in the garden city (Rev 21:24). In developing the latter story, its author draws on the imagery of the first story to key the reader that the latter story should be read in the light of the former story. As discussed in Chapter 2, Robbinsian scarcity is another way of framing the finitude of the world and the limits that circumscribe the human vocation.

The account as it stands in Chapter 2, however, is insufficient to account for the threat and actuality of Malthusian scarcity. In other words, an account is now needed that explains why the degree of Robbinsian scarcity is such that human need, at times, goes unmet.

The degree of Robbinsian scarcity affects the development of human persons and their sense of responsibility, dependence, and interdependence, as well as the development of the non-human world. Consider a world where the degree of Robbinsian scarcity is strongly characterized by Malthusian abundance, where Malthusian scarcity is not even a threat. This

---

<sup>320</sup> Wright, 45. Emphasis original.



would be a Quadrant-III world that is well back from the point where human needs go unmet; an Arcadian paradise. Compare this with a world that is much closer to the point where human need goes unmet; a world where Malthusian scarcity is an ever-present threat. In the latter world, the chances are higher that there will be greater human development, interdependence between humans, a greater sense of responsibility and dependence, and development of the non-human world. In this case, the constitution of the world will require humans to be intentional and disciplined in deliberating between alternative ends to which resources can be put. It will require the cultivation of particular virtues (such as diligence and fortitude) and technical skill (from house building, to clothing manufacturing, to research in the fundamental sciences) to reduce the threat of Malthusian scarcity. Furthermore, there will be greater specialization and cooperation among humans, which will also ameliorate the threat of Malthusian scarcity, thereby leading to greater interdependence and responsibility.

A world, then, in which Malthusian scarcity is a threat—a real threat, such that it can become a reality if resources are misallocated—will *reinforce the development of the human vocation*. If the human vocation is to cultivate and care for the world, including the development of human persons, certain degrees of natural and moral evil can be a spur to the human vocation, in comparison to a world where these were entirely absent. For example, that crops sometime fail, say because of bad weather or a poorly yielding variety of seed (an instance of natural evil), means that humans are more likely to allocate resources with this possibility in mind, develop the tools to deal with such an eventuality (such as scenario planning), take action that might avert crop failure (such as spraying or covering crops), and so on. It will reinforce the sense of responsibility that those who are involved with planning, planting, tending, and harvesting

have—within obvious limits—for what the crop produces; it will also reinforce their sense of dependence on the natural world and on other humans as they undertake their particular tasks.

Another example can be offered with reference to moral evil. Take a team of people who are tasked with planning for a new city suburb that is needed in order to provide housing for a growing population. The team is comprised of a number of highly skilled individuals—a town planner, infrastructure engineer, economist, and so on—who are required if the planning for the new city suburb is to succeed. Within this team there will be occasion for instances of moral evil. Moral evil, for instance, could manifest as laziness in a certain team member or an uncooperative attitude between team members. These potential instances of moral evil contribute to the likelihood that Malthusian scarcity will eventuate. If a certain team member fails to complete certain tasks or if team members fail to work together, then the planning for the new city suburb is more likely to fail, with the result that there will be a lack of adequate housing in the city. Seen in this light, the team, and especially the team leader, will have to cultivate practices and procedures to mitigate instances of moral evil, and different team members will have to cultivate particular virtues to overcome the temptation to different instances of moral evil. The threat that these instances of moral evil pose to the failure of the planning project remind the team members of their dependence on one another and their responsibility to others who depend on them for the planning project to succeed.

Having now just argued that the threat of Malthusian scarcity reinforces the development of the human vocation, one must acknowledge that this is the case only up to a point. In a world, for instance, where Malthusian scarcity was always the outcome—in other words a Quadrant-II world—the constitution of the world would undermine the human vocation. Not only would one have questions about the goodness of God in a world where some inevitably suffer because their

needs go unmet, one would also have questions about the wisdom of God in creating and sustaining a world where humans cannot fulfil the vocation given to them by God. Indeed, such a world will promote particular instances of moral evil, as individuals and families struggle to survive.

Given then the understanding of the human vocation outlined in the previous chapter, the constitution of the world that will best promote it lies within a range in which Malthusian scarcity threatens, but is not inevitable. In worlds in which Malthusian scarcity never threatens, there would be little incentive to develop oneself or the non-human world. On the other hand, in a world where Malthusian scarcity is inevitable, those things which are necessary for the development of the human vocation, such as cooperation, are likely to be undermined.

To this argument can then be added the higher-order-goods defense. Not only does the presence of natural and moral evil, such that Malthusian scarcity is a real threat, reinforce the human vocation in a world characterized by Robbinsian scarcity, it also expands the scope and opportunity for the human vocation to be developed by providing occasions for the realization of higher-order goods in response to both natural and moral evil. As already discussed, this is an integral element of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century theodicies, especially that developed by Sumner. Thus particular instantiations of moral evil provide occasions for patience, courage, forgiveness, correction, and so on. Likewise, various instantiations of natural evil provide occasion for a range of goods including compassion, preventative research, generosity, and so on. In a world, in which Malthusian scarcity is a far-flung threat, these goods would not be realized or there would be much less scope for their development. On the other hand, a world where Malthusian scarcity is inevitable will mitigate these higher-order goods and will promote their counterpart vices.

What the foregoing discussion leads one to conclude, therefore, is that the world that humans actually find themselves within is calibrated to promote the human vocation. It would appear that the world, created and sustained by God, providentially supports the human vocation.

Along this line, Swinburne notes that God:

[By] the mere operation of some laws of biochemistry that produced human bodies could have placed them in a lazier environment. Rivers might have been shallow, cliffs non-existent, food plentiful, no predators preying on humans, plenty of shelter for all humans, all of whom had relatively few children so that there was little competition for shelter and other good things.<sup>321</sup>

That this is not in fact the case suggests that “God who seeks to entrust our well-being to us, and wishes the best for us, has reason to give us a range of choices where more worthwhile goals can be obtained by more effort and longer-term policies.”<sup>322</sup> So, for example:

Humans had to learn how to hunt land animals, catch fish, grow plants, and choose to use the method of food acquisition that would most probably produce the best results in their particular environment. We had to learn to build shelters, where other humans would find it difficult to tear them down in order to use the material to build their own shelters. And so on.<sup>323</sup>

In this world, the task of economic allocation—a task that is integral to the human vocation—is crucial. Take, for the example, the use of time. At the level of the individual, one has to deliberate about the use of one’s time in meeting one’s short-term needs versus building the capacity to fulfill those needs and other wants in the future. This is also the case for different levels of community. A family has to think about the allocation of time to child-rearing, earning income to support the family, and leisure activities. Similarly, a business has to think about the allocation of time between marketing and networking, the production of existing products, and

---

<sup>321</sup> Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God*, 2nd Edition (Oxford; New York: Clarendon Press ; Oxford University Press, 2004), 220–21.

<sup>322</sup> Swinburne, 220.

<sup>323</sup> Swinburne, 220.

the development of new products. And what is true of time is also true of the other resources that humans have at their disposal, and can have significant and far-reaching implications for human lives. So, for example, the allocation of public funding between defense spending to provide national security and to contribute to international peacekeeping efforts, on the one hand, and cancer research to find more effective treatments, on the other hand, is a significant decision in resource allocation. How both individuals and communities respond to the various instantiations of moral and physical evil in how they allocate resources really does matter. The freedom God has granted humans in their decision-making does (as the free-will defense demonstrates) provide the occasion for moral evil. Nevertheless, it also provides the occasion for humans to develop their human vocation in their allocation of scarce resources in the presence of natural and moral evil.

The free-will defense and the higher-order-goods defense are interconnected elements of a theodicy developed in relation to the human vocation. Free will is a necessary condition for human agency to be meaningful, as humans seek to live out their vocations. The presence of natural evil gives occasion for the reinforcement of the human vocation and the goods associated with this (e.g., responsibility), as well as providing scope and opportunity for the development of higher-order goods (up to a point). The presence of moral evil (up to a point), which arises because humans have free will in order to make their human vocation meaningful, also reinforces the human vocation and provides scope and opportunity for higher-order goods that are part of developing this vocation.

The foregoing discussion points to why it can be difficult to disentangle what is due to natural evil and what is due to moral evil—albeit that these are useful analytic distinctions—when it comes to viewing certain events. There is a symbiotic relationship among the different

elements that comprise the “world” that are dynamic through time. A community plants crops in a particular location for years and then, all of a sudden one year, the crop fails because of blight. Eventually some in the community go hungry. *Prima facie*, this cause of Malthusian scarcity looks to be a natural evil. But, one might ask, why didn’t the community take preventative action against the blight? Or why was not a more resilient variety of seed developed to resist fungal infection (perhaps too little funding was allocated to agricultural research)? And why did the community not minimize the risk of food shortages by planting in other locations, or engaging in more trade to import needed food? What, then, this admittedly stylized example illustrates is the interconnections between natural evil and moral evil *vis-à-vis* Malthusian scarcity and how human agency impacts individuals and communities.

Of course, God is ultimately responsible for this state of affairs, for it is the world that God has created and sustains. Hence, as Hick writes:

Divine responsibility for evil... is generated by the belief that God has determined in His absolute existence all the conditions of creaturely existence, including those out of which sin and suffering have arisen. Given this circumstance, how can God fail to have final responsibility for the existence of His creation in its concrete actuality, including, as it does, evil as an element within it?<sup>324</sup>

As Hick goes on to note, however, this does not undermine human agency or human moral liability when this agency is abused (a point also made clear in the discussion of the free-will defense):

[God’s] decision to create the existing universe was the primary and necessary precondition for the occurrence of evil, all other conditions being contingent upon this, and He took His decision in awareness of all that would flow from it. However, even this omni-responsibility of the Creator does not take away each human individual’s accountability for his own deliberate actions. Our moral liability is not diminished by the fact that we have been created by a higher Being who bears final responsibility for His creatures’ existence, with all that this contingency encompasses. The divine and human responsibilities operate upon different levels and are not mutually incompatible. Man is

---

<sup>324</sup> Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, 289–90.

responsible for his life within the creaturely world, whilst God is ultimately responsible for the existence of that creaturely world and for the fact that man lives responsibly within it.<sup>325</sup>

The theodicy outlined herein, then, is consistent with what Hick describes as an “Irenaean Theodicy” in which one “accepts God’s ultimate omni-responsibility and seeks to show for what good and justifying reason He has created a universe in which evil was inevitable.”<sup>326</sup>

This type of theodicy is also consistent with the contemporary understanding of evolutionary biology which take pain, suffering, and death as having always been inherent to the world. Another important aspect of this theodicy is that “the world exists to be an environment for man’s life, and its imperfection are to be integral to its fitness as a place of soul-making.”<sup>327</sup> In other words, the world is fit for humans to develop their vocations. In addition to this theodicy being framed in relation to scarcity, the theodicy herein extends Hick’s theodicy in that the non-human world is seen as not only integral to the development of the human vocation, but is itself bound up with God’s purposes, in that it too will be renewed (rather than done away with). In contrast to the theodicies of Paley, Sumner, and Barrera which retain the notion of some original perfect state, this theodicy moves in the direction of that presented in Malthus’s *FE* where natural and moral evil are woven into the constitution of the world as created and sustained by God (albeit rejecting other weaknesses in Malthus’s theodicy in the *FE*).

In addition, the provisioning of the world discussed herein cannot be reduced to the material (*contra* Barrera). The provision of the world for the meeting of human needs includes non-material resources, most notably time, as well as material resources. Thus consistent with

---

<sup>325</sup> Hick, 290–91.

<sup>326</sup> Hick, 236.

<sup>327</sup> Hick, 237.

Robbins's understanding of the "economic", this theodicy conceives of the provisioning and allocation of all resources, whether they be material or non-material, in relation to Malthusian scarcity.

The final element of this account of why God creates and sustains a world where Malthusian abundance is possible, but where Malthusian scarcity, nevertheless, still threatens, relates to God's activity in the world. God is not only an agent who sustains this world, but also an agent within it seeking to defeat evil, and will finally achieve this goal when, in the age to come, God will inaugurate the new heavens/new earth. This element changes the vantage point from which one sees God's omni-responsibility for creating and sustaining the present world.

The testimony of Scripture is that God is an agent who is actively addressing evil, or as N.T. Wright puts it, Scripture tells "the story of what God has done, is doing, and will do about evil."<sup>328</sup> In a world in which both natural and moral evil threaten the human community with Malthusian scarcity, God is an active agent calling, making promises, saving, delivering, sanctifying, healing, judging, and so on, in order to assist humans in their human vocation, and to bring God's purpose for creation to its fulfillment.

This can be seen in the life of Israel, beginning with the call to Abraham and Sarah. The story of Abraham's initial call (Gen. 12) is set against the stories of the garden, the flood, and the tower of Babel.<sup>329</sup> In this call, God reiterates the vocation given to humans in the story of the garden and promises to bring this vocation to fulfillment through the lives of Abraham and Sarah:

I will make you into a great nation,

---

<sup>328</sup> Wright, *Evil and the Justice of God*, 45.

<sup>329</sup> At this point in the story, Abraham is still called Abram, however, Abraham is used throughout for convenience.



and I will bless you;  
I will make your name great,  
and you will be a blessing.  
I will bless those who bless you,  
and whoever curses you I will curse;  
and all people on earth will be blessed through you.  
(Gen. 12:2-3)

Israel will look back on this moment as the founding of their nation, and the decisive point where God begins to deal with the problem of evil outlined in the stories of the garden, the flood, and the tower of Babel. For this reason, Abraham can be seen as a new Adam. Wright comments:

The promises to Abraham were understood in relation to the problems caused by Adam. Their intention was to get the human project back on track after the disasters of the fall, the flood, and the idolatrous Tower. The covenant that YHWH made with Abraham was the way of sealing this intent, binding this God to his promise and Abraham's family to this God, assuring Abraham of the 'seed' that would inherit the promises, the promises that were focused on the Land as the new Eden.<sup>330</sup>

Israel's call, then, now set within the bounds of the covenant established between God and Abraham and Sarah, is to fulfill the human vocation, remembering the promises of the Abrahamic covenant (including the promise that *all people* would be blessed through Abraham) and calling on the ongoing assistance of God in its fulfillment. This is, as Wright contends, "a matter of setting the existing creation to rights rather than scrapping it and doing something else instead."<sup>331</sup> He continues:

God decides, for that reason, to work through human beings as they are—even though their hearts think only of evil—and through Israel, even though from Abraham onward they make as many mistakes as they do acts of obedience. Both in the grand narrative itself, and many smaller movements within it, we observe a pattern of divine action, to judge and punish evil and to set bounds to it without destroying the responsibility and agency of human beings themselves; and also both to promise and to bring about new moments of

---

<sup>330</sup> N. T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), 794.

<sup>331</sup> Wright, *Evil and the Justice of God*, 73.

grace, events which constitute new creation however much they are themselves necessarily shot through with ambiguity.<sup>332</sup>

This quote is also consistent with what has been outlined earlier in this section. Although Israel is called to live out the human vocation, Israel's attempt is marred with disobedience and failure.<sup>333</sup> As creator and sustainer, God is responsible for the world within which Israel is given this vocation, but this does not undermine the agency and culpability of human agents. Moreover, these instances of evil provide opportunity for Israel—and also Israel's God—to create higher-order goods, “new moments of grace”, which are also necessarily shot through with ambiguity.”<sup>334</sup>

Israel's persistent and, arguably, growing failure—which results in exile—sets the stage for Israel's Messiah, who will eventually be recognized by his followers as God incarnate. In the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus, the Scriptures and the Christian tradition confess that God has decisively dealt with evil, albeit that Jesus' victory over evil has not been fully realized and, thus, Jesus' followers still await that moment when Jesus “hands over the kingdom to God the Father... so that God may be all in all” (1 Cor. 15: 24, 28). Thus, as Wright puts it, “God's great No to evil has been acted out in the person of Jesus, the person who could and did represent Israel as its Messiah, and hence the person who represented the whole world.”<sup>335</sup>

---

<sup>332</sup> Wright, 73.

<sup>333</sup> “Within the story we discover a second-order problem: Israel, the children of Abraham, may be carriers of the promise, but they turn out to be part of the problem themselves. This unwinds through a massive and epic narrative, from the patriarchs to the exodus, from Moses to David, through the twists and turns of the Israelite monarchy, ending finally with Israel in exile.” Wright, 46.

<sup>334</sup> Wright, 73.

<sup>335</sup> Wright, 88. Like many other Christian theologians, Wright sees Jesus' death as pivotal in the defeat of evil. He writes:

Jesus suffers the full consequences of evil: evil from the political, social, cultural, personal, moral, religious and spiritual angles all rolled into one; evil in the downward spiral hurtling toward the pit of destruction and despair. And he does so precisely as the act of redemption, of taking that downward fall and exhausting it, so that there may be new creation, new covenant, forgiveness, freedom and hope. The Gospels thus tell the

The ultimate defeat of evil in the cross, resurrection, and ascension, are foreshadowed in Jesus' public ministry before these decisive events in and nearby Jerusalem. Some of these relate to different instantiations of natural and moral evil and the threat of Malthusian scarcity, and point towards a world in which the victory over evil is final. Take, for instance, the story of Jesus calming the storm in Mark's Gospel (Mark 4:35-41). In this story, a storm on a lake threatens to swamp a boat that contains Jesus and his disciples. It is a vivid example of natural evil threatening to overwhelm human life. In this situation, Jesus rebukes the wind, preserving himself and his disciples. It is a clear example of Jesus fulfilling his own vocation by prevailing against natural evil, in order to avert the destruction of human life. Take another example: the story of the feeding of the five thousand, also recorded in Mark's Gospel (Mark 6:30-44). In this story, Jesus takes five loaves of bread and two fish, multiplying them to feed five thousand men (and presumably their families), with twelve basketfuls of bread and fish leftover. It is an example of Malthusian scarcity threatening, but, through the action of Jesus, being transformed into a situation of Malthusian abundance.

Of course, these are examples of miraculous preservation and provision—and, being miraculous, one should not expect them to be commonplace. Nevertheless, they convey three important points. First, the overcoming and the defeat of evil are central to Jesus' own vocation. As Israel's Messiah and God incarnate, Jesus seeks to overcome the evil that threatens to overwhelm human life, thereby fulfilling his own vocation and promoting that of others.

Second, these two stories of miraculous preservation and provision point to a world in which Jesus' defeat over evil will be fully realized. This is a world that Scripture invites us to

---

story of Jesus, in particular the story of how he went to his death, *as* the story of how cosmic and global evil, in its supra-personal as well as personal forms, are met by the sovereign, saving love of Israel's God, YHWH, the Creator of the world. Wright, 92.

imagine at several points, for instance, in the picture of a creation free from violence in Isaiah 11—invoked by the image of the wolf living with the lamb, where “the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea” (Isaiah 11:9); or the picture of the Garden City in Revelation 21 where “there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away” (Revelation 21:4). This will be a world that is free from any threat of Malthusian scarcity.<sup>336</sup>

Third, these stories highlight the tension that Christians now live with, knowing that Jesus has defeated evil and anticipating a future where this victory is fully realized. Thus, on the one hand:

Jesus’ death and resurrection is the foundation, the model and the guarantee for God’s ultimate purpose, which is to rid the world of evil altogether and to establish his new creation of justice, beauty and peace. And it’s clear from the start that this was not intended simply as a distant goal for which one was to wait in passive expectation. God’s future had already broken into the present in Jesus, and the church’s task consisted not least of *implementing* that achievement and thus anticipating that future.<sup>337</sup>

Yet, on the other hand, this victory has not been fully realized and, thus, humans still experience brokenness, frustration, wastage, injustice, and suffering. Indeed, as Wright notes:

The call of the gospel is for the church to *implement* the victory of God in the world *through suffering love*. The cross is not just an example to be followed; it is an achievement to be worked out, put into practice. But it is an example nonetheless, because it is the exemplar—the template, the model—for what God now wants to do by his Spirit in the world, through his people.<sup>338</sup>

Christians, then, are called to fulfill the human vocation, which includes overcoming the threat and reality of Malthusian scarcity, by working out the victory that Christ has achieved through suffering love. On this count, Barrera is right to highlight that this involves sharing our

---

<sup>336</sup> But not, one suspects, Robbinsian scarcity. Although the degree of Robbinsian scarcity is likely to change (as suggested by Jesus’ own resurrection body), Robbinsian scarcity will not have been erased.

<sup>337</sup> Wright, *Evil and the Justice of God*, 101–2. Emphasis original.

<sup>338</sup> Wright, 98. Emphasis original.

resources with others, “even to the point of radical voluntary dispossession,” and in doing so that we become “Christ-like... and the more profound in our participation in God’s holiness and righteousness.”<sup>339</sup> The outworking of this vocation in response to Christ by the power of the Spirit is not, however, simply a matter of the personal sharing of resources. The human vocation as broadly conceived in the narrative arc of the Christian scriptures includes caring and cultivating the creation *in toto*. This includes the design of institutions and policies that take the reality of evil into account—including the moral evil that human beings sometimes display—such that the threat of Malthusian scarcity is reduced and the reality mitigated. This is as much part of the human vocation as the personal distribution of resources and is an area, as will be discussed in the chapters to come, where economics has a contribution to make. Moreover, for the Christian, this work is not to be viewed as independent of the agency of God. God is at work in seeking to defeat natural and moral evil and this extends to the work of designing and improving the institutions that promote the human vocation more generally. Indeed, God has poured out his Spirit on humans following the work of Jesus Christ, such that they partner with God in fulfilling the human vocation to make something of this world, which includes overcoming Malthusian scarcity so that all human needs can be met.

### *Conclusion*

A Christian understanding of what it means to be human is to be given a vocation by God to make something of the world; to take the garden and care for and cultivate it such that it becomes a garden city. The previous chapter argued that the conditions that delineate Robbinsian scarcity are another way of describing human finitude and, when situated within a

---

<sup>339</sup> Barrera, *God and the Evil of Scarcity*, 178.

theology of vocation, provide a theological understanding of why humans find themselves in a situation—in the terminology of economics—of having to allocate scarce resources to various ends. From a theological standpoint, then, economics, as the discipline that studies the allocation of scarce resources, can be viewed as seeking to help humans realize their vocations. The economist who is also a Christian can, therefore, see her vocation as helping humans more generally to realize their vocations.

Moreover, from this chapter, the economist who is also a Christian has an understanding of her vocation in relation to the defeat of natural and moral evil in anticipation of Jesus' full victory over evil in the age to come. Recognizing that there are degrees of Robbinsian scarcity and that humans find themselves in a world in which Malthusian abundance is possible but in which Malthusian scarcity threatens, she can understand her vocation as helping humans to develop their vocations including the creation and cultivation of higher-order goods in the presence of natural and moral evil. She can carry out her vocation knowing that eventually Jesus' already-secured defeat of evil will be fully realized, and can pray for the Spirit's power in helping her to implement this victory in anticipation of its full arrival.

The argument developed over the course of Chapter 2 and Chapter 3, then, provides a theological rationale for economics and the vocation of the economist. Economics is a valuable discipline from a theological standpoint because it undertakes higher-order reflection on the task of allocating scarce resources that is integral to fulfilling the human vocation; the economist carries out an important vocation, then, in aiding humans to fulfill their vocations more generally.

At this point in the dissertation, however, one cannot yet provide a complete theological endorsement of economics (and by implication the vocation of the economist), as demarcated by Robbins, because not only does he frame economics as the discipline that studies the allocation

of scarce resources, he also contends that economics as a science should be *wertfrei* when it comes to the ends to which humans allocate their scarce resources. All that has been secured, then, at this point, is the accuracy of Robbinsian scarcity as a description of the world, the framing of Robbinsian scarcity in terminology more familiar to the Christian theologian and ethicist, and a theological rationale for economics as the study of the allocation of scarce resources. Can one go the final leg and accept Robbins's stricture that economics should be a *wertfrei* science? Or are there good reasons, theological and otherwise, to repudiate this stricture and admit ethical evaluation of ends and the means-ends *ratio* into the discipline of economics? Reaching answers to these questions is the task of the coming chapters.

CHAPTER 4  
ECONOMICS, ETHICS, AND POLITICAL ECONOMY

*Introduction*

In a reflective article entitled “Live and Dead Issues in the Methodology of Economics,” written three years after the publication of the Second Edition of *ENSES*, Robbins notes that his scarcity definition of economics “has not met with universal acceptance.”<sup>340</sup> Despite this, Robbins goes on to state, “But the difference between this and other definitions now current is not a very serious matter.”<sup>341</sup> This is because the various alternative definitions on offer eventually come back to the study of the allocation of scarce goods. Thus, in comparing his own definition with that of Arthur Pigou’s—which is “concerned with conduct which can be brought into relation with the measuring rod of money”—Robbins argues that Pigou’s definition “must concern goods and services which are *scarce*.”<sup>342</sup> Therefore, although Robbins finds Pigou’s definition overly restrictive, because it narrows the scope of economics to that which can be measured with the “rod of money,” he nevertheless concludes, “Whether we define the actual subject matter of study in terms which cover all institutional settings (the “scarcity” definition) or limit it to those settings with which we are most preoccupied (the “exchange” definition), is not a

---

<sup>340</sup> Robbins, “Live and Dead Issues in the Methodology of Economics,” 344.

<sup>341</sup> Robbins, 344.

<sup>342</sup> Robbins, 344. Emphasis added



matter about which sensible people will waste many precious moments.”<sup>343</sup> On this front, the scope of economics is a “dead” issue: Studying the allocation of scarce resources lies at the center of economics, and whether one wants to restrict that study to the disposal of goods and services in markets in which money is used as a medium of exchange, or to also include the allocation of resources outside of those markets, is of negligible concern. One hopes that the work of Chapter 1 through to Chapter 3—and particularly the theological work therein—has reinforced the view that the study of scarcity-constrained choice is integral to the development of the human vocation, thereby giving legitimacy to economics as the study of the allocation of scarce resources, without the penumbra of suspicion given it by some Christian theologians and ethicists.<sup>344</sup>

In contrast to the “dead” issue of scarcity, in the same article Robbins suggests, “The only question with regard to the scope of economics which can be said to be in any sense alive is the question whether economics, as such, can be said to include judgments of what is good or bad in the world of relative scarcities, as distinct from judgments of what exists or what might be conceived to exist.”<sup>345</sup> Here, then, is the key issue that was raised at the end of Chapter 1, namely, whether economics as the study of economic allocation should exclude ethical evaluation of ends and the means-ends *ratio*, and the implications of that for how economics relates to ethics. Chapter 1 suggested that, on Robbins’s own terms, this is a normative issue. What *should* be the scope of economics? Obviously, there needs to be some limitation of scope, otherwise economics would become the study of everything. But where *should* the boundary lie?

---

<sup>343</sup> Robbins, 344.

<sup>344</sup> Of course, some economists could not care in the least about the theological legitimacy of their work; but this is likely to be an issue for the *Christian* economist.

<sup>345</sup> Robbins, “Live and Dead Issues in the Methodology of Economics,” 345.

Thus, having agreed with Robbins that the study of the allocation of scarce resources to competing ends is integral to the study of economics and worthy of pursuit—and having offered a theological defense of this position—an outstanding and significant concern of this dissertation is whether economics should also *include* the ethical evaluation of ends and the means-ends allocation. To address this question it is first necessary to consider Robbins’s portrayal of the relationship between ethics and economics in *ENSES* in further detail. This, in turn, will lead into an examination of Robbins’s notion of political economy and his understanding of the relationship between this discipline and ethics, on the one hand, and economics, on the other. Robbins’s notion of political economy has been ignored or underplayed in some of the secondary literature that examines his demarcation of economics as a science and its separation from ethics. Not only will examining Robbins’s understanding of the relationship between ethics, political economy, and economics bring his overall schema into sharper relief; it will also put a somewhat different complexion on the standard presentation of Robbins’s attempt to separate ethics from economics. That said, this chapter will also examine certain aspects of Robbins’s overall schema—even when enriched to take account of his notion of political economy—that require critical scrutiny. These aspects include the capacity of economists to undertake objective economic analysis and Robbins’s construal of “facts” and “values”. In examining these, the overall goal is to lay the groundwork for reconfiguring and enriching Robbins’s basic schema, such that its deficiencies are removed, in order to suggest that political economy is the discourse wherein interdisciplinary exchange between ethicists and economists is likely to be most fruitful. Specifically, the final section of this chapter will suggest that Robbins’s conception of political economy is that of a hybrid discipline, which draws on the deliverances of both ethics and economic science. This discussion will establish the basic schema that will be further developed

in Chapter 5 to propose that Christian political economy is the site where a robust intergration can take place between Christian ethics and economic science, without undermining the intellectual integrity and the relative autonomy of either.

### *Economic Science, Ethics, and Political Economy*

In *ENSES*, Robbins states that economics is a *science*, “the *science* which studies human behaviour as a relationship between ends and scarce means which have alternative uses.”<sup>346</sup> As already discussed in Chapter 1, economics is a science in the same sense that physics or biology are sciences, albeit that they each study different aspects of the world.

For Robbins, the science of economics is based on a series of postulates from which the economist reasons deductively to a set of theoretical propositions. Robbins writes, “The propositions of economic theory, like all scientific theory, are obviously deductions from a series of postulates.”<sup>347</sup> These postulates are “judgments of what “is” or “might be conceived to exist.””<sup>348</sup> Robbins distinguishes between two different classes of postulates: the “chief” or “main” postulates of economic theory; and the “subsidiary” or “historico-relative” postulates of economic theory. Robbins writes of the main postulates:

These postulates are all assumptions involving in some way simple and indisputable facts of experience relating to the way in which the scarcity of goods which is the subject-matter of our science actually shows itself in the world of reality. The main postulate of the theory of value is the fact that individuals can arrange their preferences in an order, and in fact do so. The main postulate of the theory of production is the fact that there are more than one factor of production. The main postulate of the theory of dynamics is the fact that we are not certain regarding future scarcities. These are not postulates the existence of whose counterpart in reality admits of extensive dispute once their nature is fully realised. We do not need controlled experiments to establish their validity: they are so much the

---

<sup>346</sup> Robbins, *An Essay*, 16. Emphasis added.

<sup>347</sup> Robbins, 78.

<sup>348</sup> Robbins, “Live and Dead Issues in the Methodology of Economics,” 345.

stuff of our everyday experience that they only have to be stated to be recognised as obvious. Indeed, the danger is that they may be thought to be so obvious that nothing significant can be derived from their further examination. Yet in fact it is on postulates of this sort that the complicated theorems of advanced analysis ultimately depend. And it is from the existence of the conditions they assume that the general applicability of the broader propositions of economic science is derived.<sup>349</sup>

Robbins distinguishes these main postulates of economics from a “great multitude of subsidiary postulates regarding the condition of markets, the number of parties to the exchange, the state of law, the *minimum sensible* of buyers and sellers, and so on and so forth.”<sup>350</sup> The subsidiary postulates are “historico-relative” in the sense that they change depending on the economic phenomenon being studied. In contrast, the main postulates “are applicable whenever and wherever the conditions which give rise to economic phenomena are present” and, therefore, “it is not true that the main assumptions are historico-relative in the same sense [as the subsidiary postulates].”<sup>351</sup>

Although economics is principally a deductive science, whose main postulates are self-evident, there is still an important empirical component to economics. Robbins delineates several reasons why empirical work is important. First, is in providing a “check on the applicability to given situations of different types of theoretical constructions.”<sup>352</sup> Robbins writes, “As we have seen already, the *validity* of a particular theory is a matter of its logical derivation from the general assumptions which it makes. But its *applicability* to a given situation depends upon the extent to which its concepts actually reflect the forces operating in

---

<sup>349</sup> Robbins, *An Essay*, 78–79.

<sup>350</sup> Robbins, 79. Emphasis original.

<sup>351</sup> Robbins, 80.

<sup>352</sup> Robbins, 116.

that situation.”<sup>353</sup> Second, empirical work is crucial in identifying the subsidiary postulates that will be important in analyzing any given economic issue.<sup>354</sup> Finally, empirical work is needed to identify areas where economic theory is to be “reformulated and extended.”<sup>355</sup>

For Robbins, because economics claims to be a science, it must exclude particular kinds of value judgments from its analyses. There are two broad classes of value judgments that Robbins discusses in *ENSES*. Robbins labels the first class of value judgments “conventional valuation[s].”<sup>356</sup> Although purporting to make a straightforward claim about reality, these judgments cannot be verified by either introspection or observation and are thus “essentially normative,” and have “no place in pure science.”<sup>357</sup> The important example that Robbins considers in *ENSES* is the claim that persons are equally capable of equal satisfaction—a claim embedded in important economic works of the time.<sup>358</sup> Robbins writes:

In Western democracies we assume for certain purposes men in similar circumstances are capable of equal satisfactions. Just as for purposes of justice we assume equality of responsibility in similar situations as between legal subjects, so for purposes of public finance we agree to assume equality of capacity for experiencing satisfaction from equal incomes in similar circumstances as between economic subjects. *But although it may be convenient to assume this, there is no way of proving that the assumption rests on ascertainable fact.*<sup>359</sup>

The second class of value judgments is labeled, for convenience, ethical valuations. For Robbins, ethical valuations are always framed as “ought” propositions and, as such, prescribe a

---

<sup>353</sup> Robbins, 116–17. Emphasis original.

<sup>354</sup> Robbins, 118.

<sup>355</sup> Robbins, 118.

<sup>356</sup> Robbins, 139.

<sup>357</sup> Robbins, 139. What Robbins means by “verification” will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter.

<sup>358</sup> See, for example, Arthur C. Pigou, *The Economics of Welfare*, 4th ed. (London: Macmillan, 1932).

<sup>359</sup> Robbins, *An Essay*, 140. Emphasis added.

course of action. That ethical valuations should be excluded from economic science follows from Robbins's assertion that economics must be "entirely neutral between ends."<sup>360</sup> When Robbins first makes this statement in *ENSES*, neutrality has the widest possible compass, including political, aesthetic and ethical neutrality. Nevertheless, overall the primary concern is with ethical neutrality. Whenever the economist undertakes an ethical evaluation of ends, he has stopped practicing economics as a science. Presumably, Robbins would say the same thing about the economist who makes ethical judgments about the means-ends allocation (e.g., condemning the practice of burning fossil fuels to accomplish the end of heating one's house).

To make his claim concerning the ethical neutrality of economics vivid, Robbins takes the example of prostitution:

Economists, equally with other human beings, may regard the services of prostitutes as conducive to no "good" in the ultimate ethical sense. But to deny that such services are scarce in the sense in which we use the term, and that there is therefore an aspect of hired love, susceptible to treatment in the same categories of general analysis as enable us to explain fluctuations in the price of hired rhetoric, does not seem to be in accordance with the facts.<sup>361</sup>

In other words, it is possible to undertake a scientific economic analysis of prostitution that, even when prostitution is morally repugnant to the economist, is ethically neutral. In this case, moral disapprobation should not enter the economic analysis. So also, moral approbation should not enter the economic analysis, when the economist is considering the optimal allocation of resources. Robbins is fastidious on this point:

The pure theory of equilibrium enables us to understand how, given the valuations of the various economic subjects and the facts of the legal and technical environment, a system of relationships can be conceived from which there would be no tendency to variation. It enables us to describe the distribution of resources which, given the valuations of the individual concerned, satisfies demand most fully. *But it does not by itself provide any*

---

<sup>360</sup> Robbins, 24.

<sup>361</sup> Robbins, 28.

*ethical sanctions. To show that, under certain conditions, demand is satisfied more adequately than under any alternative set of conditions, does not show that it is desirable. There is no penumbra of approbation round the theory of equilibrium. Equilibrium is just equilibrium.*<sup>362</sup>

In other words, even the statement that one ought to maximize allocative efficiency is, for Robbins, a value judgment.

Robbins's distinction between positive statements (based on judgments about what "is" or "might be conceived to exist") and normative statements (based on judgements of what "ought to be") is founded on his conception of "facts" and "values". Facts pertain to what "is"; values to what "ought" to be the case. Based on this distinction, Robbins draws his (in)famous boundary between economics and ethics:

Economics deals with ascertainable facts; ethics with valuations and obligations. The two fields of enquiry are not on the same plane of discourse. Between the generalisations of positive and normative studies there is a logical gulf fixed which no ingenuity can disguise and no juxtaposition in space and time bridge over.<sup>363</sup>

Note that in drawing the boundary between economics and ethics, Robbins does not offer a definition of ethics; all he states is that ethics is concerned with valuations and obligations. Thus, consonant with one of his stated goals in *ENSES*, namely "to arrive at precise notions concerning the subject matter of Economic Science," he discusses ethics in *ENSES* only to the extent that it is pertinent to his delineation of economic science.<sup>364</sup> However, as will be discussed later in this chapter, underpinning this distinction is a particular meta-ethical position.

As Robbins acknowledges at several points in *ENSES*, his conception of—and, indeed, his exhortation for—an ethically-neutral economic science is indebted to Max Weber and his notion

---

<sup>362</sup> Robbins, 143. Emphasis added.

<sup>363</sup> Robbins, 148.

<sup>364</sup> Robbins, xiv.

of *Wertfreiheit*. Unsurprisingly then, there are numerous parallels between *ENSES* and Weber's two methodological essays on the social sciences, "Der Sinn der »Wertfreiheit« der soziologischen und ökonomischen Wissenschaften" and "Die »Objektivität« sozialwissenschaftlicher und sozialpolitischer Erkenntnis." For example, the following passage illustrates Weber's concern that social sciences should exclude the practical value judgments of the social scientist:

What is really at issue is the intrinsically simple demand that the investigator and teacher should keep unconditionally separate the establishment of empirical facts... and *his* own practical evaluations, i.e., his evaluation of these facts as satisfactory or unsatisfactory... These two things are logically different and to deal with them as though they were the same represents a confusion of entirely heterogeneous problems.<sup>365</sup>

In arguing that economics as a science should be free of conventional and ethical value judgments, Robbins is not suggesting that the actual ethical valuations that humans make, when allocating scarce resources, should be excluded from economic analysis. That would be inconceivable for Robbins. He recognizes that ethical value judgments are made when humans allocate resources to some ends and not to others. But these ethical judgments, which are reflected in the human orderings of competing ends, are taken as given. They are the data with which the economist undertakes his scientific analysis. Thus, Robbins writes economists "deal *inter alia* with values; but they deal with them as individual or social facts."<sup>366</sup> Whether these data are from a sample of humans who follow the categorical imperative unfailingly, or who

---

<sup>365</sup> Max Weber, "The Meaning of 'Ethical Neutrality' in Sociology and Economics," in *Max Weber on the Methodology of the Social Sciences*, trans. Edward Shils (Glencoe, Ill: Free Press, 1949), 11. Emphasis original.

<sup>366</sup> Robbins, "Economics and Political Economy," 4. In this, one can see, once again, see the influence of Weber. For instance Weber writes, "When the normatively valid is the object of empirical investigation, its normative validity is disregarded. Its "existence" and not its "validity" is what concerns the investigator." Weber, "The Meaning of 'Ethical Neutrality' in Sociology and Economics," 39. Robbins writes, "Now in so far [*sic*] as the idea of rational action involves the idea of *ethically appropriate* action, and it certainly is used in this sense in everyday discussion, it may be said at once—that no such assumption enters into the economic analysis. As we have just seen, economic analysis in *wertfrei* in the Weber sense. The values of which it takes account are valuations of individuals. The question whether in any further sense they are *valuable* valuations is not one which enters into its scope." Robbins, *An Essay*, 91. Emphasis original.



make all their decisions based on the utilitarian calculus, or some combination thereof, is of no consequence when undertaking economic analysis, except insofar as a shift in the proportion of Kantians or Benthamites in the sample under examination would change the ordering of competing ends.

Nor does the boundary that Robbins draws between economics as a science and ethics indicate that he wishes economists to limit themselves to scientific enquiry and to abstain from commenting on economic policy; a conclusion that was sometimes drawn in contemporary reviews of *ENSES*. As noted in Chapter 1, Robbins's position in *ENSES* is as follows:

All this is not to say that economists should not deliver themselves on ethical questions, any more than an argument that botany is not aesthetics is to say that botanists should not have views of their own on the lay-out of gardens. On the contrary, it is greatly to be desired that economists should have speculated long and widely on these matters, since only in this way will they be in a position to appreciate the implications as regards *given* ends of problems which are put to them for solution. Our methodological axioms involve no prohibitions of outside interests!<sup>367</sup>

Robbins is arguing, however, that whenever economists advise on a particular course for policy they are no longer simply practicing economics as a science but are also involved in doing ethics (or social philosophy, as he sometimes puts it in *ENSES*).

Figure 2 depicts Robbins's understanding of the relationship between economics and ethics in *ENSES* and how each of these disciplines contributes to different types of economic policy analysis and advice. Economic science is concerned with facts—"judgments of what exists or what might be conceived to exist."<sup>368</sup> And, at the risk of belaboring the point, the most critical fact for economic science, according to Robbins, is that humans find themselves in a state of scarcity that requires economic allocation. On the other hand, ethics is concerned with values—

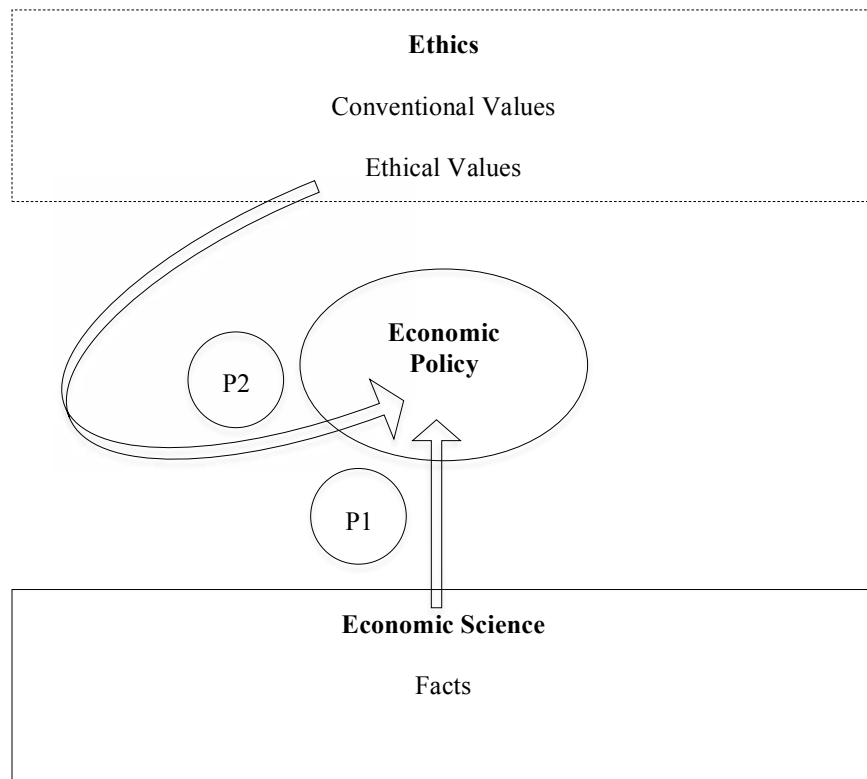
---

<sup>367</sup> Robbins, *An Essay on the Nature & Significance of Economic Science*, 1932, 133–34. Emphasis original.

<sup>368</sup> Robbins, "Live and Dead Issues in the Methodology of Economics," 345.

that is, conventional and ethical valuations. To reflect the fact that Robbins is far from presenting a definition of ethics, Figure 2 depicts the boundary of ethics as a dotted line.

**Figure 2: Ethics and Economic Science in *ENSES***



Economic science can contribute to economic policy directly by presenting analyses on the efficiency of scarce resource allocation, the opportunity costs involved, the consistency (or otherwise) of given ends, and potential unintended consequences. Policy advice of this type, which for convenience is labeled policy advice of class P1, is ethically neutral, as long as the economist takes the policy problem as given and refrains from ethical evaluations. Weber, in characteristically rigorous fashion, delineates policy advice of the P1 class as follows:

It is obviously possible and scientifically useful and necessary to establish propositions of the following type: in order to attain the end  $x$  (in economic policy),  $y$  is the only means, or

under conditions  $b_1$ ,  $b_2$  and  $b_3$ ,  $y_1$ ,  $y_2$  and  $y_3$  are the only or the most effective means. It should be emphatically recalled that the possibility of the exact definition of the end sought for is a prerequisite to the formulation of the problem.<sup>369</sup>

Weber's construal of class P1 policy advice does flatten out what is often required by the economist in rendering advice of this type. For example, it overlooks the fact that oftentimes the policy problem is not well specified or that methodological judgments need to be made when examining a given policy problem. These things will be discussed in more detail later.

Nonetheless, this delineation is consistent with Robbins's position that such policy advice can be offered in which there is no need for the economist to engage in ethical evaluation.

On the other hand, whenever an economist is asked to evaluate economic policy that involves making conventional value judgments or to recommend a particular course of policy action, he necessarily is doing ethics. For convenience, policy advice of this type is labeled policy advice of class P2. In doing so, the economist will most likely draw on policy advice of the P1 class, but as Robbins sees it, he will also need to draw on the discipline of ethics. From the perspective of the economist offering policy advice of class P2, ethics and economic science are *complementary* disciplines. The principal contribution of ethics to economic policy, in Robbins's schema, is to identify those ends that an individual or society should pursue. For Robbins, this contribution has a particularly teleological cast, which one surmises is due to his avowed "provisional utilitarianism".<sup>370</sup> Because of this, Robbins does not discuss the potential contribution of ethics to the means-ends deliberation, a point noted previously. One infers, however, that when confronted with this omission he would readily acknowledge ethics's potential contribution. On the other hand, the contribution of economic science is to undertake

---

<sup>369</sup> Weber, "The Meaning of 'Ethical Neutrality' in Sociology and Economics," 45.

<sup>370</sup> Lionel Robbins, "Interpersonal Comparisons of Utility: A Comment," *The Economic Journal* 48, no. 192 (1938): 635.

economic analyses of given policy problems. Within this schema, economic science is subordinate to ethics in that economics is “incapable of deciding as between the desirability of different ends.”<sup>371</sup> In this sense, economic science is subordinate to ethics and, for this reason, is depicted below ethics in Figure 2.

As already noted, Robbins suggests in *ENSES* that economic science and ethics “are not on the same plane of discourse” and, therefore, “between the generalisations of positive and normative studies there is a logical gulf fixed over which no ingenuity can disguise and no juxtaposition in space and time bridge over.”<sup>372</sup> Such stark language reinforces the impression that Robbins thinks the economist has no need of ethics. What the forgoing discussion has underscored, however, is that, while it is correct that Robbins wants an economic science that is ethically neutral, ethics is indispensable for the policy economist when offering policy advice of class P2. Hence, Robbins states, “I should, however, be the first to agree that the economist who thinks that his subject is capable of being used as a basis for policy without further appeal to social philosophy is cherishing a naïve delusion.”<sup>373</sup> Indeed, arguably it is because of the skill required in combining the deliverances of economic science and ethics, when offering policy advice of class P2, that Robbins eventually writes of a third discipline, political economy. Although some notion of political economy as a discipline is latent in *ENSES*, it is not until 1937—with the publication of Robbins’s *Economic Planning and International Order*—that there is a clear articulation of what this discourse of political economy is:

The book [*Economic Planning and International Order*] is essentially an essay in what may be called Political Economy, as distinct from Economics in the stricter sense of the

---

<sup>371</sup> Robbins, *An Essay*, 152.

<sup>372</sup> Robbins, 148.

<sup>373</sup> Robbins, “Live and Dead Issues in the Methodology of Economics,” 345.

word. It depends upon the technical apparatus of analytical Economics; but it applies this apparatus to the examinations of schemes for the realization of aims whose formulation lies outside economics [i.e., ethics]; and it does not abstain from appeal to the probabilities of political practice when such an appeal has seemed relevant.<sup>374</sup>

Robbins reiterates the importance of political economy in his *Richard T. Ely Lecture*, quoting the passage above from *Economic Planning and International Order*, before adding, “It should be clear then that Political Economy in this sense involves all the modes of analysis and explicit or implicit judgments of value which are usually involved when economists discuss assessment of benefits and the reverse or recommendations for policy.”<sup>375</sup>

In marking out space for a discipline labeled political economy, Robbins uses the label that was first used to describe economic discourse in an earlier period, a discipline that Robbins suggests “covered a *mélange* of objective analysis and applications involving value judgments.”<sup>376</sup> Here, however, Robbins reconceives political economy as a discipline that is distinct from economics and ethics, which, nevertheless, draws on both of them. Whereas once the work of what is now called economic science took place under the umbrella of political economy, Robbins argues it should now be housed within and conceived of as a distinct discipline. Political economy—in a way that was not possible in the eighteenth and nineteenth century—should draw on the deliverances of both ethics and economic science.

As the discipline that seeks to integrate the deliverances of both ethics and economic science, political economy is the discipline that informs and guides the policy economist. For Robbins, it is the discipline that brings together “the generalizations of positive and normative

---

<sup>374</sup> Lionel Robbins, *Economic Planning and International Order* (London: Macmillan, 1937), vii–viii.

<sup>375</sup> Robbins, “Economics and Political Economy,” 8.

<sup>376</sup> Robbins, 7. It is worth noting, however, that several of the classical economists (e.g., Adam Smith) would depart from Robbins’s meta-ethic. See the discussion later in this chapter in the subsection entitled “‘Facts’ and ‘Values’”.

studies.” Thus, although he contends “there is a *logical* gulf fixed [between economic science and ethics] over which no ingenuity can disguise and no juxtaposition in space and time bridge over,” he does think that it is possible—indeed necessary—to integrate these discourses when offering policy advice of the P2 class.<sup>377</sup> Figure 3, which is a modified version of Figure 2, schematizes Robbins’s understanding of the relationship between political economy, economics, and ethics, and their relation to policy advice of class P1 and class P2.

With Robbins’s entire schema in hand, certain points—some of which are touched on above—can be made with greater clarity. First, Robbins is arguing for an ethically-neutral economic science that is distinct from ethics. This discipline can analyze given economic issues in an ethically-neutral fashion. It can also be free of conventional valuations. As such, Robbins anticipates that economic science can facilitate a high degree of consensus among economists concerning the efficiency of resource allocations, the opportunity costs that are attendant to these allocations, the consistency (or otherwise) of given ends, and potential unintended consequences. Thus, in a vivid example, Robbins suggests:

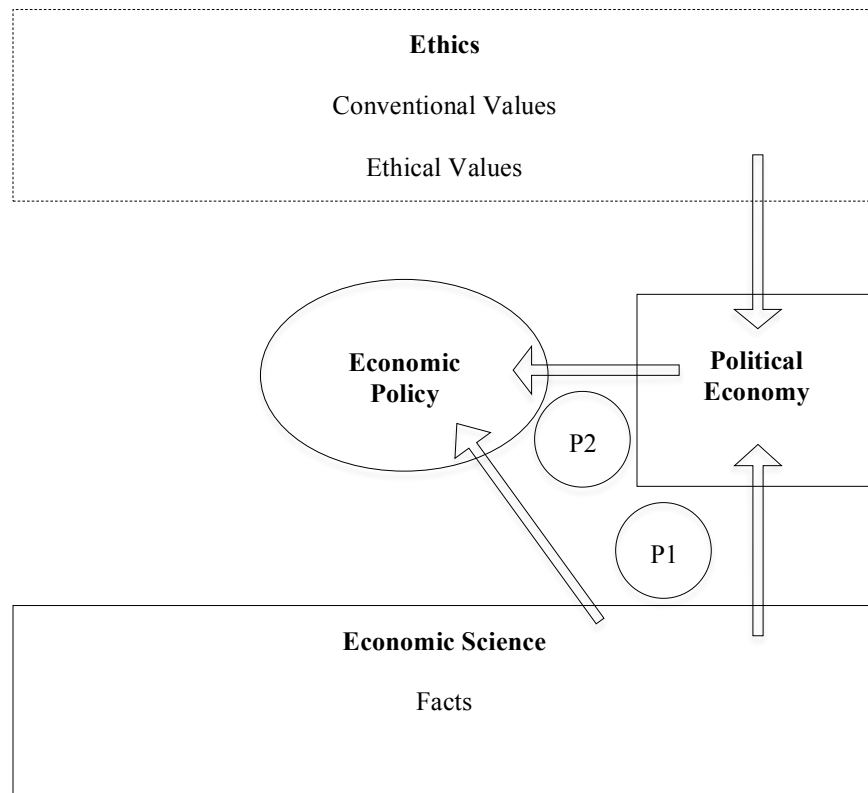
Shut Mr Hawtrey in a room as Secretary of a Committee composed of Bentham, Buddha, Lenin and the Head of the United States Steel Corporation, set up to decide upon the ethics of usury, and it is improbable that he could produce an “agreed document”. Set the same committee to determine the objective results of State regulation of the rate of discount, and it ought not to be beyond human ingenuity to produce unanimity—or at any rate a majority report, with Lenin perhaps dissenting.<sup>378</sup>

---

<sup>377</sup> Robbins, *An Essay*, 148. Emphasis added.

<sup>378</sup> Robbins, 151.

**Figure 3: Ethics, Economic Science, and Political Economy in *Economics and Political Economy***



Second, because economic science cannot speak to the desirability of competing ends, the discourse of ethics is needed. Indeed, by stressing the limits of economics as a distinct science, arguably Robbins makes the need for ethics clearer. Whenever the economist is advising on policy of the P2 class, she is also engaging in ethics and, therefore, she should have some competency in this discipline (or at least work with someone who has). From this perspective, the discourses of ethics and economics are complementary.

Third, Robbins believes that keeping the “different kinds of propositions” of economic science and ethics distinct will mitigate the “dangers of intellectual confusion on our part and justifiable criticism from outside.”<sup>379</sup> On this note, Robbins writes in the PREFACE TO THE

<sup>379</sup> Robbins, “Economics and Political Economy,” 4.

SECOND EDITION of *ENSES*, “All that I contend is that there is much to be said for separating out the different kinds of propositions involved by the different disciplines which are germane to social action, in order that we may know at each step exactly on what grounds we are deciding.”<sup>380</sup> Nevertheless, because the economist, when advising on a policy of the P2 class, must draw on the deliverance of both economic science and ethics—and this is a complex exercise—Robbins eventually comes to write of a third discipline, political economy. Political economy, as Robbins frames it *vis-à-vis* economic science and ethics, minimizes the danger of confusing the discourses of ethics and economic science, because it draws on these as distinct disciplines.

Fourth, there is a risk of confusion because of the way Robbins uses the terms economics and political economy in comparison to contemporary and past usage. For example, at present it is commonplace to refer to “economics” as covering what Robbins sees as falling under both economic science and political economy. For instance, modern welfare economics, which makes conventional and ethical judgments, is a part of mainstream economics.<sup>381</sup> Robbins’s usage, on the other hand, is to restrict the use of the term “economics” to economic science. Thus, if one were to say, “Economics is ethically neutral,” even if one holds that certain types of economic

---

<sup>380</sup> Robbins, *An Essay*, ix.

<sup>381</sup> For instance, economists have developed various techniques to measure changes in welfare associated with changes in the distribution of income. Creedy writes regarding these techniques: Such value judgements cannot be avoided in any attempt to describe a change in the income distribution in terms of an improvement or deterioration. The role of the economist is therefore not to pass judgement but to examine the implications of adopting a variety of value judgements. The problem is to find ways of specifying different value judgements and to work out the implications of such values for comparisons of income distributions. The extensive research on inequality measures that has been carried out over the last quarter century has been motivated by the desire to relate the measures explicitly to value judgements. John Creedy, *Taxation and Economic Behaviour: Introductory Surveys in Economics* (Edward Elgar Publishing, 2001), 3.

This quote also makes clear that Robbins’s understanding of political economy is more expansive than what falls under welfare economics. Within political economy, economists are not simply to clarify for decision makers the implications of different value judgements, but to advise that particular policies should be adopted.



analysis are, in fact, ethically neutral, this would oftentimes be incorrect based on current parlance. Failing to keep this in mind, when engaging with other methodological works, risks nothing more than logomarchy.

Finally, Robbins's schema is predicated on the ability of the economist to undertake objective economic analysis, based on his distinction between facts and values. Since Robbins first wrote *ENSES*, both the capacity for objective analysis and the fact-value dichotomy have been put under considerable scrutiny. Concerning the former, questions have been raised about whether an ethically-committed person is able to undertake objective economic analysis. Concerning the latter, questions have been raised about Robbins's construal of facts and values. The next two sections of this chapter will engage both of these issues. In doing so, it will lay the groundwork for taking the basic elements of Robbins's schema, but reconfiguring and enriching them to present an alternative framework for thinking about the relationship between ethics, political economy, and economics, which overcomes some of the deficiencies of Robbins's original schema. This adjusted schema is presented as a model for interdisciplinary exchange between ethicists and economists at the end of this chapter, in which political economy can serve as a bridge or hybrid discipline that integrates the deliverances of ethics and economics, without undermining the intellectual integrity or relative autonomy of either. Subsequently, this modified schema is also proposed as a model for ordering interdisciplinary dialogue between Christian theologians, ethicists, and economists.

### *Neutrality, Commitment, and Objectivity*

Underpinning Robbins's schema is the position that the economist has the capacity to perform economic analysis that is ethically neutral. The possibility of an ethically-neutral

economic science, in other words, is predicated on the capacity of the economist to undertake economic analysis that is free of ethical bias. If all economists lack this capacity, then any talk of an ethically-neutral economic science is pretense.

A potential concern with ethical neutrality is that it seems to ignore that the economist *qua* human is a particular subject who has been shaped by a unique history with its attendant traditions and practices, forms of reasoning, ethical commitments, and so on. Moreover, because the economist *qua* human is never fully cognizant of the various influences that arise from her unique history, this calls into question her ability to undertake economic analysis that is free of bias, including ethical bias.

There are various aspects to this general argument that need to be teased out, which will require a more detailed discussion of neutrality, commitment, and objectivity. These will be discussed from the standpoint of ethical neutrality, given the importance of this concept for Robbins's schema and the concerns of this dissertation. Before turning to this discussion, however, it is instructive to highlight some important features of Robbins's conception of the economist's capacities that will be important to keep in mind when evaluating the strength of this critique. In doing so, further use will be made of Weber's two essays on method in the social science to aid in coming to a fuller understanding of Robbins's position.

Robbins certainly holds that the economist *qua* human has ethical commitments.<sup>382</sup> Evidence for this is his own oft-stated commitment to being a proto-utilitarian, as well as his commitment to personal liberty.<sup>383</sup> In this sense, the economist *qua* human is always ethically

---

<sup>382</sup> The idea of the human as one who necessarily holds a set of commitments—including ethical commitments—is well articulated by Basil Mitchell in Basil Mitchell, "Neutrality and Commitment," in *How to Play Theological Ping-Pong: And Other Essays on Faith and Reason*, ed. William J. Abraham and Robert W. Prevoost (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1990), 113–31.

<sup>383</sup> See, for example, Robbins, "Economics and Political Economy," 8–9.

committed and never ethically neutral. At the same time, Robbins holds that the economist has the capacity to undertake higher-order analysis of scarcity-constrained choice that is ethically neutral, even though the economist is unavoidably an ethically-committed human. Recall, at this point, that Robbins's conception of ethical neutrality is a specific one: once the particular economic issue that is to be analyzed has been determined, the economist refrains from any ethical evaluation of ends and, one infers, the means-ends allocation. In this sense, Robbins holds that the economist has the capacity to perform objective economic analysis of a given economic issue—objective, that is, in the sense that economic analysis is not influenced by the economist's own particular set of ethical commitments. Thus, as noted earlier in this chapter, Robbins contends “it ought not to be beyond human ingenuity” for a committee comprised of Hawtrey, Bentham, Buddha, Lenin, and the Head of the United States Steel Corporation to reach agreement (or at least produce a “majority report”) on the effects of government regulation of the discount rate, despite their having different ethical commitments concerning usury.<sup>384</sup>

Although the economist must not allow her ethical commitments to impinge on her economic analysis, Robbins expects that her ethical commitments will inform her work as a political economist. In addition, one infers that Robbins finds it permissible for the economist's ethical commitments to influence her choice of subject to study within economic science. Two things are adduced to support this conclusion. One is the universality of Robbins's argument for scarcity-constrained choice and the part that ethics plays in shaping individual decisions. This applies equally to the economist as it does to humans in other walks of life. Thus, the economist—because she is a human who finds herself in the state of scarcity—is required to allocate her time to some lines of inquiry and not to others, and her particular ethical

---

<sup>384</sup> Robbins, *An Essay*, 151.

commitments are likely to influence her choice of some lines of inquiry over others. Indeed, values, broadly conceived to include ethical values, determine what areas are taken up for study within economic science—either by the economist or someone who sets the economist a particular problem for analysis—and this cannot be otherwise. The other piece of evidence to support this conclusion is Weber’s explicit argument, in the very essays that Robbins uses to support his own case for an ethically-neutral economic science, that values are what determines the specific issues that the social scientist takes up for analysis. Weber writes, “The problems of the social sciences are *selected by the value-relevance of the phenomena treated.*”<sup>385</sup> Nevertheless, to reiterate, once the line of inquiry has been selected by the economist, or given to her by another party, she is to remain ethically neutral when undertaking the economic analysis *qua* scientist.

Finally, although Robbins views the economist as having the capacity for objective economic analysis, this is not to say that his ethical commitments will never distort the economic analysis or that he will claim scientific legitimation for his value judgments when there is none on Robbinsian grounds. Robbins is well aware that this happens. Indeed, as discussed in the previous section, one of the main reasons that he wishes to keep the discourses of economic science and political economy distinct is to mitigate the risk of this happening.

In sum, Robbins affirms that the economist is an ethically-committed human, but this does not mean she is incapable of performing objective economic analysis. Put another way, Robbins’s position is consistent with positing that the economist *qua* human has the capacity for performing objective analysis, despite being ethically committed. It is this capacity that makes

---

<sup>385</sup> Weber, “The Meaning of ‘Ethical Neutrality’ in Sociology and Economics,” 21. Emphasis added.

the distinction between economic science and political economy workable. The critical issue, now, is whether this position can be defended against various objections.

One counter assertion to this position would be to deny that humans have the capacity for objective analysis along Robbinsian lines. In effect, this is to assert that humans lack the capacity to make valid judgments about the world and to reason deductively from these to a conclusion.

One is not aware of anyone who seriously asserts that humans lack the capacity to reason in this way. If anyone, however, were to hold this position, one wonders how he could have reached it, or continue to hold it with any confidence. Without the capacity to make accurate judgments about the world, how could anyone conclude with confidence (or even conclude at all) that humans lack the capacity to make accurate judgments or to reason deductively? He could not have reached this conclusion with any confidence based on introspection or his own observation of others, as it would contradict his own assertion that humans lack the capacity to make accurate judgments about the world.

A more moderate and subtle counter assertion is to contend that while persons have the capacity for objective analysis, it is always impeded by their ethical commitments to such an extent that any truly objective higher-order analysis of human activity is never possible. This assertion is not peculiar to the economist; it would also hold, *mutatis mutandis*, for the natural scientist. Nor is it lessened by the argument that the scientist studies the physical world, whereas the economist studies the human. Quite apart from the fact that some scientists study humans (for example, the neuroscientist or the physiologist), the natural scientists necessarily adopt some ethical stance towards the physical world.

A good representative of this position, from a theological standpoint, is Joerg Rieger. He writes in *No Rising Tide: Theology, Economics and the Future*:

In this book, we have challenged the idea that free-market economics [which Rieger uses synonymously with neoclassical or mainstream economics] is a neutral science that can be developed in a vacuum, as it were. Just as nature abhors a vacuum, there is no neutral position from which to start. Those who claim neutrality, whether in economic theory or in theology, forget this simple truth. Our social locations, our values, and our beliefs cannot be turned off at will, and neither can we ever completely escape the powers that be. If those things are not accounted for and addressed, they will come in through the back door and haunt us. This was Antonio Gramsci's point about what he called "traditional intellectuals": they may consider themselves neutral and independent, but they always end up supporting the status quo because this is the context that shapes us by default.<sup>386</sup>

Because Robbins is the modern progenitor of the argument that economic science can and should be ethically neutral, his argument is the ideal case to interrogate using the position advanced by Rieger in this quotation.

To start, it is helpful to reiterate that Robbins has no dispute with the contention that the economist is socially located, that he is committed to a particular set of beliefs and values, and so on. Nor does Robbins hold that economic science "can be developed in a vacuum." Robbins recognizes that economic science is dependent on the extent to which allocative efficiency and policy consistency are valued. "And thus in the last analysis," Robbins writes in the final paragraph of *ENSES*, "Economics does depend, if not for its existence, at least for its significance, on an ultimate valuation—the affirmation that rationality and ability to choose with knowledge is desirable."<sup>387</sup> Furthermore, as has already been discussed, the economist's or another party's values influence the subject areas that the economist takes up for investigation. Therefore, if some mainstream economists are claiming that economic science is neutral and

---

<sup>386</sup> Joerg Rieger, *No Rising Tide: Theology, Economics, and the Future* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress Press, 2009), 122.

<sup>387</sup> Robbins, *An Essay*, 157.

mean by that the economist *qua* human is uncommitted or that economics operates in a vacuum, they have no support from Robbins in these claims because this is *not* what Robbins means by ethical neutrality.<sup>388</sup> Robbins's schema can straightforwardly accommodate the claim that economists have neglected certain lines of scientific inquiry because of their social location or because the economics profession has become allied with certain "powers that be" without having to give up the claim that economic science can and should be ethically neutral.

Therefore, given that when Robbins writes of ethical neutrality he means the capacity to analyze a predetermined issue without undertaking any ethical evaluation of ends and the means-end allocation, the crux of this critique—if it is to prevail—must be that the economist can never "turn off at will" his ethical beliefs or "ever completely escape the powers that be" when undertaking economic analysis of a given problem. His ethical commitments, in other words, will always slip into the economic analysis. Robbins does not think that this is necessarily so; Rieger, on the other hand, does, such that ethical (and other) commitments will unconsciously "come in through the back door and haunt us."

In what ways, then, might the economist's ethical commitments unconsciously shape his economic analysis of a given issue such that they can never be fully kept out of the economic analysis, despite having the capacity to judge whether particular conditions obtain and to reason deductively? One way is via the theoretical apparatuses, or "analytical constructions" (to use Robbins's terminology) which the economist uses to examine a given economic issue.<sup>389</sup> For instance, in another passage in *No Rising Tide* Rieger writes:

---

<sup>388</sup> Rieger does not directly cite any mainstream economist in support of his claim that mainstream economics holds neutrality to mean that economic science operates in a vacuum.

<sup>389</sup> Robbins, *An Essay*, 91.

Perhaps the most important service of feminist perspectives in economics is to point out a “masculine bias” in neoclassical economics, which sees itself as neutral. The bias is not hard to spot and helps to create awareness of the problem of bias in other areas as well. On these grounds, feminist economists question such neoclassical ideas as the “separative self,” the ubiquity of self-interest, and the primacy of competition over cooperation. Proposing alternatives, they define economics “in terms of real-world issues of concern to women, men, and children, rather than as merely the examination of choice under the conditions of scarcity.” Once the idealist assumptions of economic theory are called into question, a tremendous opportunity for fresh research opens up in all areas.<sup>390</sup>

Presumably, this critique would not apply to all the analytical constructions that the mainstream economist employs. For instance, one surmises that this is not a critique of the analytical construction of a price floor, that is, a legal minimum price that must be paid. Rather, as the quote above suggests, it is a critique of the “idealist assumptions” of neoclassical economics, such as methodological individualism, self-interest, and competition that pertain to the human person and her relations with others. To address this vexed issue, self-interest will be taken as a specific example, not least because Robbins explicitly discusses it in *ENSES*.

Mainstream economics has been criticized from a number of quarters for its ubiquitous use of self-interest as a behavioral assumption by several figures, including no less an eminence than the Nobel-prize-winning economist, Amartya Sen, who has challenged the equation of rationality with self-interested maximizing behavior. Sen questions, “Why should it be *uniquely* rational to pursue one’s own self-interest to the exclusion of everything else? It may not, of course, be at all absurd to claim that maximization of self-interest is not irrational, at least not necessarily so, but to argue that anything other than maximizing self-interest must be irrational seems altogether extraordinary.”<sup>391</sup> What quickly becomes apparent from Sen’s critique is that the common use of self-interest is problematic for him because it fails as an accurate description of reality. Hence,

---

<sup>390</sup> Rieger, *No Rising Tide*, 85.

<sup>391</sup> Amartya Sen, *On Ethics and Economics*, The Royer Lectures (Oxford; New York: B. Blackwell, 1987), 15. Emphasis original.



what Sen calls for is use of analytical constructions that go beyond self-interested behavior in order to bring what he calls descriptive or predictive economics—which is akin to Robbins’s economic science—into greater accord with reality.<sup>392</sup>

Surprising as it will be for some, Robbins would not oppose Sen on this point. Robbins writes:

The general absurdity of the belief that the world contemplated by the economist is peopled only by egoists or “pleasure machines” should be sufficiently clear from what has been said already. The fundamental concept of economic analysis is the idea of relative valuations; and, as we have seen, while we assume that different goods have different values at different margins, we do not regard it as part of our problem to explain why these particular valuations exist. We take them as data. So far as we are concerned, our economic subjects can be pure egoists, pure altruists, pure ascetics, pure sensualists or—what is much more likely—mixed bundles of all these impulses.<sup>393</sup>

Indeed, Robbins’s position should really not be surprising given he emphasizes that “it is a characteristic of scientific generalizations that they refer to reality” and that the “concern of the economist is the interpretation of reality.”<sup>394</sup>

Having said this, Robbins holds that the economist has the prerogative to introduce analytical constructs, such as self-interested behavior, which simplify the economic analysis in order to make the issue under investigation more tractable and lucid. At one level this is necessary because it is not possible to describe reality in all its complexity. This is not peculiar to economic science. “In this respect,” writes Robbins, “the procedure of pure economics has its

---

<sup>392</sup> For this reason, Sen contends, “Sticking entirely to the narrow and implausible assumption of purely self-interested behaviour seems to take us in an alleged ‘short-cut’ that ends up in a different place from where we wanted it to go. The objective is to understand, explain and predict human behaviour in a way such that economic relationships can be fruitfully studied and used for description, prognosis and policy. The jettisoning of all motivations and valuations other than the extremely narrow one of self-interest is hard to justify on grounds of predictive usefulness, and it also seems to have rather dubious empirical support. To stick to that narrow path does not seem a very good way of going about our business.” Sen, 79.

<sup>393</sup> Robbins, *An Essay*, 94–95.

<sup>394</sup> Robbins, 104 and 105.

counterpart in the procedure of all physical sciences which have gone beyond the stage of collection and classification.”<sup>395</sup> For example, in some settings the physicist assumes the world is frictionless in order to reduce computational requirements. Therefore, just as it would be a mistake to infer from this simplifying analytical construct that the physicist believes the world is frictionless, so too it would be a mistake to infer, in every case, that whenever the economist employs the behavioral assumption of self-interest that he believes the world to be entirely peopled by self-interested individuals. For this reason, Robbins writes the purpose of simplifying analytical constructions in economic science “is not to foster the belief that the world of reality corresponds to the constructions in which they figure, but rather to enable us to study, in isolation, tendencies which in the world of reality, operate only in conjunction with many others.”<sup>396</sup>

What the economist needs to do, in other words, is to make methodological judgments about what analytical constructs to use when analyzing a particular economic problem. But to equate these methodological judgments with ethical judgments seems somewhat odd. If the economist chooses to use the behavioral assumption of self-interest because he thinks this is a better approximation to reality than another behavioral assumption or to make the analysis more tractable, it would be unfair to describe this as a situation in which the economist’s ethical commitments have unconsciously slipped in the back door. In this case he has *consciously* chosen to use the analytical assumption of self-interested behavior because he thinks it is a good approximation to reality and/or because it makes the economic analysis more manageable and

---

<sup>395</sup> Robbins, 94.

<sup>396</sup> Robbins, 94. Along this line, Mäki is right to caution, “A refined account of the presuppositions of theory T does not necessarily serve as an adequate account of the ontological convictions of an economist using T: deep in her heart, the economist may not fully believe in the world view presupposed by T.” Uskali Mäki, “Economic Ontology: What? Why? How?,” in *The Economic World View: Studies in the Ontology of Economics*, ed. Uskali Mäki (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 6–7.

lucid. Once again, this is not to deny that an economist's ethical commitments will never determine his use of particular analytical constructs, but rather to deny that this will always be the case.

The foregoing arguments can also be deployed, *mutatis mutandis*, in relation to the other way in which an economist's ethical commitments could be viewed as always unconsciously shaping her economic analysis, namely the factors she chooses to consider when analyzing a particular economic issue, which is really another type of methodological judgment. While, once again, it would be futile to deny that an economist's ethical commitments might unconsciously influence the factors she chooses to consider, this does not mean that it is always so. Thus, we return to one of the main problems with this objection, but one that also gives it much intuitive appeal: the move from particular instances in which the economist's ethical commitments have distorted her economic analysis to an assertion that they will *always* distort it.

Not only does someone holding this objection face the challenge of explaining why it is that economists of diverse ethical commitments reach similar conclusions when analyzing a given problem, more fundamentally he needs to hold this position as the one exception to his universal claim or acknowledge that his viewpoint is itself influenced by his ethical commitments. Why? Because presumably he has arrived at this conclusion by engaging in higher-order reflection on his own or someone else's attempts to undertake objective analysis—unless he has had some kind of special revelation. But unless he holds that this conclusion is the one instance in which his ethical commitments have not influenced the outcome, he would be compelled to admit that this assertion is itself influenced by his ethical commitments.

Therefore, in the final analysis, the claim that the economist has the capacity for ethically-neutral analysis can be defended against the objection that it is impossible, thereby making

Robbins's notion of an economic science that is *wertfrei* viable. In addition, the foregoing discussion has brought various aspects of the practice of economic science into clearer relief.

First, the practice of economics as an ethically-neutral science along Robbinsian lines is a difficult enterprise requiring specialty knowledge, technical skill, and integrity on the economist's part.<sup>397</sup> It requires familiarity with the body of knowledge that has been accumulated and a facility with the definitions and tools that have been developed by the economics community. Furthermore, the practice of economics requires ongoing accountability to the economics community.

Second, the practice of economic science requires methodological judgments. This is oftentimes forgotten. But that this is so is one of the reasons why economists differ in their economic analyses: one economist adopts a certain set of methodological judgments, while another adopts a different set, and as a result they reach different conclusions. Noting this, one might see it as evidence of the economists' inability to be objective. But this is not necessarily so, given Robbins's understanding of objectivity. It is understandable that when developing theoretical constructs to analyze a given, complex economic issue that economists will make different methodological judgments. What the capacity for objectivity initially makes possible, though, is for economists, who have different ethical commitments, to examine each other's analysis and to assent that if they had made the same methodological judgments they would have arrived at the same conclusions (assuming no deductive errors are made in the analyses). Put another way, economists can pinpoint where they disagree on how to analyze a given economic

---

<sup>397</sup> Brennan insightfully comments on this point: "Although the fact that human values are part of the object of study in economics may make it more difficult to obey relevant methodological strictures, I do not see this fact as creating methodological problems in itself. A positive analysis of actual moral attitudes is not the same as normative analysis, even if such a positive analysis is difficult to deliver." H. Geoffrey Brennan, "The Impact of Theological Predispositions on Economics: A Commentary," in *Economics And Religion: Are They Distinct?*, ed. H. Geoffrey Brennan and A. M. C. Waterman (Norwell, Massachusetts: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1994), 170.

issue. What the capacity for objectivity then makes possible is the ability to debate which theoretical construct offers a better account of reality. Robbins's discussion within *ENSES* often gives the impression that this is a straightforward and quick process. But in reality it is complex process and, as a result, debate can be prolonged, as economists contest which theoretical construct offers a better account of reality. Nevertheless, the expectation is that one theoretical construct will prevail over another—or that a better theoretical construct will be found—so that progress is made over time.

Third, because of the difficulty of the enterprise and the need to make judicious methodological judgments the practice of economics requires what Mitchell describes, in the context of discussing another discipline, as openness.<sup>398</sup> The economist must be prepared to keep an open mind as to the judiciousness of his methodological judgments. This is not to say he should drop a particular methodological judgment as soon as someone or something calls it into question. There are good reasons for persisting with some methodological judgments. However, it does suggest a willingness to scrutinize his judgments, to be aware of how his analysis is likely to change if different methodological decisions are made, and to alter his theoretical construct when the weight of evidence suggests this is necessary. More needs to be said on this topic as it relates not only to economic science, but also to ethics and political economy. However, this further discussion is best reserved until after an examination of Robbins's understanding of “facts” and “values.”

---

<sup>398</sup> Mitchell, “Neutrality and Commitment.”

## “Facts” and “Values”

As discussed earlier in this chapter, Robbins contends that economic science is concerned with “facts,” whereas ethics is concerned with “values.”<sup>399</sup> In characteristic fashion, Robbins elucidates his understanding of facts and values, by turning to a concrete example:

The proposition that the price of pork fluctuates with variations in supply and demand follows from a conception of the relation of pork to human impulses which, in the last resort, is verifiable by introspection and observation. We can ask people whether they are prepared to buy pork and how much they are prepared to buy at different prices. Or we can watch how they behave when equipped with currency and exposed to the stimuli of the pig-meat markets. But the proposition that it is *wrong* that pork should be valued, although it is a proposition which has greatly influenced the conduct of different races, is a proposition which we cannot conceive being verified at all in this manner. Propositions involving the verb “ought” are different in kind from propositions involving the verb “is”. And it is difficult to see what possible good can be served by not keeping them separate, or failing to recognise their essential difference.<sup>400</sup>

This example is instructive because it draws out two distinct but related issues that are critical to Robbins’s understanding of facts and values. First, what separates facts and values is that the former can be verified using introspection and observation, whereas the latter cannot. The proposition, “The price of pork fluctuates with variations in supply and demand” is able to be verified by introspection and direct observation, whereas the proposition, “It is wrong that pork should be valued” cannot.<sup>401</sup> On this basis, Robbins distinguishes facts from values. Second, factual propositions, which are “is” propositions, are on a “different plane” from or “different in kind” than value propositions, which are “ought” propositions. Thus, Robbins separates “is” and “ought” propositions in such a way that it is never possible to derive an “ought” proposition

---

<sup>399</sup> Robbins, *An Essay*, 148.

<sup>400</sup> Robbins, 148–49. Emphasis original

<sup>401</sup> Likewise, it is also possible to verify the proposition, “The price of pork will increase if demand increases, *ceteris paribus*,” by introspection and the possibility of verification were the set of conditions that give rise to this alternative state fulfilled. This proposition is an example of what Robbins would label a “may be conceived to exist” proposition.

solely from an “is” proposition. This section will examine both of these issues, with the goal of not only coming to a deeper understanding of Robbins’s understanding of “facts” and “values,” but also his epistemology and meta-ethics more generally.

When it comes to examining Robbins’s separation of values from facts, using his notion of verifiability, there is a need to tread sensitively. Some commentators move quickly to place Robbins in the logical positivist camp or, more minimally, to see him as being significantly influenced by logical positivism. It is easy to see why, given during the period in which Robbins wrote *ENSES* logical positivism was taking hold in philosophical circles in Britain. For example, Putnam writes, “It was during the depths of the Depression that Lionel Robbins, certainly one of the most influential economists in the world, persuaded the entire economics profession that interpersonal comparisons of utility are “meaningless.””<sup>402</sup> Putnam then cites Robbins’s 1938 article, “Interpersonal Comparisons of Utility: A Comment,” as evidence for this claim. The problem with this is that Robbins never describes interpersonal utility comparisons—which require a conventional value judgment—as “meaningless” or “nonsense.” Indeed, I have never been able to find a single instance in which Robbins explicitly states that conventional or ethical value judgments are meaningless or nonsense. This is, of course, not to say that one cannot argue that Robbins’s conception of values renders them meaningless. But in making such an argument it is important that one takes care to understand what Robbins means when he deploys terms, such as verification.

Perhaps the clearest statement of what Robbins means by verification comes towards the end of his career, when he gave the *Richard T. Ely Lecture* before *The American Association of Economists*. Robbins states:

---

<sup>402</sup> Hilary Putnam, *The Collapse of the Fact/Value Dichotomy and Other Essays* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2002), 53.

Let me say at once that I see no reason for denying to the study of the activities and institutions created by scarcity the title of science. It conforms fundamentally to our conception of science in general: that is to say the formation of hypotheses explaining and (possibly) predicting the outcome of the relationships concerned and the *testing of such hypotheses by logic and by observation*. This process used to be called *verification*. But, since this way of putting things may involve an overtone of permanence and nonrefutability, it is probably better described, as Karl Popper has taught us, as a search for falsification—those hypotheses which survive the test being regarded as provisionally applicable.<sup>403</sup>

Leaving aside Robbins's acknowledgement that he moves in a more Popperean direction over his life, what he initially means by verification is the confirmation of the validity of the postulates of economics and the conclusions deduced from these postulates. This, as has already been discussed, is one of the roles of empirical work. Thus, verification in Robbins's schema, functions to separate scientific from nonscientific propositions based on the ability to validate these propositions using introspection and observation. In this, Robbins follows the understanding of verification used by the classical economists of the nineteenth century, as encapsulated by John Neville Keynes in his summative methodological work of the time, *The Scope and Method of Political Economy*.<sup>404</sup> For Robbins, then, the ability to verify propositions by introspection and observation allows one to distinguish between fact and value propositions. In turn, one is justified in holding a fact proposition as true—as a fact—when it has been validated by introspection and/or observation. Verification in this schema, while separating scientific and nonscientific propositions, is not intended to go the extra mile and separate cognitively meaningful propositions from meaningless statements, as the verificationist principle of the logical positivists does. If this construal of Robbins's schema is correct, then there is the

---

<sup>403</sup> Robbins, "Economics and Political Economy," 2.

<sup>404</sup> John Neville Keynes, *The Scope and Method of Political Economy*, 2nd Edition (Macmillan, 1897).



possibility of nonscientific but cognitively meaningful value propositions within his schema.<sup>405</sup>

Are there instances of such propositions? It is instructive to attempt an answer to this question, albeit that Robbins does not explicitly deal with the issue of meaning, because it will aid in coming to an understanding of Robbins's meta-ethics.

To start, it is useful to turn to the case of conventional value propositions, and to a specific example, namely, "Humans are capable of equal satisfaction from consuming pork." In contrast to the proposition, "The price of pork fluctuates with variations in supply and demand," which can be verified by introspection and observation, this proposition cannot. Therefore, it is not a scientific statement and cannot be scientifically justified as true. For this reason, Robbins contends when it comes to a conventional value proposition, "It can be justified on grounds of general convenience. Or it can be justified by appeal to ultimate standards of obligation. *But it cannot be justified by appeal to any kind of positive science* [that is, introspection and observation]."<sup>406</sup> This quote is revealing for two reasons. First, it shows that Robbins recognizes there are other ways of justifying propositions. But this raises the issue as to why introspection and direct observation are considered "scientific," whereas other means of justification are not—an issue that becomes especially striking considering that within *ENSES* Robbins argues against some that introspection is a scientific means of justification for economic science. Second, the only alternative means of justification that Robbins considers within this quote are pragmatic means (it's convenient) and ethical means (it's obligatory). Other forms of justification, such as basicity, are not considered. It will be important to return to these two

---

<sup>405</sup> This interpretation also fits with Robbins's later adoption of falsifiability, as Popper allows nonscientific propositions to be cognitively meaningful. Karl R. Popper, *The Logic of Scientific Discovery*, Routledge Classics (London: Routledge, 2008).

<sup>406</sup> Robbins, *An Essay*, 141. Emphasis added.

issues below. But for now, it is necessary to see that although the conventional value proposition, “Humans are capable of equal satisfaction from consuming pork,” cannot be justified scientifically on Robbinsian grounds, it does not make this proposition—or others like it—meaningless or nonsense. Conventional value propositions are cognitively meaningful and purport to describe reality, albeit that they cannot be justified by introspection and observation. For this reason, Robbins writes of how persons routinely makes conventional value judgments that are cognitively and descriptively meaningful:

I do not deny that, in everyday life, we do make comparisons between the satisfactions of different people. When the head of a family carves up a turkey, he may take account of his estimate of the satisfaction afforded to different members by different proportions; and, in more serious judgments of social relationships outside the family, whenever we discuss distributional questions, we make our own estimates of the happiness afforded or the misery endured by different persons or groups of persons.<sup>407</sup>

Can the same be said of ethical value propositions? Certainly, they are nonscientific propositions for Robbins, hence he contends “the proposition that it is *wrong* that pork should be valued, although it is a proposition which has greatly influenced the conduct of different races, is a proposition which we cannot conceive being verified at all in this manner [that is, by introspection and/or observation].”<sup>408</sup> But are they cognitively meaningful propositions for Robbins? I conclude they are not. Two things are adduced in support of this conclusion. First, is Robbins’s assertion that when there is disagreement over ends there is “no room for argument.”<sup>409</sup> Robbins writes:

In the rough-and-tumble of political struggle, differences of opinion may arise either as a result of differences about ends or as a result of differences about the means of attaining ends. Now, as regards the first type of difference, neither Economics nor any other science

---

<sup>407</sup> Robbins, “Economics and Political Economy,” 5.

<sup>408</sup> Robbins, *An Essay*, 148–49.

<sup>409</sup> Robbins, 150.

can prove solvent. *If we disagree about ends it is a case of thy blood or mine—or live and let live, according to the importance of the difference, or the relative strength of our opponents. But, if we disagree about means, then scientific analysis can often help us to resolve our differences.* If we disagree about the morality of the taking of interest (and we understand what we are talking about), *then there is no room for argument.* But if we disagree about the objective implications of fluctuations in the rate of interest, then economic analysis should enable us to settle our dispute.<sup>410</sup>

Because the determination of ends is oftentimes immediately bound up with ethical value propositions—or finds ultimate reference to such—this quote suggests that there is no way to rationally adjudicate between ethical values. Indeed, one is reduced to “thy blood or mine—or live and let live.”<sup>411</sup> Ethical values are reduced to the expression of one’s will in which no rational deliberation with another is possible.

Second, ethical value propositions are always specified as “ought” propositions. For example, “It is wrong that pork should be valued.” However, note that for Robbins the “It is wrong” does no semantic work in describing an actual state of affairs. The function of this proposition is simply to prescribe a course of action. To see this, consider the proposition, “Valuing pork is wrong,” which is a modified version of Robbins’s ethical value proposition, “It is wrong that pork should be valued.” In this simpler form, a particular ethical property (wrongness) is ascribed to a particular action (valuing pork). There is no doubt that this “is” proposition involves an ethical valuation. Yet, if we take this proposition at face value it does not necessarily prescribe a course of action. It simply ascribes an ethical property (wrongness) to an action (valuing pork), as a description of reality. In this sense, it is akin to the proposition, “the price of pork fluctuates with variations in supply and demand,” albeit that this proposition connects effect (movement in the price of pork) to cause (variations in supply and demand),

---

<sup>410</sup> Robbins, 150–51. Emphasis added.

<sup>411</sup> Robbins, 150.

whereas the proposition, “Valuing pork is wrong,” attributes an ethical property (wrongness) to an action (valuing pork). But for Robbins, ethical value propositions are always “ought” propositions, they are never “is” propositions. One infers this is because ethical valuations never describe an actual state of the world. They are nondescriptive propositions and, therefore, cognitively meaningless as “is” propositions. Rather, as “ought” propositions their semantic function is to express a speaker’s will and prescribe a course of action for their hearers.<sup>412</sup>

As prescriptions for action, ethical value propositions play a crucial role in Robbins’s schema. Indeed, because one can never derive an “ought” proposition from an “is” proposition, they play a necessary role in the discourse of political economy in enabling the economist *qua* political economist to recommend a set of economic policies. Perhaps the most vivid example of this claim, is when Robbins asks his reader to imagine a hypothetical situation in which conventional value propositions are taken as scientific propositions (even though he believes they are not). Robbins writes:

Suppose that we could bring ourselves to believe in the positive status of these conventional assumptions, the commensurability of different experiences, the equality of capacity for satisfaction, etc. And suppose that proceeding on this basis, we had succeeded in showing that certain policies *had the effect* of increasing “social utility”, even so it would be totally illegitimate to argue that such a conclusion by itself warranted the inference that these policies *ought* to be carried out. For such an inference would beg the whole question whether the increase of social satisfaction was socially obligatory. And there is nothing within the body of economic generalizations, even thus enlarged by the inclusion of elements of conventional valuation, which affords any means of deciding this question. Propositions involving “ought” are on an entirely different plane from propositions involving “is”.<sup>413</sup>

In other words, within the discourse of political economy, even if one could establish that humans are capable of equal satisfaction (a conventional valuation that is now supposed to be a

---

<sup>412</sup> This account is also consistent with Robbins’s assertion that one can never derive an “ought” solely from an “is”.

<sup>413</sup> Robbins, *An Essay*, 142. Italicization original; underlining added.

fact), and that a set of policies would increase utility (a deliverance of economic science), an ethical value proposition would also need to be supplied (from ethics) to complete the recommendation for action.

With the foregoing analysis in hand, one can draw two important conclusions about Robbins's epistemology and meta-ethics, respectively. First, Robbins is an epistemological methodist. He specifies introspection and observation as the two scientific criteria for determining whether one has justified knowledge of the "facts." This parsing renders any proposition that cannot be justified in this way as a nonscientific value proposition. But this begs the question, why are introspection and observation the criteria for scientific justification? In this direction, it is telling that many within mainstream economics have attempted to get what Robbins labels conventional value propositions back on the table as factual propositions or to find alternative criteria for social evaluation (within welfare economics) that can be deemed scientific. It is worth contemplating how much less resource might have been expended on this task if those working on economic methodology had rejected Robbins's methodism and started with a particularist epistemology, asking themselves: Given we think it is reasonable to believe that persons are capable of equal satisfaction, why and how are we justified in this belief?

Second, Robbins's meta-ethics is best construed as noncognitivist. This means "moral claims do not really make assertions of fact but, rather, express the moral agent's or appraiser's attitudes. Consequently, moral claims can be neither true nor false, there can be no moral facts or true moral claims, and moral knowledge is not possible."<sup>414</sup> This meta-ethics underpins Robbins's conception of "facts" and "values." Putnam encapsulates what is at stake with this concept of facts and values when he concludes, "The fact/value dichotomy is, at bottom, not a

---

<sup>414</sup> David O. Brink, *Moral Realism and the Foundations of Ethics* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 3.

*distinction* but a *thesis*, namely the thesis that “ethics” is not about “matters of fact.”<sup>415</sup>

Robbins’s noncognitivism is usefully contrasted with the meta-ethics of the moral realist who holds “there are moral facts and true moral claims whose existence and nature are independent of our beliefs about what is right and wrong.”<sup>416</sup>

For Robbins’s noncognitivism to be convincing—like all noncognitivists—he would need to offer a convincing account as to why everyday ethical speech putatively describes moral realities as they pertain to persons, institutions, actions, and things. Because Robbins was not an ethicist or attempting to write a meta-ethics he does not undertake such a task. Instead, he seems to take it as self-evident that ethical value propositions are *only* prescriptions and that there is no means of rationally adjudicating between ethical values whenever there are disagreements. On this front, however, it is highly questionable whether Robbins believed his own press. Much of his own writing on political economy—which is to say, the majority of his writing—consistently offers rational arguments for why particular economic and political institutions and policies lead to more humane societies. In other words, they are not examples of discourse where Robbins simply expresses his own preference for certain set of institutions and policies. And, although demonstrating this is beyond the scope of this dissertation, *contra* the meta-ethics underpinning *ENSES*, one suspects that as Robbins actually practiced the art of political economy he was, in fact, a moral realist of the naturalist stripe. If correct, it demonstrates how difficult it is to be a consistent noncognitivist.

---

<sup>415</sup> Putnam, *The Collapse of the Fact/Value Dichotomy and Other Essays*, 19.

<sup>416</sup> Brink, *Moral Realism and the Foundations of Ethics*, 7.

Where Robbins's noncognitivism becomes an acute issue for this dissertation is that most Christian theologians and ethicists are committed moral realists.<sup>417</sup> Does this mean that one is required to jettison Robbins's schema completely? In particular, does it mean one has to give up on the notion of economics as a discourse that is distinct from ethics, and the notion of political economy as a bridge discourse, because it is based on Robbins's particular understanding of "facts" and "values"? Even if one rejects Robbins's noncognitivism, in favor of moral realism, this does not follow. It is possible to make a distinction between positive and normative statements without having to found it on Robbins's distinction between "facts" and "values". The goal of the final section of this chapter is to demonstrate that it is possible to adjust Robbins's schema by placing it on a moral realist meta-ethics. With this in hand, it will then argue that this adjusted Robbinsian schema has distinct advantages over the main alternative, namely to expand the scope of economics as the study of scarcity-constrained choice to include ethical judgments, thereby rendering economic science and political economy as distinct disciplines redundant.

### *Adjusting Robbins's Schema*

So far, this dissertation has supported Robbins's contention that economics should be the discipline that studies scarcity-constrained choice, first by defending the reality of scarcity, and second by offering arguments, including theological arguments, as to why it is appropriate that economics should limit its scope along this line. What this chapter has gone on to detail is that Robbins contends that economics should also be ethically neutral with respect to ends and the means-end allocation, given the economist's capacity for objective analysis. By setting

---

<sup>417</sup> But not all. See for example, D. Z. Phillips, "Religious Beliefs and Language-Games," in *Wittgenstein and Religion*, by D. Z. Phillips (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1993), 56–78.

economics within Robbins's wider schema, this chapter has also shown that the stricture of ethical neutrality does not apply in the bridge discipline of political economy; and necessarily so. Furthermore, this chapter has also pointed out that central to Robbins's demarcation of economics, ethics, and political economy is his particular construal of "facts" and "values".

With a moral realist meta-ethics it is still possible to demarcate economics as the discipline that studies scarcity-constrained choice and to do so while remaining ethically neutral with respect to ends and the means-ends allocation. What is critical for this demarcation of economics is that humans have the capacity for objective analysis. This capacity was defended earlier in this chapter. Based on this demarcation, the economist is able to offer policy advice of class P1 that is ethically neutral.

Ethics proper is concerned, *inter alia*, with the ethical evaluation (for example, goodness and rightness) of persons, institutions, objects, and so on, on the foundation of a moral realist meta-ethics. As such, ethics is concerned principally with ethical value propositions, but these propositions are no longer considered as mere prescriptions that express the speaker's will (or emotion or attitude). Nevertheless, it is judicious to recognize that ethical value propositions differ from other kinds of propositions. This is evident when it comes to the epistemological justification of the propositions that economics and ethics are, respectively, concerned with. For this reason, there is merit in making a distinction between positive and normative statements, as long as one recognizes that normative statements, which involve ethical judgments, also purport to be factual statements about the world and can be justified as such. On this reading of positive and normative statements, one recognizes that, in the words of Putnam, "There is a distinction to



be drawn (one that is useful in some contexts) between ethical judgments and other sorts of judgments.”<sup>418</sup>

In reaching ethical judgments, many moral realists will contend that it is possible to move from an “is” to an “ought”. What this effectively means, once a moral realist meta-ethics has been granted, is that it is possible to move solely from a non-moral fact to a moral conclusion—a moral conclusion that oftentimes has the force of prescribing a course of action.<sup>419</sup> Moral realists of both the naturalist or supernaturalist variety hold this to be possible because ethical properties can be defined non-ethically.<sup>420</sup> For example, a naturalist may define “good” in terms of those conditions that promote human flourishing. A supernaturalist, on the other hand, may define the good in terms of what God commands.<sup>421</sup>

At this point, it is not critical for the adjustment of Robbins’s schema to decide in which tent one wants to be in within the moral realist camp. What is crucial is that moral facts exist, that their truth or falsehood is independent of the moral beliefs that humans actually hold, that

---

<sup>418</sup> Putnam, *The Collapse of the Fact/Value Dichotomy and Other Essays*, 19.

<sup>419</sup> I take it to be commonplace among moral realists that the establishment of some moral facts places persons under an obligation to act, or refrain from acting, as the case may be. For example, if one were to demonstrate that the ethical value proposition, “It is wrong to value pork,” is a moral fact, this puts one under an obligation to refrain from valuing pork. It is, however, important to note that in some contexts moral facts do not carry the force of an “ought” proposition. Rather, their semantic function is simply to describe a state of affairs. If I say to my son, Jonathan, “You have been a good boy today,” not only do I intend to describe his goodness but also to exhort him that he ought to continue to behave as he has today. On the other hand, when I say to my wife, “Jonathan has been a good boy today,” my intention is simply to describe.

<sup>420</sup> Or, as Frankena puts it, “Ethical terms can be defined in terms of nonethical ones, and ethical sentences can be translated into nonethical ones of a factual kind.” William K. Frankena, *Ethics*, 1973, 98.

<sup>421</sup> Famously, the ability to define ethical properties non-ethically was challenged by G. E. Moore’s open-question argument—an argument that purportedly succeeds because whenever the good is defined non-ethically (say, in terms of desirability), a competent speaker is still faced with an open question: “Y is desirable, but is it good?” In contrast, other definitions, such as, “A bachelor is an unmarried man,” result in closed questions, for to state, “Z is a bachelor,” but then to ask, “But is he unmarried?” is meaningless. For this reason, Moore concluded that the good is undefined and *sui generis*.

some moral beliefs can be justified as moral facts, and that these moral facts will oftentimes place humans under an obligation to act.

Political economy is the discipline that attempts to integrate the propositions of ethics and economics with the goal of proffering policy advice—that is policy advice of class P2. As such, it is a hybrid or bridge discipline and the main discipline that the policy economist or the applied economic ethicist contributes to and draws upon in offering policy advice. Principally, it requires her to identify those normative propositions that identify the goodness of particular ends—ends that can be justified as good and are, therefore, truly good “goods”—and to couple those with the positive propositions of economics in order to recommend the most efficient resource allocation in order to realize those goods. In doing so, it will oftentimes involve her making judicious tradeoffs among competing ends, with knowledge of the opportunity costs involved in making these trade-offs. At times, it will require her to make ethical judgments about human dispositions to act—both vicious and virtuous—and human institutions and policies; and economic judgments about how particular institutions and policies influence human dispositions to act, and *vice versa*, insofar as they influence scarce resource allocation.

The scope of inquiry of these different disciplines and their relationships to one another can be illustrated by considering the human act. When the human person acts, he does so by pursuing some end and selecting various means for the achievement of that end. The choice of end and means may involve some conscious ethical evaluation, or some previous ethical evaluation in the case of which the pursuit of a particular end and the choice of means is so habituated that no self-conscious deliberation occurs. Within the state of scarcity, choosing a particular end necessarily entails an opportunity cost for the person, as he necessarily gives up other ends in pursuing this one. In choosing to pursue a particular end, the agent weighs these

opportunity costs in arriving at his decision to act. For any given act, the agent may be more or less conscious of his deliberation in weighing opportunity costs.

While any one act is viewed as a singular event for an observer, the foregoing discussion suggests there are different types of deliberation that go into an agent's decision to pursue a particular end. Both ethics and economics are disciplines that undertake higher-order reflection on different aspects of the agent's act. Ethics is concerned with the first aspect of the human act, namely, the ethical evaluation of the ends and the means-ends evaluation. Various normative ethical theories have been developed to undertake this evaluation. Further, because the ethical evaluation of some human acts present particular difficulties, casuistry remains an important activity within contemporary ethics. Economics is concerned with the second aspect of the human act, namely, economic analysis of an agent's decision to allocate scarce resources to some ends, but not to others. What the discipline of political economy offers are recommendations as to what ends an agent should pursue within the state of scarcity and what scarce resources should be allocated in order to pursue those ends. In making recommendations of this sort, political economy will draw on the higher-order reflection that ethics and economics have undertaken with respect to human action, because when it comes to proffering economic policy advice of the P2 class, higher-order analysis of both aspects of the human act is required in order to outline an ethically appropriate and economically consistent course of action that the human person should follow cognizant of the opportunity costs of doing so.

Another way of illustrating the relationship between the three disciplines is in relation to a practical syllogism. The practical syllogism "consists of a major premiss, which is a general principle about what it would be good to have, a minor premiss, which is a judgment of how one

can realize that good in the circumstances one faces, and a conclusion, which is an action.”<sup>422</sup> As applied to Robbins’s schema, the major premise would be a normative proposition that would be supplied by ethics (for example, “A lower unemployment rate is better”). The minor premise would be a positive proposition supplied by economics (for example, “A reduction in the minimum wage will reduce the unemployment rate”). The recommendation for action would then be to reduce the minimum wage. Political economy would be the intellectual discipline within which the major and minor premises would be selected and combined in order to recommend a course for action. In this sense, political economy is a practical discipline.

Both these illustrations have been simplified for expositional purposes. In reality, the issues that are being investigated within ethics, economics, and political economy are more complex. For example, most often it is not the activity of a single person that is being studied, but rather the activity of numerous persons that comprise a society who are often pursuing competing ends and who differ concerning which goals society should pursue. Likewise, determining which ethical propositions and economic propositions hold in any given situation is not always straightforward. The ethical proposition, “A lower unemployment rate is better,” is not always universally true. Additional conditions need to hold for this proposition to be true. Moreover, there may be long-term trade-offs between reducing the unemployment rate and some other societal good that needs to be taken into account. Similarly, the economic proposition, “A reduction in the minimum wage will reduce the unemployment rate,” will only be true if particular conditions obtain and, again, may involve trade-offs with other societal goods.

This adjusted Robbinsian schema can be compared to its main alternative (A1) in which the scope of economics would be expanded to include ethical evaluation, or, to use Robbins’s

---

<sup>422</sup> John Deigh, *An Introduction to Ethics* (Cambridge University Press, 2010), 219.

own mode of expression, “to include judgments of what is good or bad in the world of relative scarcities.”<sup>423</sup> To be clear, this is not to say that economics would be reduced to making ethical judgments about “what is good or bad in the world of relative scarcities,” but rather that these judgments would be undertaken in conjunction with economic analysis regarding the allocation of scarce resources. This expansion in scope would mean that there would be no distinction between economics and political economy *à la* Robbins as both ethical deliberation and deliberation about scarce resource allocation would be housed within the one intellectual discipline called economics, albeit that there would still need to be some recognition that both kinds of deliberation require different sets of tools and judgments. In many ways, this would be a return to the political economy of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but consciously concerned with human behavior in the world of relative scarcities, and with all the tools that have been developed in the intervening years at the economist’s disposal. It is also consistent with an understanding of “economics” that includes welfare economics, even when economists are laying out the implications of various value judgments and not advising on a particular course of action, albeit that this would fall short of a full-blown political economy as envisaged by Robbins.

In A1, the economist, when undertaking economic analysis, would still need to draw on the ethical value propositions developed within the intellectual discipline of ethics.

A further alternative (A2) to the adjusted Robbinsian schema would be to subsume the reconstituted intellectual discipline of economics from A1, which undertakes both ethical deliberation and deliberation about scarce resource allocation, within the discipline of ethics. This would be akin to a return to a time when “economic issues” were part of moral philosophy.

---

<sup>423</sup> Robbins, “Live and Dead Issues in the Methodology of Economics,” 345.

The demarcation of economics in A1 is closest to how mainstream economics is currently conceived, taught in the academy, and practiced in the policy realm. For example, mainstream economists see economics as a discipline that is comprised of both a scientific or “positive” part and an ethical or “normative” part. Certainly, as economics is taught at the introductory and intermediate levels, students are introduced to the distinction between positive and normative economics and how this distinction separates the work of the economist *qua* scientist from the economist *qua* policy adviser. For example, Gregory Mankiw in his popular introductory textbook *Principles of Economics*, after defining positive statements as “claims that attempt to describe the world as it is” and normative statements as “claims that prescribe how the world should be,” counsels students:

As you study economics, keep in mind the distinction between positive and normative statements. Much of economics just tries to explain how the economy works. Yet often the goal of economics is to improve how the economy works. When you hear economists making normative statements, you know they have crossed the line from scientist to policy adviser.<sup>424</sup>

Although a distinction is oftentimes made between the scientific versus the policy work of the economist, the discipline of “economics” as taught and practiced gives too little attention to its normative work, outside of what takes place in modern welfare economics. Economists have very little training in ethics alongside their training in economics proper. When developing policy recommendations, the policy economist oftentimes does not think of herself as drawing on ethical discourse alongside of the discourse of economic science in developing and advising on policy.

A2 is also a live option in some circles, not least some theological circles. For example, the proposal of the theologian D. Stephen Long can be viewed as an argument that economics

---

<sup>424</sup> Mankiw, *Principles of Microeconomics*, 29.

should be subsumed within the intellectual discipline of Christian ethics.<sup>425</sup> What this proposal underplays—or even dismisses—is the specialist works that economic science has been able to undertake in understanding the efficient allocation of scarce resources.

Foundationally, the modified Robbinsian schema recognizes that higher-order ethical judgments, scientific judgments concerning the allocation of scarce resources, and judgments about how to combine these latter two judgments into policy recommendations are different kinds of human judgments. As such, it should not be surprising that different vocabularies, methods, tools, and institutional practices have been developed to assist one in making different kinds of judgments in a robust fashion. For example, over the course of time, economics has increasingly used mathematical tools to study scarcity-constrained choice. Mathematical techniques of static and dynamic constrained optimization, for instance, have been fruitful in studying a range of issues from household resource allocation to the management of renewable resources. These techniques are not as amenable to ethical evaluation, which is why ethics has developed other techniques for doing so. This may seem obvious, but at times it appears to get overlooked in some of the work at the intersection of Christian ethics and economics. To reach ethical judgments about why a society should not tolerate economic inequality beyond a certain level, for instance, requires a different set of vocabularies, methods, tools, and institutional practices than those for designing an efficient tax and benefit system to help reach this end. Similarly, political economy requires practical judgment in discerning what issues need to be addressed and how to draw on the deliverances of ethics and economics in doing so.

In principle, there is nothing that prohibits all of these kinds of judgments being housed within a single intellectual discipline (i.e., pursuing A2). Indeed, historically this has been the

---

<sup>425</sup> Long, *Divine Economy*.

case. There are, however, a number of things to recommend the adjusted Robbinsian schema that conceives of three distinct, although related, disciplines, which undertake different investigations that require different kinds of judgments. First, there are the gains associated with specialization and the mitigation that the concerns of political economy are ignored. The disciplines of ethics and economics both require the mastery of particular vocabularies, methods, tools, and institutional practices, which aid the ethicist and economist in making particular kinds of judgments, that further the accumulation of human knowledge. These gains have been made because persons have been able to specialize in particular academic disciplines. On the other hand, some worry that academic specialization, even if it has led to gains in human knowledge, has resulted in disciplinary fragmentation. Note, however, that within the adjusted schema, the intellectual discipline of political economy seeks to integrate the findings from the disciplines of ethics and economics. Moreover, the discipline of political economy will likely supply new work for the disciplines of ethics and economics, as work in the policy realm will confront particular problems that are best investigated in further detail within the disciplines of ethics and economics. A disadvantage of A1 and A2 is that they are likely to impede specialization or, even worse, to encourage the neglect of some lines of inquiry. Indeed, as noted above, economics as it is now taught tends to neglect the ethical concerns of political economy. Students acquire the vocabularies, methods and tools that enable them to do the work of economic science; however, it is questionable whether they acquire the corresponding vocabularies, methods, and tools to do the work of ethics and, therefore, political economy. Specialization in economic science is needed; but so too is specialization in political economy.

Second, the adjusted Robbinsian schema mitigates the risk of confounding different kinds of judgments or, related, of overstepping one's disciplinary expertise—things that are more



likely to occur in A1 and A2. This was the principal reason why Robbins urged that a clear distinction be made between ethics and economics. So, today, concerns arise that different types of judgments are sometimes confounded. For example, when the theoretical construction of the self-interested agent—which may be a legitimate theoretical construction when it comes to investigating a particular problem within economic science—is straightforwardly deployed to argue that persons *should* only seek their self-interest because, when coordinated through the market, that will lead to improved social outcomes, without the economist realizing that she has made ethical judgments in offering this prescription. A similar problem arises when the ethicist offers a set of economic policy prescriptions some of which are mutually inconsistent or will not achieve the intended policy goals. The adjusted Robbinsian schema seeks to avoid instances of this sort by making distinctions between ethics, economics, and political economy and, then, rightly ordering these disciplines to one another.

### *Conclusion*

This chapter has introduced Robbins's notion of political economy and its relationship to the disciplines of ethics and economic science. Given this schema, this chapter has defended Robbins on the count that it is possible to conceive economic science as an ethically-neutral discipline, based on the human capacity for objective analysis. On the other hand, it has shown that Robbins's meta-ethics is noncognitivist which presents a particular problem if this schema is to be used to promote dialogue between economists and ethicists, not least Christian theologians and ethicists. Despite Robbins's noncognitivism, this chapter has argued that his schema can be "adjusted"—such that moral realism becomes the underpinning meta-ethics—but where it is still

possible and advantageous to conceive of three intellectual disciplines: ethics, economics, and political economy.

The argument presented herein is applicable to ethicists and economists who are interested in the relationship between economics and ethics, regardless of whether these ethicists and economists are Christian ethicists or Christian economists. Indeed, the argument of this chapter stands as a call for policy economists to receive further training in ethics and for greater collaboration to take place between ethicists and economists, without the need to make any necessary recourse to Christian theological or ethical arguments. Given that the overarching goal of this dissertation, however, is to facilitate exchange between Christian theologians and ethicists and economists, Chapter 5 turns to this task within the context of the adjusted Robbinsian schema presented herein.

## CHAPTER 5

### CHRISTIAN POLITICAL ECONOMY

#### *Introduction*

The modified Robbinsian schema outlined in the previous chapter related economics, ethics, and political economy as interdependent disciplines. Each discipline was viewed as having relative autonomy in that they each have a particular line of inquiry and associated vocabularies, methods, and tools, and so on, to facilitate these respective inquiries. But they were also viewed as dependent on one another in different ways. Political economy, as a hybrid discipline, is dependent on the disciplines of ethics and economics. In addition, political economy will direct much of the work of economics and will give to ethics issues that require further ethical deliberation. It may also be the case that the deliverances of economic science “constrain” or “modify” the work of ethics and political economy in important ways by, for example, constraining the number of ends that can be achieved, given the available resources; or by showing the achievement of some ends is inconsistent.

Thus far, the discussion of economics, ethics, and political economy has treated each as if it is a generic discipline, as if there were no particular instantiations such that one might speak of *Buddhist* ethics or *utilitarian* political economy. This chapter now turns to the question of whether one may speak of Christian varieties of these disciplines, with a view to clarifying the nexus for interdisciplinary exchange between the Christian theologian and ethicist and economist. Some, no doubt, will already judge that a foot has already been put wrong by treating economics,

ethics, and political economy as generic disciplines because, in their view, no such entities exist. In defense of the approach so far two things can be said. First, up to this point the goal has been to defend Robbins's demarcation of ethics, political economy, and economics (with some important modifications) based on the fact that they have different objects of inquiry, methodologies, and require different judgments. This seems entirely defensible, unless one holds that there is a single discipline that encompasses all lines of human enquiry. Moreover, in doing so, it has been acknowledged that there are various possible configurations, but that Robbins's schema has a number of advantages. Second, and related, "generic" is taken here to entail that there are a common, core set of concerns that attend the different disciplines. In addressing these core concerns, one would expect different varieties of ethics and political economy to emerge (for economic science, as will be discussed, the situation is somewhat different).

The task of this chapter, then, is to consider the implications for economic science and political economy of introducing ethics as Christian ethics into the schema of the last chapter, with a view to framing interdisciplinary exchange between Christian theologians and ethicists and economists. This approach differs to various other approaches that seek to bring Christian ethics and economics into dialogue. For example, Chapter 2 examined Tanner's approach of bringing theological ethics and economics into dialogue by treating both as a discourse about economy.<sup>426</sup> Others have pursued the opposite approach of bringing Christian ethics and economics into dialogue by treating both as religious discourses.<sup>427</sup> The approach adopted herein, building on the foregoing discussion—and especially the discussion in Chapter 1 and Chapter

---

<sup>426</sup> This is also the approach taken by Meeks, *God the Economist*.

<sup>427</sup> Examples of this approach include Robert H. Nelson, *Economics as Religion: From Samuelson to Chicago and Beyond* (Pennsylvania: Penn State Press, 2001), Jung Mo Sung, *Desire, Market and Religion* (London: SCM Press, 2007), and J. Sung, *The Subject, Capitalism, and Religion: Horizons of Hope in Complex Societies* (New York: Springer, 2011).

4—is to understand the scope and nature of the disciplines of economic science, political economy, and Christian ethics, and with those understandings in hand to argue for Christian political economy—as a variety of political economy—as the site wherein exchange between Christian theologians, ethicists, and economists will be most fruitful.<sup>428</sup>

The remainder of this chapter is organised as follows. The next section considers whether one might be justified in applying the adjective “Christian” to the discipline of economics. This section defends the Robbinsian understanding of economic science in which there is no need for the modifier “Christian”. In doing so, it considers two potential objections to Robbins’s position. The following section then turns to the question of whether one is justified in applying the adjective “Christian” to political economy. This section argues that because Christian political economy draws on Christian ethics to develop policy advice, one is justified in adding the modifier. This section considers two objections to this position as part of the analysis. The following section then takes Modern Catholic Social Thought as an example of Christian political economy and uses it as a case study of how the overall schema might work. The last section offers concluding thoughts on the cumulative argument of the dissertation and sketches an agenda for future work.

### *Christian Economics?*

As delineated by Robbins, economics is a science that studies the allocation of scarce resources to different ends. Unless one can identify something particularly Christian about *how* one studies the allocation of scarce resources to different ends, that would be inadmissible given

---

<sup>428</sup> This approach is in line with the taxonomies developed by, for example, Waterman, “Economists on the Relation Between Political Economy and Christian Theology”; Ian Smith, “God and Economics,” in *God and Culture: Essays in Honor of Carl FH Henry*, ed. D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1993).

the methodological standards of the discipline, there is no case for using the word “Christian” for distinguishing “Christian” economic science from economic science more generally. The same is also true for any other modifier that might be applied to economic science. Economic science on these terms is open to all who conform to its disciplinary standards, in the same way that someone engaging in the discipline of mathematics conforms to the standards of that discipline (hence the nomenclature *discipline*). To reiterate, this understanding of economics does not preclude studying—or somehow trying to remove—the effect that Christian faith has on the economizing activity of humans. Rather, these are taken as part of the data that economists study. Economic science, then, is set up to understand economizing activity, given scarcity, and, as such, is an input into political economy that endeavors to prescribe courses of policy action.

Similarly, Robbins’s delineation of economics does not preclude the development of a theological rationale for economic science along the lines developed in Chapter 2 and Chapter 3 of this dissertation. On this note, Brennan writes:

The study of economics absorbs intellectual energy, creative imagination, and time... Energy, imagination, and time are scarce resource that could have been devoted to more overtly religious activities—including, but certainly not exhausted by, the study of theology. If religious economists are to justify the study of economics in terms to which their own intellectual schemes commit them, they must provide an account of the *religious* value of their economics... [B]ecause economists are aware of this fact, because they carry with them a lively sense of the necessity of choice, of opportunity cost, and of the logical connection between values and action, they will hardly be able to suppress the desire to provide a coherent account of the religious value of how they spend their time and energy professionally. Some account of the theological significance of economics as a field of study will be unavoidable.<sup>429</sup>

Indeed, Chapters 2 and 3 of this dissertation offer not only a theological justification of economics *vis-à-vis* scarcity-constrained choice, but an account of the economist’s vocation more generally in relation to both Robbinsian and Malthusian scarcity.

---

<sup>429</sup> Brennan, “The Impact of Theological Predispositions on Economics: A Commentary,” 194. Emphasis original.

Related, this schema does nothing to censure the economist, who is also a Christian, taking up certain areas of study because they are important to her Christian faith. For instance, she might wish to study child poverty because of her Christian commitment to seeing all humans made in the image of God living with human dignity. When it comes, however, to her study of child poverty as an economist *qua* scientist there is nothing in how she undertakes her study as an economist and Christian that warrants calling her approach Christian economic science along Robbinsian lines. She is like the mathematician, who is also a Christian, who practices the discipline of mathematics, without needing to affix the modifier Christian.

This position, it would increasingly appear, is that adopted by most economists who are also Christians. For instance, Hawtrey writes that among Anglican economists “there are signs, appropriately in my opinion, of gravitation toward the neutrality position, that theology does not affect the *way* we do economics.”<sup>430</sup> In a similar vein, Yuengert writes about the relationship between Modern Catholic Social Teaching and economics in a way that recognizes economics as a science along the lines presented herein:

The popes do not call for “Roman Catholic Economics,” if by this it is meant a fully integrated treatment of Roman Catholic theology and economics, a combined field. On the contrary, they repeatedly express respect for an autonomous economic science, whose insights they need for a fuller understanding of person and society. They do not want to build a new economic science on Catholic principles; instead they wish to engage the existing field of economics in conversation about society.<sup>431</sup>

Nonetheless, not all agree with this position—some see it as desirable to conceive of a Christian economics because, in their view, the Christian faith materially changes how one does

---

<sup>430</sup> Kim Hawtrey, “Anglicanism,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Christianity and Economics*, ed. Paul Oslington (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 191. Emphasis added. Hawtrey views this position, which now has “ascendency among Anglican economists” as being “launched by [Denys] Munby and nurtured by [Paul] Heyne.” Hawtrey, 182.

<sup>431</sup> Andrew M. Yuengert, “Roman Catholic Economics,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Christianity and Economics*, ed. Paul Oslington (Oxford; New York, 2014), 153.

economics, such that it is appropriate to speak of Christian economics. In particular, there are two objections that warrant careful consideration. Note the objection that economics is necessarily normative when it comes to offering policy advice—and that Christian faith has something to offer in this realm—is not one of these objections, as the adjusted Robbinsian schema does not preclude such an offering within the discipline of political economy. The discussion at that juncture is whether it is appropriate to speak of a *Christian* political economy—a discussion taken up in the next section.

### **Objection 1: Economic Science Fails To Explain**

What is being advocated here for economic science and political economy is consistent with what Smith describes as and terms “disciplinary interdependence”.<sup>432</sup> The same position is outlined in various typologies/taxonomies, albeit with different terminology, that look to elucidate the relationship between economics and theology and/or religion.<sup>433</sup> For Smith, this perspective holds “the positivist view that economic analysis may serve as an input into biblically based ethical discussion” and that “the Bible may also serve as an input into economic discourse.”<sup>434</sup> Oftentimes this is contrasted with what Smith describes as “disciplinary autonomy,” the perspective that economics can be regarded as completely autonomous from theology.<sup>435</sup>

---

<sup>432</sup> Smith, “God and Economics.”

<sup>433</sup> For example, in Waterman’s taxonomy the schema discussed in this chapter is a subtype of what he delineates as the modern or pluralistic view.

<sup>434</sup> Smith, “God and Economics,” 170.

<sup>435</sup> Smith, 166.



Clive Beed and Cara Beed have been critical of both these perspectives, calling for a Christian economics that not only offers policy prescriptions, but which also seeks to *explain* economic phenomena from a Christian perspective. There are various strands that they develop and draw together to make the case for their position. First, they suggest that what is here being termed economic science has little explanatory or predictive power. Using J. David Richardson's writings as a particular case of disciplinary interdependence approach,<sup>436</sup> Beed and Beed contend:

Richardson does not substantiate his case that orthodox economic theory provides the insights into real-world behavior or possess the robustness he suggests. It may well have a far weaker purchase on unraveling reality than he implies. The claimed advantages of new developments in orthodox economic theory to which Richardson points are not demonstrated by him, and have been claimed by critics to be dubious. If the interdependency position... accords to economics "the positivist view that economic analysis may serve as an input into biblically based ethical discussion", this precept has less validity if (orthodox) economic theory and analysis has a weak relation to reality.<sup>437</sup>

If correct, as Beed and Beed view things, this would undermine not only the disciplinary interdependence view, but also the disciplinary autonomy view, as economic science as it now stands lacks explanatory or predictive power.

Second, Beed and Beed suggest that in practice the disciplinary interdependence approach becomes the disciplinary autonomy approach. Again, using Richardson as their example, they argue:

There is virtually no discussion of whether Christianity itself or the sources of Christian belief have anything to say about economic issues. This orientation and proportion in Richardson's paper, typical of the separatist approach [i.e., disciplinary autonomy], probably reflects the greater importance the separatists attached to the analytical nature of

---

<sup>436</sup> J. David Richardson, "Frontiers in Economics and Christian Scholarship," *Christian Scholar's Review* 17 (1988): 381–400.

<sup>437</sup> Clive Beed and Cara Beed, "The Autonomy of Economics from Judeo-Christian Thought: A Critique," *International Journal of Social Economics* 30, no. 9 (September 1, 2003): 945.

economics than to *Judeo-Christian thought for revealing and prescribing for real-world socio-economic matters*.<sup>438</sup>

With these critiques developed, one is brought to the heart of their constructive proposal: a Christian economics that not only prescribes, but explains economic phenomenon. Beed and Beed write:

The Judeo-Christian Bible provides the triune God's normative guide, and the only correct one, for humankind's interconnected spiritual and material life. The Bible is seen to provide a teleological assessment of this life applying to specific contexts. *Principles inherent in this teleology are intended to apply to other temporal/spatial contexts for both explanatory and prescriptive purposes...* No hint exists in the Bible that behavioral frameworks explicitly ignoring God's purposes for humankind can provide adequate explanations for human action or correct prescriptions for it (even assuming a natural law framework). If such an enterprise were achievable, human behavior could be explained outside God's provenance. The Bible would have little relevance to this explanation. The Bible's teleology rejects that searching for this approach will succeed, that sinful human action is to be understood outside the framework of God's normative guidelines, or that stable second best solutions can be devised for fallen humankind.<sup>439</sup>

What the above quote makes clear is that, for Beed and Beed, the delineation of economic science along Robbinsian lines is basically vacuous because it is impossible, from their standpoint, to offer an adequate explanation of human action devoid of a normative Christian framework. Thus, it is unsurprising that elsewhere they question, for example, whether “a separate domain of human behavior—“the economic”—can be excised from the entirety of behavior, and analyzed as a separate secular entity to yield valid conclusions about that domain” or whether “the analysis of an economic domain of human behavior independently from the normative intentions about God and Jesus Christ have for human life yields valid conclusions about that domain.”<sup>440</sup>

---

<sup>438</sup> Beed and Beed, 950. Emphasis added.

<sup>439</sup> Beed and Beed, 953–54. Emphasis added.

<sup>440</sup> Beed and Beed, 960.

In response to the claim that economic science fails to offer any “insights into real-world behavior or processes” one could try and take this challenge head-on by offering various examples of where economics has contributed to explaining the world or inputting into normative analysis. An alternative response, however, is to note that there is nothing in principle stopping the insights from other disciplines being incorporated into economic science in explaining how the world works.<sup>441</sup> Take for example, the oft-cited example of alternatives to the the standard assumptions that economics usually adopts. As already noted in Chapter 4, there is nothing prohibiting alternative behavioral assumptions being adopted, say because one wants to take into account addiction arising from human sin. Indeed, the schema being developed in this chapter anticipates that Christian ethics may raise issues that need to be considered by economic science in explaining resource allocation. In fact, this chapter will later consider how Yuengert sees a role for Modern Catholic Social Thought in offering insights that should be taken on board by economic science. The only strictures put on these insights is that they must conform to the standards of economic science as a discipline. So, for example, addictive behavior must be verifiable by observation and/or introspection.

That the disciplinary interdependence view has a tendency to slide into disciplinary autonomy is really best discussed under the heading of Christian political economy. That said, the schema being developed in this chapter makes explicit that there is a need for the Christian faith to contribute to the development of economic policy, mitigating the risk that the focus is simply on positive analysis within the discipline of economic science, by highlighting that normative analysis is essential within the discipline of political economy—normative analysis that Christian ethics can supply. Moreover, that figures like Richardson do not discuss the ways

---

<sup>441</sup> Although, the next section does consider the idea of God’s action in the world as being somewhat problematic for economic science along Robbinsian lines.

in which Christian ethics might contribute to economic policy more likely reflects the underdevelopment of Christian ethics's contribution to economic policy within what is here being called Christian policy economy, rather than any inbuilt bias toward the disciplinary autonomy standpoint.<sup>442</sup>

Finally, there is Beed and Beed's contention that "no hint exists in the Bible that behavioral frameworks explicitly ignoring God's purposes for humankind can provide adequate explanations for human action or correct prescriptions for it... If such an enterprise were achievable, human behavior could be explained outside of God's provenance."<sup>443</sup> This is a strong claim. *Prima facie*, it suggests that there can be *no* adequate account of human action without recourse to the Bible. But surely that depends on what one is seeking to explain. Granted, it might be difficult to explain some aspects of human action, from the Christian standpoint, without recourse to Scripture. Martyrdom comes to mind. But as already noted in previous chapters, economics is not claiming to offer a complete account of human action, but rather economizing behavior with respect to ends. To understand shifts in the demand for goods in response to relative price changes, while nowhere near a full account of human action, is useful in understanding resource allocation and can serve as an input into normative analysis where Christian ethics, drawing on Scripture, has a role to play.

---

<sup>442</sup> Indeed, Beed and Beed themselves note the contribution of Christian thought to economic policy is underdeveloped, although they acknowledge that Catholic Social Thought has made some progress: "In the main, socio-economic principles, themes and paradigms from the Bible have been disregarded by human society in all history by Christians and non-Christians. Therefore, they still appear as ill formed and rudimentary." Beed and Beed, "The Autonomy of Economics from Judeo-Christian Thought," 963.

<sup>443</sup> Clive Beed and Cara Beed, "The Autonomy of Economics from Judeo-Christian Thought: A Critique," *International Journal of Social Economics* 30, no. 9 (September 1, 2003): 963.

## Objection 2: God is an Agent

The second objection to constructing economics along Robbinsian lines, in which the modifier Christian has no place, is based on the fact that God is also an agent who is active in the world. Brennan writes in relation to this objection:

I come finally to an issue that seems to me to be a particularly troubling one for religious economists, as it is for religious scientists of all descriptions. This is the question as to whether, and in what way, God is believed to act in human affairs (including economic affairs)... Essentially, all the economists under discussion [in the volume Brennan is writing in] assume a kind of methodological deism. That is, they conduct their analysis as if God were totally absent from human affairs; as if God were an hypothesis they could do without. But adopting the idea of a totally noninterventionist God commits one to a strong, and I should have thought unorthodox, theological position.<sup>444</sup>

It is worth noting that this objection, as Brennan himself notes in the quote above, is not particular to the economist *qua* scientist, but is true for all scientists *qua* scientists. As Brennan himself goes on to note:

I take it that no serious physicist, religious or otherwise, takes the view that God is a sort of super-human agent who intervenes in the physical world: causing volcanoes to erupt, or earthquakes to occur, rain to fall, asteroids to appear, all in due season according to how God wills it best. The practice of physics is such that, for all intents and purposes, God is a hypothesis one not only can but *must* do without.<sup>445</sup>

Noting that this objection is not peculiar to economics as a science but is a general objection to all sciences, while not resolving the objection, does caution against giving the other sciences a free pass on this issue. What then might one say?

The first is to affirm—consistent with what has been outlined in Chapter 2 and Chapter 3—that God is an agent, who foundationally created and now sustains the world. This includes human limitation and freedom and how this relates to the non-human world. The economist who identifies as a Christian must affirm God’s agency in creating and sustaining human limitation

---

<sup>444</sup> Brennan, “The Impact of Theological Predispositions on Economics: A Commentary,” 173–74.

<sup>445</sup> Brennan, 174.

and freedom and how this relates to the non-human world, just as the cosmologist who is a Christian should affirm God's agency in creating and sustaining the existing universe. Once this affirmation has been made, however, both the economist and the cosmologist can undertake the tasks of studying the allocation of scarce resources and the workings of the universe respectively, without needing to constantly speak of God's agency in sustaining the phenomena under investigation. Moreover, both the economist and the cosmologist can engage with other economists and cosmologists who do not share the economist's and cosmologist's particular Christian belief that God is the one who created and sustains the world, as long as they all submit to the particular strictures of the respective disciplines of economics and cosmology.<sup>446</sup>

That said, God's agency is not limited to creating and sustaining the world. God also speaks, delivers, guides, judges, and so on. This is consistent with the portrayal of God in Chapter 2 and Chapter 3 of this dissertation. Does this, then, not call into question the notion of economics absent the adjective Christian, given that God is an agent in human affairs speaking to, delivering, guiding, and judging human beings? Surely, this must be taken into account when thinking about the method of studying the allocation of scarce resources?

Take, for example, a society in which God is guiding Christians in how they spend their time and use their resources. God guides and directs humans into particular vocations and how they work within those vocations, and rescues them from destructive habits and perhaps even types of work. Likewise, God might command certain Christians to give significant amounts of their income and wealth to those in need and other good causes. In this society, God is an agent who is influencing how humans allocate the scarce resources at their disposal. There is, however, no reason, why such a society is not open to investigation by the the discipline of economics

---

<sup>446</sup> Although, particular metaphysical convictions need to be in place for the economist/cosmologist who is not a Christian in order for study to get off the ground e.g., phenomena exists, etc.

according to its disciplinary standards discussed herein. In fact, economists have and continue to study the influence of the Christian faith on economic life, following in the tradition of Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*.<sup>447</sup> Of course, Weber speaks of this in terms of the influence of the Protestant Ethic on the development of capitalism, however, it is not much of a stretch to reframe this in terms of God's influence on human agents. Economists would not speak in these terms, nonetheless, the point being made is that the *way* economists study the allocation of scarce resources—even if this allocation has been influenced by God's agency—does not change.

The one exception to this—and the only reason within this schema that one would be justified in putting the adjective Christian alongside the noun economics—is for a certain class of God's acts that override the laws (regularities) that govern the human and non-human world and the relationship between the two—a particular class of miraculous intervention. An example of this—and one that, as already noted, is referred to by Robbins in *ENSES*—is God's provision of manna for Israel in the wilderness (Ex. 16). But in this case, as Robbins himself notes, there is really no economic phenomenon to study, because humans are not required to engage in economizing activity.<sup>448</sup> The same would be true of Jesus' feeding of the five thousand. In these cases, however, economic science has no work to do. Likewise, other sciences will be unable to explain the phenomena under investigation using their disciplinary methods when this kind of miraculous intervention takes place.<sup>449</sup>

---

<sup>447</sup> Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Stephen Kalberg, Revised edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010). Robert J. Barro and Rachel M. McCleary, "Religion and Economic Growth across Countries," *American Sociological Review* 68, no. 5 (2003): 760–81; Robert Barro, Jason Hwang, and Rachel McCleary, "Religious Conversion in 40 Countries," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 49, no. 1 (March 1, 2010): 15–36 are two more recent examples of studies along this line.

<sup>448</sup> Robbins, *An Essay*, 13.

<sup>449</sup> For instance, the biologist would have little to say in the face of miraculous physical healing.

### *Christian Political Economy?*

As the intellectual discipline that draws on the deliverances of ethics and economics to aid the economist or ethicist *qua* policy advisor, political economy is a normative discipline. The normative nature of the discipline arises from the normative nature of ethics, given that economic science is delineated as a positive discipline.

While the definition, scope, and nature of modern ethics is a dissertation within itself and beyond the scope of this work, the contours of the discipline outlined in a recent book by Oliver O'Donovan are instructive.<sup>450</sup> O'Donovan writes:

Ethics presents itself apparently as a discipline of study within the realm of organized knowledge. It claims to interpret, test, prove, and order the variety of things commonly thought and said in ordinary courses of practical reasoning and instruction.<sup>451</sup>

As such, ethics is a practical discipline, that “renders service both to those who think in order to act and to those who instruct others how to think in order to act.”<sup>452</sup> In this it undertakes higher-order reflection concerning human thinking and acting. In this, it is like economic science in that it undertakes higher-order reflection on human activity. Unlike economics, however, it never does so solely as an outside observer. On this O'Donovan helpfully writes:

The evolution of eighteenth-century Moral Science into the “Human Sciences” of the twentieth century brought into being studies of human action that conformed more closely to general scientific expectations. Particular human actions had become the material of the study of history; but now human action was interrogated for its recurrent patterns, the rise of Economics being, perhaps, the earliest and most striking fruit of this line of inquiry,

---

<sup>450</sup> O'Donovan notes, “The history of the modern ethical disciplines is still elusive, and we lack a comprehensive account.” Oliver O'Donovan, *Self, World, and Time: Volume 1: Ethics as Theology: An Induction* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2013), 68. Having this history will be a key input into a thorough discussion of the definition, scope, and nature of modern ethics.

<sup>451</sup> O'Donovan, 67.

<sup>452</sup> O'Donovan, 74.



followed in the nineteenth century by Sociology and Psychology. This evolution, however, left behind the original concerns of Ethics. The new science reported on how humans behave as individuals and communities in response to circumstantial pressures, and proposed explanations for the responses, but always from the observer's, not the actor's point of view—a subtle nuance conveyed in the word “behavior.” That meant that they never ventured upon the ground of *moral reason*, with its determinations of good and bad reasons for acting. . . . But all the observation and explanation in the world for behavior patterns, individual and social, for desires, feelings, aspirations, values, norms, and so on, may not include a single word about why something should be done, or what is to be valued above what. The discourse of Ethics concerns ourselves, the life we are living, the action we have in hand. Even when pursued at a high level of reflection, it is of a different order from a discourse about patterns of behavior demonstrated in the past or probable in the future.<sup>453</sup>

It is, then, moral reflection and reasoning that gives ethics its normative character. For this reason, Gustafson writes that ethics is concerned with “the specific criteria of judgment and action, the character of the moral self, and the nature and locus of the good.”<sup>454</sup> Importantly for O'Donovan this means “critically but sympathetically, ethical reflection takes up the categories of moral thinking, thinks alongside the moral thinker, not from a point of detached observation but normatively.”<sup>455</sup>

Given this understanding of ethics, O'Donovan writes regarding Christian ethics:

“Moral Theology,” which will serve as the default term for what is sometimes called Christian Ethics and sometimes Theological Ethics, *assumes this interpretation and ordering into the hermeneutic framework of Christian Theology.*<sup>456</sup>

---

<sup>453</sup> O'Donovan, 70. Emphasis original. Underlining added.

<sup>454</sup> James M. Gustafson, *Christ and the Moral Life* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), 3. As such, it includes both meta-ethical analysis and normative ethical analysis. Frankena distinguishes meta-ethical analysis from normative analysis as follows: “[Meta-ethics] does not try to answer either particular or general questions about what is good, right, or obligatory [as does normative analysis]. It asks and tries to answer logical, epistemological, or semantic questions like the following: What is the meaning or use of the expressions “(morally) right” or “good?” How can ethical and value judgments be established or justified? Can they be justified at all? What is the nature of morality? What is the distinction between the moral and nonmoral? What is the meaning of “free” or “responsible?”” William K. Frankena, *Ethics* (Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1973), 5.

<sup>455</sup> O'Donovan, *Self, World, and Time*, 72.

<sup>456</sup> O'Donovan, 67. Emphasis added.

As such, Christian ethics takes the core network of Christian beliefs about God, the world (including humanity), and God's dealings with the world, particularly in the person of Jesus Christ, as disclosed through God's revelation, as the framework for moral reflection, deliberation, and action. For example, the Christian ethicist accepts that the world has been created and sustained by God and has been visited by God in the person of Jesus Christ, that the mission of God in Christ continues in the power of the Spirit in a particular, although not exclusive, way in the Church, and that the world awaits its final judgment and redemption. This understanding then frames human moral life, both personally and corporately.<sup>457</sup> As such, it draws on its unique sources, *viz.*, the Christian Scripture and the interpretive tradition, to guide reflection, deliberation, and action.<sup>458</sup>

*Christian* political economy will draw on Christian ethics alongside of economic science to formulate policy advice. In other words, it will develop economic policy that is consistent with the core network of Christian beliefs about God, the world, and the relationship between God and the world, that also draws on the insights of economic science about the efficient allocation of scarce resources, the consistency of policy ends, and potential unintended consequences. As such, it will seek to ensure that the ends and means to which economic policies are oriented demonstrate theological integrity, alongside of what economics has to offer in the detailed

---

<sup>457</sup> This understanding of Christian Ethics is consistent with basic definitions offered in introductory textbooks. For example:

*Christian ethics* is the critical evaluation of human conduct from a Christian perspective. The Christian ethicist stands within the Christian faith and makes Christian assumptions about human nature, about the relationship of human beings to one another, and about their relationship to God. The Christian shares some beliefs with adherents of other religions, and some with nonreligious ethicists. Whether they agree with those ethicists on a particular idea, or whether they reach the same conclusions, is not the issue. The starting point is the issue. The Christian faith defines the motives from which the Christian ethicists act, the generalizations which they may make about value and duty, and the conclusions which they reach about a proposed course of action. Roger H. Crook, *Introduction to Christian Ethics* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1990), 3. Emphasis original.

<sup>458</sup> See Charles E. Curran, "How Does Christian Ethics Use Its Unique and Distinctive Christian Aspects?" *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 31, no. 2 (2011): 23–36.

formulation of policy that recognizes the reality of scarcity, the need to ensure consistency between ends and means, and the value of efficiency to human life, both individually and corporately. Soon, this dissertation will consider Modern Catholic Social Thought as a particular instantiation of Christian political economy. Before turning to this, the following two subsections consider two objections to the possibility of *Christian* political economy.

### **Objection 1: The Christian Faith Has Nothing Unique To Offer**

Anthony Waterman is someone who contends that the use of “Christian” is inappropriate in relation to what is here being described as political economy based on the argument that Christian ethics contributes nothing unique to the formulation of economic policy.<sup>459</sup> What follows is a brief outline of Waterman’s position and an evaluation of it.

To start, Waterman’s delineation of the scope and nature of economic science is in accord with what has been argued in this dissertation. Waterman writes:

Like engineering or dentistry, ‘economic science’ is accessible to all who will submit to its discipline.

None of this is to exaggerate the heuristic power of economics. It is simply to say that *if* ‘economic science’ is of any relevance to public policy, its contribution, like that of engineering or dentistry, must be confined to the means of achieving human *ends*. Ends are given by the explicit or implicit beliefs about the nature and destiny of mankind. Economics pretends to no such knowledge. Though every economist has his own convictions about such matters, he is capable of distinguishing these from his professional

---

<sup>459</sup> Waterman’s scholarship is exemplary not only in thinking about the historical relationship between Christian theology, political economy, and economics (as we have seen in Chapter 1 and Chapter 3), but also in endeavoring to engender some clear thinking about the relationship between the theological disciplines and economics at the current conjuncture. It is to the detriment of the tenor of the discussion that Christian theologians and theological ethicists’ have oftentimes not attended to his work in their writings on economics and the economy. This work has extended to convening groups to discuss the relationship between the theological disciplines and economics (broadly defined) and has resulted in two important volumes (co-edited with others), H. Geoffrey Brennan and A. M. C. Waterman, eds., *Economics and Religion: Are They Distinct?* (Norwell, Massachusetts: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1994); J. M. Dean and A. M. C. Waterman, eds., *Religion and Economics: Normative Social Theory: Normative Social Theory* (Norwell, Massachusetts: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1999).

knowledge as he is of distinguishing the latter from his knowledge of the cantatas of J. S. Bach.<sup>460</sup>

In addition, Waterman aligns with this dissertation in arguing that economic science needs to be put in dialogue with a discipline or disciplines that undertake higher-order reflection on ends in order to develop policy recommendations. For this reason, Waterman writes of “normative social theory,” which he distinguishes from “positive social theory”:

By “normative social theory” we mean any set of related doctrines that prescribes what human societies ought to be or how they ought to be governed, and that affords a standard for existing arrangements. It is to be distinguished from “positive social theory,” which describes and explains how human societies actually do function. The latter is a necessary component of the former. There can be no prescription without knowledge, implicit or explicit, about what causes good health and what causes disease.<sup>461</sup>

For Waterman, in other words, economic science is engaged in developing positive social theory, whereas what is here being described as political economy is a combination of both positive and normative social theory with the goal of offering policy advice. There is nothing in principle, for Waterman, that precludes a Christian normative social theory that draws on the positive social theory of economics. What is at stake for Waterman, however, is whether a normative social theory can be developed out of Christian ethics that is unique such that when it is combined with the deliverance of economic science it warrants being named *Christian* political economy.

In an article entitled *Can ‘Economic Policy’ Be ‘Christian’?*, Waterman develops a basic taxonomy in order to explore this issue. Therein, he distinguishes “three senses in which a policy (or a specific policy measure) might be described as ‘Christian’”: a strong sense; a first

---

<sup>460</sup> A. M. C. Waterman, “Can ‘Economic Policy’ Be ‘Christian’?,” *Review of Social Economy* 46, no. 2 (October 1, 1988): 204. Emphasis original.

<sup>461</sup> James M. Dean and A. M. C. Waterman, “Introduction: Normative Social Theory,” in *Religion and Economics: Normative Social Theory*, ed. James M. Dean and A. M. C. Waterman (Norwell, Massachusetts: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1999), 4–5.

weak sense; and a second weak sense.<sup>462</sup> Each of these senses are delineated by Waterman as follows:

Strong sense: Two conditions are necessary and sufficient. The end to which the policy is directed must be deducible from Christian belief in some publicly recognizable sense of the latter. And it must be uniquely so deducible. Christianity *and only Christianity* supplies the requisite ethical knowledge in this strong sense.<sup>463</sup>

First weak sense: One condition is necessary and sufficient. The end to which the policy is directed must be deducible from Christian belief. It may also be deducible from other systems of belief and hence may be thought of as ‘overdetermined.’<sup>464</sup>

Second weak sense: One condition is necessary and sufficient. The end to which the policy is directed must not be in conflict with Christian beliefs. In this case Christian theology serves as a filter, permitting some options and censoring others.<sup>465</sup>

In Waterman’s taxonomy, then, what separates the strong sense from the first weak sense—and, therefore, what makes the strong sense “strong” for Waterman—is the condition that the policy end be *unique* to Christianity. When the conditions associated with the strong sense are applied, Waterman suggests there will be very few instances in which one can speak of an economic policy being Christian in the strong sense. On the other hand, there will be numerous instances in which the end of economic policy will be Christian in the first weak sense. The reason for this is as follows:

From the ethical (as distinct from the soteriological) standpoint, *the dominant religious traditions and their secular analogues such as Marxist Leninism, have a great deal in common. Most people in our society approach policy issues with essentially the same set of ethical principles.*<sup>466</sup>

---

<sup>462</sup> Waterman, “Can ‘Economic Policy’ Be ‘Christian’?,” 204.

<sup>463</sup> Waterman, 204–5. Emphasis original.

<sup>464</sup> Waterman, 205.

<sup>465</sup> Waterman, 206.

<sup>466</sup> Waterman, 205.

In other words, because Waterman holds that different religious and secular traditions share the same set of ethical principles, the set of economic policy ends that are “Christian” in the strong sense will be (almost) empty, while the set of economic policy ends that are “Christian” in the first weak sense will be (almost) complete. This will also be true for other traditions when, *mutatis mutandis*, Waterman’s conditions are applied. On this basis, Waterman concludes the use of “Christian” is unjustified because “if every available tradition affords the same ethical imperatives, the adjective ‘Christian’ does no work in the relevant set of propositions.”<sup>467</sup>

Instead, Waterman contends, “It is *only* in the second weak sense that it is at all interesting to talk about ‘Christian’ economic policy.”<sup>468</sup> For this sense, there “is no traverse from theological principle to economic policy,” but rather, after various proposals have been made about the “ends and means” of policy, Christians can support the policy as long as it does not “conflict” with Christian beliefs.<sup>469</sup> Indeed, Waterman actually suggests that the filtering of policy in this way “is much more distinctly Christian than the advocacy of policies that are only ‘Christian’ in the first weak sense. *For what we mean by ‘Christian’ is recognized only at the margin.* What makes the social implications of *Christian* theology distinct from any other may be seen in the vetoes it applies to practices allowed by others and the permissions it grants to practices forbidden by others.”<sup>470</sup>

What should one make of Waterman’s taxonomic analysis and the conclusions he draws using it? Note at the outset that the uniqueness condition which Waterman uses to distinguish the “strong” sense from the “first weak” sense potentially masks degrees of weakness (or for that

---

<sup>467</sup> Waterman, 205.

<sup>468</sup> Waterman, 210.

<sup>469</sup> Waterman, 206.

<sup>470</sup> Waterman, 206. Emphasis original and underlining added.

matter strength). This can be seen readily by depicting the sets of policy ends of four traditions—A, B, C (where C denotes Christianity), and D—with the aid of Venn diagrams. Figure 4, panel a) depicts a situation in which the economic policy ends of each tradition are all deemed “strong” when Waterman’s taxonomy is generalized and applied to all traditions. At the other extreme to this case (Figure 1, panel d)), is the situation in which the economic policy ends of each tradition are all “weak” in the first sense because there is complete overlap between the sets of policy ends for each tradition. Between the extreme cases of panels a) and d), are cases in which there are a mixture of both “strong” and “first weak” economic policy ends for each tradition, A, B, C, and D, an example of which is displayed in panel b). In this example, there are degrees of “weakness” when it comes to specific policy ends. Some economic policy ends are “weaker” than others in that they overlap with more than one tradition. Indeed, it is conceptually possible to conceive of a situation in which no tradition has any policy ends in a strong sense (see panel c), for example), but where there is less “weakness” than the case depicted in panel d). What Waterman’s basic taxonomy, then, is incapable of revealing is the degree of overlapping consensus between the economic policy ends of different traditions.

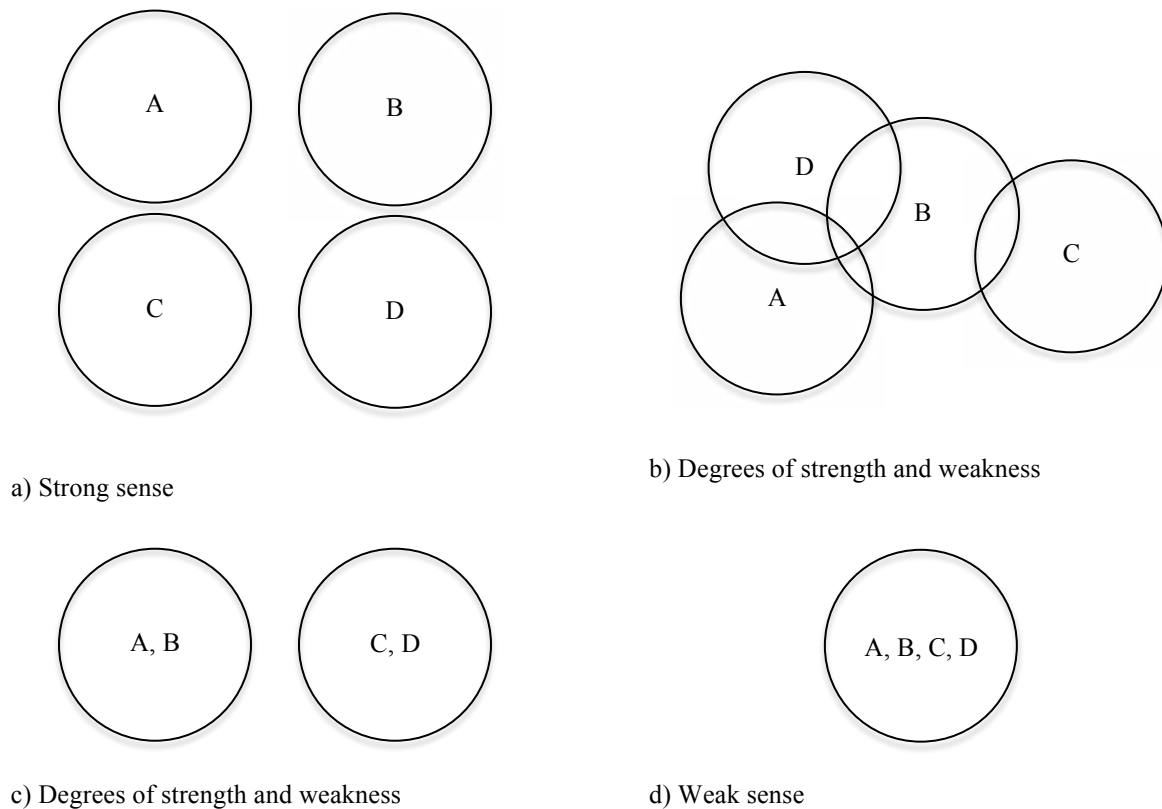
Figure 4 also makes clear that the conclusions Waterman reaches about whether one can speak of economic policy as “Christian” in either the “strong sense” or the “first weak sense” critically hinges on his assertion that “virtually every available religious tradition affords the same ethical imperatives.”<sup>471</sup> Thus, Waterman envisages a world in which the relationship between the sets of economic policy ends derived from different traditions looks like that depicted in Figure 1, panel d) (or at least something very close to it). If true, this carries with it the important implication that public debate over economic matters is not over the ends of

---

<sup>471</sup> Waterman, 205.

economic policy, but rather over policy means, which might, of course, also include whether particular means are ethically appropriate. In other words, the locus of contention is about the “best” means, where best here takes into account ethical and efficiency considerations, to secure an agreed upon economic policy end. For instance, all traditions agree that poverty should be eliminated or that a certain degree of income inequality is intolerable, but there is disagreement over how to achieve this end. This situation is the exact opposite to that imagined by Robbins and Friedman where economists would achieve a high degree of consensus concerning the efficiency of policy means, in a world where there was much disagreement about policy ends.

**Figure 4: Strength and weakness of policy ends**





Several points need to be raised in response to Waterman's contention that traditions share the same ethical imperatives and the conclusions he draws from this when it comes to "Christian" economic policy. First, Waterman's assertion that different traditions basically share the same ethical imperatives is in conflict with his conclusion that it is "only" interesting to speak of economic policy ends as Christian in the second weak sense because "what makes the social implications of *Christian* theology distinct from any other may be seen in the vetoes it applies to practices allowed by others and the permissions it grants to practices forbidden by others."<sup>472</sup> For in order for this to be true, it must be the case that Christian belief and practice modify the ethical imperatives of the Christian tradition, such that they now differ from that of other traditions, otherwise how else does the Christian tradition veto practices allowed by other traditions and permit practices vetoed by others? And if this is true, then this suggests there are likely to be some economic policy ends that are unique to Christianity and likewise to other traditions.<sup>473</sup> Thus, one cannot be in the world imagined by Waterman that is depicted in Figure 4, panel d). In the final analysis, it is an empirical question whether different traditions share the same ethical imperatives, and Waterman does not provide an empirical basis for his contention.

---

<sup>472</sup> Waterman, 206.

<sup>473</sup> Even recognizing that Waterman's "strong" and "first weak" senses are specified in terms of economic policy ends that are *directly deducible* from Christian beliefs, whereas the "second weak" sense is specified in terms of Christian beliefs acting as a *filter* as to which economic policy ends may be deemed Christian, does not undo the contradiction that different traditions have the same ethical imperatives (thereby rendering the "strong" and "first weak" senses as uninteresting) and yet that Christian beliefs are distinct enough to prohibit some practices and prohibit others in comparison to other traditions. In other words, if Christian belief permits some practices and prohibits others compared to other traditions, then Christianity's set of ethical imperatives must differ from that of other traditions.

Of course, it is not difficult to conceive of a case in which the ethical imperatives associated with the Christian tradition differ from that of other traditions, but where all the economic policy ends deduced from Christian belief are only Christian in the first weak sense. For example, if the Christian tradition's ethical imperatives differ to those of other traditions in that they contain certain additional negative imperatives, then the set of economic policy ends would be smaller than that of other traditions. Note, however, that this case differs from that imagined by Waterman (which is depicted in Figure 1, panel d)).

Second, and related, when it comes to the set of economic policies associated with a particular tradition, what is of importance is not only that these ends have been generated by the beliefs and practices of a particular tradition, but also that these beliefs and practices support a particular hierarchy of economic policy ends. Even if it were true that both religious and secular traditions share a common set of ethical imperatives, it does not necessarily follow that these imperatives will be given the same weight in different traditions. Thus, in a world of scarcity, where there are inevitable trade-offs between policies, even when traditions share the same set of ethical imperatives, it does not follow that the two traditions will make identical trade-offs when it comes to different policies.

Finally, there is the issue of whether uniqueness is a condition that should be used in the first place to determine whether one is justified in describing political economy as *Christian* political economy. On this issue, in the context of Christian ethics, Nigel Biggar has written:

Integrity... is not the same as distinctiveness. One is a virtue; the other an accident of history. If the Christian ethicist maintains his theological integrity, then there are bound to be occasions when he will say things that differ from what other people are saying. Since not everyone shares his theological premises, and since these premises shape moral vision and life, then his ethics will sometimes be distinct. Sometimes, but not always. Those who do not share his theological beliefs might nevertheless reach similar ethical conclusions by a different route. Sometimes this route will be equally adequate, and sometimes it will not; but the result is more or less the same. *Whether or not what the Christian ethicist has to say is distinctive depends on the happenstance of whom he is talking with and what he is talking about; it is a matter of historical accident. Distinctiveness is no measure of integrity.*<sup>474</sup>

What matters, then, for developing a *Christian* political economy is that it maintains theological integrity. Thus as Biggar notes in relation to Christian ethics:

The first thing for Christian ethicists is to articulate ethics in a manner that coheres with the theological convictions that are basic to Christian identity. If they do not do this, then the point of being a *Christian* ethicist is, of course, lost. No good purpose is served when

---

<sup>474</sup> Nigel Biggar, *Behaving in Public: How to Do Christian Ethics* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2011), 8. Emphasis added.

Christian ethics plays sycophant to whatever passes for common sense. No one benefits when it consistently amounts to an echo.<sup>475</sup>

*Mutatis mutandis*, so must those who are seeking to develop a *Christian* political economy.

Whether a particular economic policy end—when that policy end has either been deduced from Christian belief or practice or permitted in that it does not violate Christian belief or practice—is *unique* to the Christian tradition is a poor criteria for determining whether one should apply the adjective “Christian” and whether that appellation is either strong or weak. What does matter is that the economic policy end can be related back to Christian belief or practice and the degree of support it finds therein (albeit that it may find support from other quarters, too).

## **Objection 2: The Christian Faith Has Nothing Substantive and Realistic To Offer**

A further argument against Christian political economy is that offered by Frank H. Knight in a series of articles entitled *Ethics and Economic Reform*, especially in the third and final article *Ethics and Economic Reform III. Christianity*.<sup>476</sup> In several works, Waterman notes the force of Knight’s argument and the fact that it has never been adequately addressed.<sup>477</sup> This section outlines Knight’s objections to the possibility of Christian political economy and then responds to these objections.

---

<sup>475</sup> Biggar, 7. Emphasis original.

<sup>476</sup> Frank H. Knight, “Ethics and Economic Reform. I. The Ethics of Liberalism,” *Economica* 6, no. 21 (1939): 1–29; Frank H. Knight, “Ethics and Economic Reform. II. Idealism and Marxism,” *Economica* 6, no. 23 (1939): 296–321; Frank H. Knight, “Ethics and Economic Reform. III. Christianity,” *Economica* 6, no. 24 (1939): 398–422.

<sup>477</sup> For example, Waterman writes, “Frank Knight’s as yet unanswered attack upon the notion that Christianity can provide “value axioms” for use in public policy formulation must be dealt with by those who wish to practise or advocate a division of labour between economists and theologians.” Waterman, “Economists on the Relation Between Political Economy and Christian Theology,” 63.

Knight's objections to what is here being called Christian political economy are threefold. First, Knight contends that "the teachings of Christianity give little or no direct guidance for the change and improvement of social organisation, and in fact give clear *prima facie* evidence of not having been formulated to that end."<sup>478</sup> Indeed, for Knight, "even *indirectly* there is also little [in Christian teaching] to be found in the way of moral principles or ideals which can serve for the ethical guidance of deliberate political action."<sup>479</sup> Second, Knight claims that "not only has [Christianity] nothing to say about this whole problem-field of change in social organisation, i.e., about law-making and constitution-making, which involves institutional change, but that it positively diverts attention both from a correct view of the problem and from the fundamental facts of social life out of which the problem arises."<sup>480</sup> Third, and building off the first and second points, Knight contends:

The heart of the difficulty of Christianity as an approach is not merely in the fact that it ignores the concrete problems of the moral-legal order in any possible world of social relations conceivably realisable by any biological species living on the earth. It lies not even in the fact that the Christian type of moralistic teaching tends to distract attention from the real problem by clearly implying or actually saying "love" would solve all these problems, or what is still worse, that it is practically possible to solve them by preaching love. The concrete effects of envisaging the problem in terms of any sort of individual rights or individual obligations to any other individuals, are positively evil in a more concrete sense... The direct effects of preaching about economic relations and obligations are in general bad; and the kind of legislation which results from the clamour of idealistic preachers—and from the public attitude which such preaching at once expresses and tends to generate or aggravate—is especially bad.<sup>481</sup>

It is clear from what Knight writes that he has a simplistic, reductionistic, and at times erroneous understanding of Christianity. For example, he sees Christianity in primitivist and

---

<sup>478</sup> Knight, "Ethics and Economic Reform. III. Christianity," 399.

<sup>479</sup> Knight, 399. Emphasis added.

<sup>480</sup> Knight, 410.

<sup>481</sup> Knight, 417–18.

simplistically personal terms.<sup>482</sup> His discussion of Christianity is focussed exclusively on *agape* and how this “evidently refers to some intimate association, not to human relations in general.”<sup>483</sup> There is no understanding of Christianity as a canonical faith, in which Christianity is shaped by both the Old and New Testaments (and the diversity of writing contained therein) and the ongoing tradition that has undertaken sustained reflection on these Scriptures and the interpretation of them. Because Christianity is a canonical faith it cannot simply be reduced to the spirit of *agape* as the Scriptures themselves and the sustained theological reflection on them contain, *inter alia*, a discussion of various concepts such as wisdom, justice, mercy, judgment, and so on, how these concepts relate, and how they have been worked out in various contexts, including social contexts. That the canon of Scripture itself addresses various social issues, therefore, makes it unsurprising that the subsequent Christian tradition reflects on a range of social issues, for instance, writing on the just conditions to declare war (*jus ad bellum*) and the just execution of war (*jus in bello*). Indeed, there is an irony in Knight tendering this critique of Christianity within a series of articles concerned with developing an ethic for (classical) liberal societies, given one of the founding fathers of classical liberalism, John Locke, develops his argument for a liberal society drawing significantly on Christian sources.<sup>484</sup> Beed and Beed are, therefore, justified in concluding that Knight “demonstrates no theological or Biblical analysis, but [his statements about Christianity consist] of *ex cathedra* statements about how he saw Christianity, invariably with no reference to anybody else’s writings.”<sup>485</sup> In contrast to Knight,

---

<sup>482</sup> Knight, 401–8.

<sup>483</sup> Knight, 402.

<sup>484</sup> For a thorough discussion of this point, see Jeremy Waldron, *God, Locke, and Equality: Christian Foundations in Locke’s Political Thought* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

<sup>485</sup> Beed and Beed, “The Autonomy of Economics from Judeo-Christian Thought,” 960.

there is ample evidence that the Christian faith, both directly and indirectly, has provided guidance for the change and improvement of society.<sup>486</sup>

What, then, of Knight's claim that the Christian faith has detrimental—indeed “evil”—consequences for society? This claim has been defeated by pointing out that Christianity has supplied ethical guidance for society. Notwithstanding this, Knight is right to point out that some instances of Christian teaching and preaching have been naïve or unrealistic when it comes to economic policy. *Contra* Knight, however, what this underscores is not that Christian ethics has nothing to offer economic policy, but rather the need for the deliverances of Christian ethics to be integrated with the deliverances of economic science in a robust way—a task which this chapter contends should take place within the discipline of Christian political economy.

### *Economic Science and Christian Political Economy*

In an article *A Theological Economics*, Oslington calls for a theological economics where “theology orientates economic enquiry, relativises it and criticises it where appropriate.”<sup>487</sup>

Oslington writes:

In terms of orientating economics, theology can provide a framework for ethics that economists seem to be searching for as part of the revival of interest in the relationship between ethics and economics represented by works such as Hausman and McPherson (1993, 1996) and Groenewegen (1996). In terms of criticism, theology can identify certain weak points in neoclassical economics, for instance the inability of neoclassical economic theory to deal with divine grace.<sup>488</sup>

---

<sup>486</sup> For this reason, the Beeds are right to point out: “A large volume of Christian-based work both before and after Knight has tried to show that Judeo-Christianity relates to both personal and social relations.” Beed and Beed, 961. A further example, although after the time in which Knight wrote the original series of articles, are the writings of Martin Luther King, Jr. that underpin his involvement in the Civil Rights Movement.

<sup>487</sup> Paul Oslington, “A Theological Economics,” *Journal of the Association of Christian Economists* 27 (2000): 26.

<sup>488</sup> Oslington, 26.

The schema presented in this chapter and the associated discussion, building off the adjusted Robbinsian schema in Chapter 4, can be viewed as a response to Oslington's call. The discipline of economic science is oriented to particular ends by the deliverances of Christian ethics, within the discipline of Christian political economy. Moreover, not only will Christian political economy orient the work of economic science, it also has the ability to critique the advice that economic science offers about the most efficient means to achieve particular policy ends, as it incorporates the deliverances of economic science into policy prescriptions. In addition, there is nothing that prohibits the discipline of Christian political economy from making methodological suggestions as to how economics undertakes its positive analysis, albeit that these methodological suggestions will be subject to disciplinary standards of enquiry. Within this schema, then, economic science is relativized by, first, being directed to particular lines of enquiry by Christian political economy and, second, by the efficient allocation of resources being subject to critique by Christian ethics as it is incorporated into policy prescriptions.

Within this schema, however, economic science is not entirely subordinate to Christian political economy. In undertaking positive analysis for Christian political economy, economic science may offer critiques of Christian political economy in analyzing the feasibility, consistency, and cost of policy prescriptions. The overall schema, therefore, is complementary, shown by the fact that both economic science and Christian political economy are required, and dynamic, shown by the fact that there is a two-way interaction between both disciplines.

Moreover, there is nothing within this schema that precludes Christian political economy from dialoguing with other instantiations of political economy. Christian political economy, in other words, is open to engaging with other versions of political economy.

The formal analysis of the schema to this point suggests its potential to accommodate various species of Christian political economy. The next subsection takes an example of one stream of Christian social teaching and one economist's appropriation of it, to illustrate how this schema might incorporate substantive proposals.

### **Modern Catholic Social Teaching and Andrew Yuengert**

Modern Catholic Social Teaching (hereafter, MCST) is a body of Roman Catholic teaching concerned with, *inter alia*, economic life in the late modern period, i.e., from the late nineteenth century onwards. Although there is no official canon of documents that comprise MCST, at the heart of this corpus are the papal encyclicals concerned with social and economic issues, beginning with Leo XIII's encyclical *Rerum Novarum* (1891), and including most recently Francis I's *Laudato Si'* (2015).

The discussion that now follows takes Andrew Yuengert's presentation of MCST, alongside his own framing of the difference between positive and normative discourses as they relate to economics, to illustrate how the schema developed in this chapter might accommodate existing approaches.

In his commentary on MCST, Yuengert suggests that disciplinary space is created within MCST for economics and for interdisciplinary exchange with economics. For example, Yuengert writes regarding the papal encyclicals:

They repeatedly express respect for an autonomous economic science, whose insights they need for a fuller understanding of person and society. They do not want to build a new economic science on Catholic principles; instead they wish to engage the existing field of economics in a conversation about society. Moreover, the conversation is meant to be practical; the popes want more than understanding. Their primary goal is to create



interdisciplinary exchange capable of informing action to promote a more fully human society.<sup>489</sup>

Moreover, as Yuengert sees it:

If Roman Catholic economics cannot be a combined, fully integrated field it still must be something more than a juxtaposition of economics and CST [Catholic Social Teaching]. It must be an economics capable of informing CST, and a CST appropriately informed by economics. Economics, if it is to be useful to CST, must provide a foundation for a normative economics capable of incorporating the Catholic vision of the person: his dignity, his social nature, and his radical shortcomings. The traffic between CST and economics should not be unidirectional, however. CST, if it is to be open to the insights of economics, must make room in its analysis for unintended social order as a moral category, and for moral metrics capable of mapping the vast spaces between transcendent perfection and the inescapable imperfections of this world.<sup>490</sup>

What these quotes reveal, in addition to the disciplinary space that MCST allows economic science, is the complementary nature of MCST and economic science. The Catholic vision of the human person and society, alongside various normative social and economic concepts, such as subsidiarity and distributivism, needs the deliverances of economic science to provide economic policy advice that can be enacted. MCST, then, as Yuengert understands it is first and foremost a practical discipline:

The interdisciplinary nexus offered by CST is primarily *practical*, not *theoretical*. When interdisciplinary work is motivated by a practical goal—to *bring order to* the world by acting in it, not to *discern* the order *in* the world through combined scientific inquiry—its nature is quite different from what is considered interdisciplinary work in the academy. The need for interdisciplinary understanding, and the resulting theoretical interdisciplinary work to the practical project, is great, but more is needed for a practically oriented interdisciplinary project: a specification of the end to be accomplished through action, a

---

<sup>489</sup> Yuengert, “Roman Catholic Economics,” 153. For example, John Paul II in *Centesimus Annus* (43) writes:

The church has no models to present; models that are real and truly effective can only arise within the framework of different historical situations, through the efforts of all those who responsibly confront concrete problems in all their social, economic, political and cultural aspects, as these interact with one another. For such a task the church offers her social teaching as an indispensable and ideal orientation, a teaching which, as already mentioned, recognizes the positive value of the market and of enterprise, but which at the same time points out that these need to be oriented toward the common good. David J. O’Brien and Thomas A. Shannon, eds., *Catholic Social Thought: The Documentary Heritage* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1992), 471.

<sup>490</sup> Yuengert, “Roman Catholic Economics,” 154.

description of what the “good order” to be achieved through action looks like. It is this normative vision of a good society, to be achieved through action that CST offers.<sup>491</sup>

This construal of MCST, then, accords with the schema presented in this chapter. MCST is a variety of Christian political economy in which the deliverances of Roman Catholic moral theology are combined with the deliverances of economic science with the purpose of generating economic policy advice.

Furthermore, the interaction between MCST and economic science is not simply a one-way street: Yuengert envisages an interdisciplinary exchange between Roman Catholic moral theology and economic science, for the traffic “should not be unidirectional.”<sup>492</sup> Economic science should be open to criticism from MCST in how its standard assumptions, especially concerning humans and human society, might be modified and deepened as it seeks to understand the allocation of scarce resources. Indeed, unless it does so, Yuengert writes that “non-economists are more likely to summarily reject economic analysis because of its reductionist anthropology, and the reductionist economic model is more likely to become a competing normative account.”<sup>493</sup> Some of Yuengert’s own work provides an example of the type of constructive critique that MCST might offer economics.<sup>494</sup>

---

<sup>491</sup> Yuengert, 156. Emphasis original.

<sup>492</sup> Yuengert, 154.

<sup>493</sup> Yuengert, 162. On the second point contained within this quote, Yuengert writes elsewhere that MCST is concerned about “the methodological norms of economics” because “economic theories have an effect on culture and may promulgate distorted views about the person and society.” Andrew M. Yuengert, “The Uses of Economics in Papal Encyclicals,” in *Religion and Economics: Normative Social Theory: Normative Social Theory*, ed. J. M. Dean and A. M. C. Waterman (Norwell, Massachusetts: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1999), 37.

<sup>494</sup> See, for example, Yuengert’s engagement with economics’s standard approach to consumer theory in Andrew M. Yuengert, “Elements of a Christian Critique of Consumer Theory,” *Faith and Economics* 54 (2009): 31–56.

Yuengert also holds that the deliverances of modern welfare economics—which inform the policy advice economists offer—can be challenged, deepened, and enriched by an engagement with MCST. As Yuengert imagines this exchange:

A normative economics able to serve CST’s practical project will have to get closer to the aims of the project, incorporating in some ways into its analysis the ends of the human person. This does not mean that economists must fully adapt their models to CST’s assumptions in their positive analysis, or even in their normative analysis, but in order to make their analysis more useful to CST, they will have to explain the robustness of the normative conclusions of economics to the model of the person assumed in it.<sup>495</sup>

On the other hand, Yuengert also sees a role for economic science in sharpening the policy advice that MCST has to offer. One example he offers is the role of markets in promoting the common good, albeit that he acknowledges that “CST need not embrace the market as a solution to every social problem in order to recognize the ability of markets to process information, allocate resources, and distribute goods in desirable ways.”<sup>496</sup> A second example that Yuengert offers is the challenge that economics presents to MCST in developing a theology of the second-best. Yuengert notes that “the popes regularly lapse into analysis that is overly optimistic about the power of its vision to transform world politics, and which overstates the ease with which its reforms can be carried out.”<sup>497</sup> On this front, Yuengert suggests that economics can help MCST

---

<sup>495</sup> Yuengert, “Roman Catholic Economics,” 163.

<sup>496</sup> Yuengert, 167.

<sup>497</sup> Yuengert, 168. Waterman sounds a similar note in his review of Daniel K. Finn, ed., *The True Wealth of Nations: Catholic Social Thought and Economic Life* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2010) in suggesting that MCST gives too little attention to sin in its analysis (although it is worth noting that he sees Yuengert’s contribution in the volume as an exception). Waterman notes:

On the evidence of this collection CST seems to be comfortably ensconced in the first two chapters of Genesis, with an overwhelming reluctance to move on to the universal human tragedy in chapter 3. Yet unless we believe that the *imago dei* [*sic*] is utterly defaced by sin, then Christ died in vain. And if we believe that our salvation in Christ is a process seldom perfected in this life, we shall acknowledge that our private and public morality depend on more than pious rhetoric and good intentions. We shall need *incentives* to harness self-interest to the common good. We shall recognize *scarcity* as a pervasive consequence of the Fall. And we shall see human *knowledge* is very limited and human reason corrupt. A. M. C. Waterman, “The True Wealth of Nations in

by highlighting the need for trade-offs in a world of relative scarcity and, within this world, the value of incremental change.<sup>498</sup>

Elsewhere, Yuengert notes there will be certain tensions in how MCST and economic science relate to each other. For example, he notes:

Papal Social Teaching (PST) [which is a part of MSCT] treats mainstream economics like an architect who wants to build a house to serve ends that are opposed by the client, and whose design is based on theories that may render the structure unstable. Respectful of the expertise of economists, the popes nevertheless insist that economic analysis and advice take into account the objectives and expertise of Roman Catholic moral theology. The situation should be agreeable to economists, whose avowed goal in life is to provide value-free positive analysis in the service of social objectives outlined by others [P1 policy advice]. They are accordingly puzzled and irritated when PST dismisses their purportedly positive economic analysis as irrelevant and even harmful.<sup>499</sup>

That said, as Yuengert sees it, these tensions can motivate a fruitful exchange between MCST and economic science.

For MCST to be a particular variety of Christian political economy and to engage with economic science in a way that accords with the schema outlined in this chapter, it must have some notion of the distinction between positive and normative analysis. As Yuengert understands it, MCST does recognize a distinction between positive and normative analysis, however, it places certain provisos around it. First, positive analysis is hierarchically ordered to normative analysis. In this connection, Yuengert notes, “You cannot have a meaningful discussion about means without paying at least some attention to ends, even if ends are only

---

Recent Catholic Social Thought: A Review Essay” *Faith and Economics* 57 (2011): 51–52.  
Emphasis original.

Notwithstanding Waterman’s construal of human sin, especially as it relates to the the *imago Dei* and scarcity *vis-à-vis* the proposal presented in this dissertation in Chapter 2 and Chapter 3, he is right to point out that MCST underplays human sin.

<sup>498</sup> Yuengert, “Roman Catholic Economics,” 168–69.

<sup>499</sup> Yuengert, “The Uses of Economics in Papal Encyclicals,” 34.

tentatively assumed, for the purpose of analysis.”<sup>500</sup> This is commensurate with the schema presented herein. Economic science, as here delineated, offers no guidance as to what ends should be examined by positive analysis—these ends must be provided by the discipline of (Christian) political economy, for P1 policy advice to be offered in the first place. Beyond this, normative analysis is the critical ingredient in providing P2 policy. Furthermore, economic science with its focus on the allocation of scarce resources only has value if particular communities value efficiency, otherwise there is no particular reason for economics to exist (beyond it being an interesting intellectual game).

Second, Yuengert points out that MCST rejects a non-cognitivist understanding of the normative. Yuengert writes that for MCST:

Normative analysis is the object of a science—moral theology—that has its own method and does not admit of any “pure” normative judgments (“mere” opinions). Roman Catholic moral theology draws inferences primarily from Scripture and tradition and secondarily from natural law and human experience. All “pure” normative statements are in fact impure and may be changed by an appeal to the “facts” of moral theology. Thus, the *normative* is in no way *subjective* in PST. Normative statements have their own logic and are amenable to rational discussion about the content of revealed truth and its corollaries.<sup>501</sup>

This is commensurate with what was discussed in Chapter 4, where Robbins’s non-cognitivist meta-ethics was rejected in favor of moral realism. Thus, the way Yuengert understands the normative statements that are integral to MCST is consistent with the adjusted Robbinsian schema.<sup>502</sup>

---

<sup>500</sup> Yuengert, 36.

<sup>501</sup> Yuengert, 36. By *pure normative statements*, Yuengert means statements that “are opinions or tastes, not amenable to rational analysis and discussion,” compared with *impure normative statements* that “are contingent upon certain facts accepted as true.” Yuengert, 34.

<sup>502</sup> Yuengert has also undertaken work on the distinction and relationship between positive and normative discourse based on Aquinas’s understanding of human action. See Andrew Yuengert, “Why Did the Economist Cross the Road? The Hierarchical Logic of Ethical and Economic Reasoning,” *Economics and Philosophy* 18, no. 2

### *Concluding Thoughts and an Agenda for Future Work*

This dissertation has come a long way from Chapter 1 which first mooted that the contention around scarcity and economics as a *wertfrei* science are serious intellectual impediments to any fruitful exchange between Christian theologians, ethicists, and economists. That chapter returned to Robbins's *ENSES* to show how the the concepts of scarcity and economics as a *wertfrei* science that Robbins develops therein are critical to the delineation of the scope of modern economic science and its relationship to ethics and, therefore, why any attempt to remove the contention that surrounds these should start with a reckoning with *ENSES*. As a starting point, Chapter 1 sought to delineate Robbins's conception of scarcity—situating it in relation to an anterior conception of scarcity—and to offer a preliminary discussion as to how Robbins conceived of economics as a *wertfrei* science, and how that shaped his (initial) understanding of the relationship between economics and ethics.

With Robbins's delineation of scarcity in hand, Chapter 2 turned to three challenges to scarcity as a description of the world, *viz.*, the nature-of-desire challenge, the nature-of-goods challenge, and the incommensurability challenge. The works of William Cavanaugh, Kathryn Tanner, and D. Stephen Long, were taken, respectively, as representatives for each of these challenges. In the final analysis, each of these challenges failed to overturn Robbinsian scarcity as an accurate description of the world. If Robbinsian scarcity is an accurate description of the world, then it should be possible to translate it into theological language. The end of Chapter 2 took up this challenge, by framing scarcity in terms of limitation, and discussing how that coheres with a theology of vocation.

---

(2002); Andrew Yuengert, *The Boundaries of Technique: Ordering Positive and Normative Concerns in Economic Research*, Studies in Ethics and Economics (Lanham, Md: Lexington Books, 2004).

Relating Robbinsian scarcity to a theology of vocation gives rise to the question of evil. As noted in Chapter 1, Robbinsian scarcity is a relative concept; one can imagine different degrees of Robbinsian scarcity. Why, then, did God create and why does God sustain a world that is attended by natural and moral evil that, *prima facie*, results from a relatively severe degree of Robbinsian scarcity? Why did not God create and sustain a world with a less severe degree of Robbinsian scarcity which might have entailed less natural and moral evil? As seen in Chapter 3, these are not new questions; from the time of Malthus's *FE* various thinkers in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century developed theodicies that sought to offer an account of why God constituted a world in which some of the population's basic needs go unmet. This chapter reviewed the theodicies of the principal thinkers who developed their theodicies with Malthus's understanding of scarcity in mind, before turning to a contemporary theodicy of scarcity developed by Albino Barrera. After reviewing these theodicies, Chapter 3 offered a theodicy of scarcity, building on the theology of vocation presented at the end of Chapter 2. By the end of Chapter 3, then, this dissertation had offered a theological account of scarcity and a theological rationale for the focus of economics on the allocation of scarce resources and the vocation of the economist.

Chapter 4, then, returned to the other intellectual impediment to interdisciplinary dialogue, Robbins's construal of economics as a *wertfrei* science and his distinction between facts and values, and based on these, how he frames the relationship between economic science and ethics. This chapter returned to *ENSES*, but also discussed a significant later essay of Robbins's, *Economics and Political Economy*. This chapter showed that Robbins's later understanding of the relationship between ethics and economics is more sophisticated than that presented in *ENSES*. Indeed, Robbins proposes the discipline of political economy as a hybrid discipline that

integrates the deliverances of economic science and ethics in order to offer economy policy advice. Chapter 4 sought to recover Robbins's idea of political economy as the discipline that integrates the deliverances of economics and ethics, but not without adjustment. The chapter offered a critique of Robbins's construal of facts and values, which underpins his distinction between positive and normative statements, suggesting instead that it is possible to maintain a distinction between positive and normative statements, without having to ground them in a non-cognitivist meta-ethic. The arguments developed in this chapter related to economics and political economy in general and, therefore, this chapter concluded with several suggestions for developing political economy as a discipline and the competence of economists and ethicists as its practitioners.

This chapter took the schema outlined in Chapter 4 to propose that the site of interdisciplinary dialogue between Christian theology and ethics and economics is within the discipline of Christian political economy. In developing this proposal, various objections were considered along the way. *Christian* political economy is the site of interdisciplinary exchange between economists and ethicists who wish to bring the deliverances of Christian ethics together with the deliverances of economic science, with the goal of offering policy advice. Christian political economy is a species of political economy which, while maintaining its theological integrity, understands and respects the scope and nature of economic science.

For *Christian* political economy to become a robust site of interdisciplinary exchange, a number of work streams need to be further developed by Christian theologians, ethicists, and economists. First, there is benefit in identifying and summarising the main normative concepts within the different traditions of social and economic thought and teaching. In some Christian traditions, much of this work has already been undertaken (e.g, MCST); however, in other



traditions (e.g., Anglican Social Thought and Liberation Theology) there is still further work to do. This will facilitate exchange between different traditions, highlighting lacunae, differences, and promoting the syntheses of concepts where that is possible. Where possible, normative concepts, such as the distinction between goods and services that satisfy human needs versus human wants or the preferential option for the poor, should be formalized to enable comparison with the normative concepts of mainstream welfare economics, such as the Pareto principle and the compensation principle. This is unexplored territory and, therefore, there are potential gains to come from comparing normative concepts along these lines.

Second, the understandings of the human person, human society, and the non-human world, as well as the normative assumptions that emerge from various Christians traditions of social and economic thought and teaching can be taken up by the economist *qua* scientist to refine the explanation of how humans allocate scarce resources. As noted above, Yuengert provides an example of such work.<sup>503</sup>

Third, it will be fruitful for Christian theologians, ethicists, and economists to collaborate in developing economic policy for some well-specified policy questions. By narrowing the scope to a particular policy question—rather than trying to reform global capitalism as an entire system—Christian ethicists and economists are more likely to develop policy advice that has theological integrity and economic robustness. Responding to a succession of well-specified policy questions could naturally lead into the development of a full-blown Christian political economy. Such a Christian political economy could engage with other versions of political economy, including those not developed from explicitly Christian theological foundations (e.g.,

---

<sup>503</sup> Yuengert, “Elements of a Christian Critique of Consumer Theory.”

Sen's capability approach to economic development).<sup>504</sup> The integrity and robustness of this sort of work will depend, in large part on the development of work streams noted in the first and second points above.

Finally, further work should be undertaken along the lines of Chapters 2 and 3 of this dissertation in which there is theological engagement with foundational economic concepts. Ripe for theological engagement, for instance, is the role of markets in coordinating economic behavior.

---

<sup>504</sup> See Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom*, Reprint edition (New York: Anchor, 2000).

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Alvey, James E. "A Short History of Economics as a Moral Science." *Journal of Markets & Morality* 2, no. 1 (1999): 53–73.
- Backhouse, Roger E. "Robbins and Welfare Economics: A Reappraisal." *Journal of the History of Economic Thought* 31, no. 4 (2009): 474–84.
- Backhouse, Roger E., and Steven G. Medema. "Defining Economics: The Long Road to Acceptance of the Robbins Definition." *Economica* 76 (2009): 805–20.
- . "Retrospectives: On the Definition of Economics." *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 23, no. 1 (2009): 221–33.
- Barrera, Albino. *God and the Evil of Scarcity: Moral Foundations of Economic Agency*. University of Notre Dame Press, 2005.
- Barro, Robert, Jason Hwang, and Rachel McCleary. "Religious Conversion in 40 Countries." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 49, no. 1 (2010): 15–36.
- Barro, Robert J., and Rachel M. McCleary. "Religion and Economic Growth across Countries." *American Sociological Review* 68, no. 5 (2003): 760–81.
- Becker, Gary Stanley. *The Economic Approach To Human Behavior*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976.
- Beed, Clive, and Cara Beed. "The Autonomy of Economics from Judeo-Christian Thought: A Critique." *International Journal of Social Economics* 30, no. 9 (September 1, 2003): 942–66.
- Bell, Daniel M. *Liberation Theology After The End of History: The Refusal To Cease Suffering*. London; New York: Routledge, 2001.
- Biggar, Nigel. *Behaving in Public: How to Do Christian Ethics*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2011.
- Brennan, H. Geoffrey. "The Impact of Theological Predispositions on Economics: A Commentary." In *Economics And Religion: Are They Distinct?*, edited by H. Geoffrey Brennan and A. M. C. Waterman, 163–77. Norwell, Massachusetts: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1994.
- Brennan, H. Geoffrey, and A. M. C. Waterman, eds. *Economics and Religion : Are They Distinct?* Norwell, Massachusetts: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1994.
- , eds. "Introduction: Economics and Religion?" In *Economics And Religion: Are They Distinct?*, 3–15. Norwell, Massachusetts: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1994.

- Brink, David O. *Moral Realism and the Foundations of Ethics*. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989.
- Bronfenbrenner, M. "The Scarcity Hypothesis in Modern Economics." *The American Journal of Economics and Sociology* 21, no. 3 (1962): 265–70.
- Buchanan, James M. "Opportunity Cost." Edited by Steven N. Durlauf and Lawrence E. Blume. *The New Palgrave Dictionary of Economics*. Basingstoke: Nature Publishing Group, 2008.
- Calder, Todd. "The Concept of Evil." In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by Edward N. Zalta, Winter 2016. Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2016. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/concept-evil/>.
- Cannan, Edwin. *Wealth*. 3rd Edition. London: Staples Press, 1928.
- Cavanaugh, William T. *Being Consumed: Economics and Christian Desire*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2008.
- Colander, David. "What Was 'It' That Robbins Was Defining?" *Journal of the History of Economic Thought* 31, no. 4 (2009).
- Cooter, Robert, and Peter Rappoport. "Were the Ordinalists Wrong About Welfare Economics?" *Journal of Economic Literature* 22, no. 2 (1984): 507–30.
- Cortez, Marc. *Theological Anthropology: A Guide for the Perplexed*. New York; London: T&T Clark International, 2010.
- Creedy, John. "English Marginalism." *The University of Melbourne Department of Economics, Working Paper Series*, September 2010.
- . *Taxation and Economic Behaviour: Introductory Surveys in Economics*. Edward Elgar Publishing, 2001.
- Crespo, Ricardo F. "Is Economics a Moral Science?" *Journal of Markets & Morality* 1, no. 2 (1998): 201–11.
- Crook, Roger H. *Introduction to Christian Ethics*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1990.
- Curran, Charles E. "How Does Christian Ethics Use Its Unique and Distinctive Christian Aspects?" *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 31, no. 2 (2011): 23–36.
- Danner, Peter L. "Personalism and the Problem of Scarcity." *Forum for Social Economics* 25, no. 1 (1995): 21–32.

- Dean, J. M., and A. M. C. Waterman, eds. *Religion and Economics: Normative Social Theory: Normative Social Theory*. Norwell, Massachusetts: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1999.
- Dean, James M., and A. M. C. Waterman. "Introduction: Normative Social Theory." In *Religion and Economics: Normative Social Theory*, edited by James M. Dean and A. M. C. Waterman. Norwell, Massachusetts: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1999.
- Deaton, Angus, and John Muellbauer. *Economics and Consumer Behavior*. Cambridge University Press, 1980.
- Deigh, John. *An Introduction to Ethics*. Cambridge University Press, 2010.
- Finn, Daniel K., ed. *The True Wealth of Nations: Catholic Social Thought and Economic Life*. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2010.
- Frankena, William K. *Ethics*. Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1963.
- . *Ethics*. Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1973.
- Fraser, Lindley M. "How Do We Want Economists to Behave?" *The Economic Journal* 42, no. 168 (1932): 555–70.
- Friedman, Milton. *Essays in Positive Economics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953.
- Gustafson, James M. *Christ and the Moral Life*. New York: Harper & Row, 1968.
- Harvey-Phillips, M. B. "Malthus' Theodicy: The Intellectual Background of His Contribution to Political Economy." *History of Political Economy* 16, no. 4 (1984): 591–608.
- Hawtrey, Kim. "Anglicanism." In *The Oxford Handbook of Christianity and Economics*, edited by Paul Oslington, 177–96. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2014.
- Hick, J. *Evil and the God of Love*. New York: Springer, 2010.
- Hicks, J. R., and R. G. D. Allen. "A Reconsideration of the Theory of Value. Part I." *Economica* 1, no. 1 (1934): 52–76.
- . "A Reconsideration of the Theory of Value. Part II. A Mathematical Theory of Individual Demand Functions." *Economica* 1, no. 2 (1934): 196–219.
- Hirschfeld, Mary. "Discussion: Economics and Theology in Conversation." *Faith & Economics* 58 (2011): 24–29.
- Howson, Susan. *Lionel Robbins*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011.

- . “The Origins of Lionel Robbins’s Essay on the Nature and Significance of Economic Science.” *History of Political Economy* 36, no. 3 (2004).
- Hume, David. *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion and Other Writings*. Edited by Dorothy Coleman. Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy. Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007.
- Hutchison, Terence. *A Review of Economic Doctrines 1870-1929*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1953.
- Jevons, William Stanley. *The Theory of Political Economy*. 5th Edition. New York: Augustus M. Kelley, Bookseller, 1965.
- Keynes, John Maynard. *Essays in Persuasion*. London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1952.
- Keynes, John Neville. *The Scope and Method of Political Economy*. 2nd Edition. Macmillan, 1897.
- King, William. *An Essay on the Origin of Evil*. Cambridge: W. Thurlbourn Bookseller, 1731.
- Knight, Frank H. “Ethics and Economic Reform. II. Idealism and Marxism.” *Economica* 6, no. 23 (1939): 296–321.
- . “Ethics and Economic Reform. I. The Ethics of Liberalism.” *Economica* 6, no. 21 (1939): 1–29.
- . “Ethics and Economic Reform. III. Christianity.” *Economica* 6, no. 24 (1939): 398–422.
- Leibniz, Gottfried Wilhelm. *Theodicy*, 1710.
- LeMahieu, D. L. “Malthus and the Theology of Scarcity.” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 40, no. 3 (1979): 467–74.
- . *The Mind of William Paley: A Philosopher and His Age*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1976.
- Lipsey, Richard G. “Some Legacies of Robbins’ An Essay on the Nature and Significance of Economic Science.” *Economica* 76 (2009): 845–56.
- Long, D. Stephen. *Divine Economy: Theology and the Market*. Radical Orthodoxy Series. London; New York: Routledge, 2000.
- Long, D. Stephen, Nancy Ruth Fox, and Tripp York. *Calculated Futures: Theology, Ethics, and Economics*. Waco, Tex: Baylor University Press, 2007.

- Mäki, Uskali. "Economic Ontology: What? Why? How?" In *The Economic World View: Studies in the Ontology of Economics*, edited by Uskali Mäki. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001.
- Malthus, T. R. *First Essay on Population, 1798*. Edited by James Bonar. London: Macmillan, 1926.
- Mankiw, N. Gregory. *Principles of Microeconomics*. 5th Edition. Mason, OH: South-Western College Pub, 2008.
- Marshall, Alfred. *Principles of Economics*. 8th Edition. London: Macmillan, 1920.
- Masini, Fabio. "Economics and Political Economy in Lionel Robbins's Writings." *Journal of the History of Economic Thought* 31, no. 4 (2009): 421–36.
- McGrath, Alister E. *Christian Theology: An Introduction*. 5th Edition. Chichester, West Sussex, U.K.; Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011.
- Meeks, M. Douglas. *God the Economist: The Doctrine of God and Political Economy*. Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress Press, 1989.
- Middleton, J. Richard. "Image of God." *Dictionary of Scripture and Ethics*. Baker Academic, November 1, 2011.
- . *The Liberating Image: The Imago Dei in Genesis 1*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Brazos Press, 2005.
- Milbank, John. *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*. Signposts in Theology. Oxford: Blackwell, 1990.
- Mill, John Stuart. *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill, Vol X: Essays on Ethics, Religion and Society*. Edited by J. M. Robson, F. E. L. Priestly, and D. P. Dryer. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1969.
- Mitchell, Basil. "Neutrality and Commitment." In *How to Play Theological Ping-Pong: And Other Essays on Faith and Reason*, edited by William J. Abraham and Robert W. Prevost, 113–31. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1990.
- Morris, Thomas V. *Our Idea of God: An Introduction to Philosophical Theology*. Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 2002.
- Nelson, Julie A. "Economy of Grace. By Kathryn Tanner. Fortress Press, 2005. 158 Pages." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 74, no. 3 (2006): 782–84.
- Nelson, Robert H. *Economics as Religion: From Samuelson to Chicago and Beyond*. Pennsylvania: Penn State Press, 2001.

- O'Brien, D. P. *Lionel Robbins*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988.
- O'Brien, David J., and Thomas A. Shannon, eds. *Catholic Social Thought: The Documentary Heritage*. Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 1992.
- O'Donovan, Oliver. *Self, World, and Time: Volume 1: Ethics as Theology: An Induction*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2013.
- Oslington, Paul. "A Theological Economics." *Journal of the Association of Christian Economists* 27 (2000): 17–31.
- . "Review of 'Divine Economy: Theology and the Market' by D. Stephen Long." *Journal of Markets & Morality* 4, no. 1 (2012): 136–41.
- Oslington, Paul, Andrew M. Yuengert, Daniel Hungerman, Craig Blomberg, and Mary Hirschfeld. "What Do Economists and Theologians Have to Say to Each Other? Present Situation And Future Prospects: A Symposium." *Faith & Economics* 58 (2011): 1–30.
- Paley, William. *The Works of William Paley, D.D.: Natural Theology*. Joshua Belcher, 1810.
- Pecchenino, Rowena. "On Tanner's 'Economy of Grace': An Economist Responds." *Irish Theological Quarterly* 72, no. 1 (2007): 96–104.
- Peck, Harvey W. "Review of Robbins (1932)." *American Economic Review* 26, no. 3 (1936).
- Phillips, D. Z. "Religious Beliefs and Language-Games." In *Wittgenstein and Religion*, by D. Z. Phillips, 56–78. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1993.
- Pigou, Arthur C. *The Economics of Welfare*. 4th ed. London: Macmillan, 1932.
- Popper, Karl R. *The Logic of Scientific Discovery*. Routledge Classics. London: Routledge, 2008.
- Pullen, John M. "Malthus' Theological Ideas and Their Influence on His Principle of Population." *History of Political Economy* 13, no. 1 (1981): 39–54.
- Putnam, Hilary. *The Collapse of the Fact/Value Dichotomy and Other Essays*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2002.
- Rawls, John. *A Theory of Justice*. Original Edition. Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press, 1971.
- Richardson, J. David. "Frontiers in Economics and Christian Scholarship." *Christian Scholar's Review* 17 (1988): 381–400.
- Rieger, Joerg. *No Rising Tide: Theology, Economics, and the Future*. Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress Press, 2009.



- Robbins, Lionel. *An Essay on the Nature & Significance of Economic Science*. London: Macmillan, 1932.
- . *An Essay on the Nature & Significance of Economic Science*. 2nd Edition. London: Macmillan, 1935.
- . *An Essay on the Nature & Significance of Economic Science*. 3rd Edition. New York: New York University Press, 1984.
- . *Autobiography of an Economist*. London: Macmillan, 1971.
- . *Economic Planning and International Order*. London: Macmillan, 1937.
- . “Economics and Political Economy.” *The American Economic Review* 71, no. 2 (1981): 1–10.
- . “Interpersonal Comparisons of Utility: A Comment.” *The Economic Journal* 48, no. 192 (1938): 635–41.
- . “Live and Dead Issues in the Methodology of Economics.” *Economica* 5, no. 19 (1938): 342–52.
- Samuelson, Paul A. “The Canonical Classical Model of Political Economy.” *Journal of Economic Literature* 16, no. 4 (1978): 1415–34.
- Sandmo, Agnar. *Economics Evolving: A History of Economic Thought*. Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 2011.
- Santurri, Edmund N. “Theodicy and Social Policy in Malthus’ Thought.” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 43, no. 2 (1982): 315–30.
- Sen, Amartya. *Development as Freedom*. Reprint edition. New York: Anchor, 2000.
- . *On Ethics and Economics*. The Royer Lectures. Oxford; New York: B. Blackwell, 1987.
- Smith, Ian. “God and Economics.” In *God and Culture: Essays in Honor of Carl FH Henry*, edited by D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1993.
- Stackhouse, John G. *Making the Best of It: Following Christ in the Real World*. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2011.

- Sumner, John Bird. *A Treatise on the Records of the Creation, and on the Moral Attributes of the Creator: With Particular Reference to the Jewish History, and to the Consistency of the Principle of Population with the Wisdom and Goodness of the Deity*. London : J. Hatchard, 1833.
- Sung, J. *The Subject, Capitalism, and Religion: Horizons of Hope in Complex Societies*. New York: Springer, 2011.
- Sung, Jung Mo. *Desire, Market and Religion*. London: SCM Press, 2007.
- Swinburne, Richard. *Providence and the Problem of Evil*. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1998.
- . *The Existence of God*. 2nd Edition. Oxford; New York: Clarendon Press ; Oxford University Press, 2004.
- Tanner, Kathryn. *Christ the Key*. Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010.
- . *Economy of Grace*. Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress Press, 2005.
- . *Economy of Grace*. Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress Press, 2005.
- . *God and Creation in Christian Theology: Tyranny or Empowerment?* Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress Press, 1988.
- . *The Politics of God: Christian Theologies and Social Justice*. Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress Press, 1992.
- . *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology*. Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress Press, 1997.
- Waldron, Jeremy. *God, Locke, and Equality: Christian Foundations in Locke's Political Thought*. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002.
- Walsh, Vivian. *Scarcity and Evil*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1961.
- Waterman, A. M. C. "Can 'Economic Policy' Be 'Christian'?" *Review of Social Economy* 46, no. 2 (October 1, 1988): 203–11.
- . "Economists on the Relation Between Political Economy and Christian Theology: A Preliminary Survey." *International Journal of Social Economics* 14, no. 6 (June 1, 1987): 46–68.
- . "Review of Divine Economy: Theology and the Market." *International Journal of Social Economics* 29, no. 3 (2002): 251–57.

- . “Review of God and the Evil of Scarcity: Moral Foundations of Economic Agency by Albino Barrerra.” *Faith and Economics* 49 (2007): 61–65.
- . *Revolution, Economics and Religion: Christian Political Economy, 1798-1833*. Cambridge University Press, 1991.
- . “The True Wealth of Nations in Recent Catholic Social Thought: A Review Essay.” *Faith and Economics* 57 (2011): 47–55.
- Weber, Max. “The Meaning of ‘Ethical Neutrality’ in Sociology and Economics.” In *Max Weber on the Methodology of the Social Sciences*, translated by Edward Shils. Glencoe, Ill: Free Press, 1949.
- . *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Translated by Stephen Kalberg. Revised edition. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010.
- Wicksteed, Philip Henry. *The Common Sense of Political Economy, and Selected Papers and Reviews on Economic Theory*. Edited by Lionel Robbins. George Routledge and Sons, 1933.
- Wright, N. T. *Evil and the Justice of God*. 5/31/13 edition. Westmont: IVP Books, 2013.
- . *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013.
- Yuengert, Andrew. *The Boundaries of Technique: Ordering Positive and Normative Concerns in Economic Research*. Studies in Ethics and Economics. Lanham, Md: Lexington Books, 2004.
- . “Why Did the Economist Cross the Road? The Hierarchical Logic of Ethical and Economic Reasoning.” *Economics and Philosophy* 18, no. 2 (2002).
- Yuengert, Andrew M. “Elements of a Christian Critique of Consumer Theory.” *Faith and Economics* 54 (2009): 31–56.
- . “Roman Catholic Economics.” In *The Oxford Handbook of Christianity and Economics*, edited by Paul Oslington, 153–76. Oxford; New York, 2014.
- . “The Uses of Economics in Papal Encyclicals.” In *Religion and Economics: Normative Social Theory: Normative Social Theory*, edited by J. M. Dean and A. M. C. Waterman, 33–50. Norwell, Massachusetts: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1999.