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Interdisciplinary Dialogue and *Scarcity* in Economic Terminology

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The Challenge of Dialogue

Interdisciplinary academic work is inherently fraught, and the incentives in most scholarly environments tend to direct efforts toward greater specialization rather than to foster cross- and interdisciplinary collaboration and dialogue. With specialization of focus comes specialization of terminology, and the challenge of overcoming the technical jargon of another discipline is one of the key barriers to genuine interdisciplinary work. My formal academic training in theology, while including formation in different theological specializations—including history, systematics, and ethics—did little to either substantively introduce or materially develop expertise in fields like political science or economics. One of the great blessings of my time working at the Acton Institute has been an ongoing education and formation in economics, public policy, and political philosophy.

So, while I come at the dialogue between theology and economics from the side of the theologians, I do so with a deep sense of how much there is for theologians to learn from other perspectives. I think it is, in fact, imperative for theologians and ecclesial leaders not to be content with remaining in the narrow conceptual confines of the institutional church but to expand their perspectives and open their inquiry and curiosity to the structures, contexts, and developments in the world more broadly. This is, in a way, a practical outworking of a theology of the relationship between created nature and saving grace, and sometimes confessional perspectives that emphasize the harmony between these two do not manifest consistent practical expression. Theologians in the Reformed tradition, for example, might speak strongly about the continuity of common grace, but in terms of their actual work, attitudes, and attention, focus almost exclusively on academic and scholarly debates concerning theological matters related to the institutional church and saving grace. The opposite is also often true, of course, and is perhaps a more prevailing trend in theological education today, which transmutes theology into a spiritualized expression of some other disciplinary approach, whether psychology, sociology, or economics. The fiercely pragmatic and anti-theoretical attitude in American theological institutions is what provoked the visiting German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer to observe, "There is no theology here."[1]

The economic concept of division of labor, rightly understood, is no doubt helpful in this regard. Each discipline has its own unique and characteristic contribution to make to human understanding. Speaking of the contrast between the free society and totalitarianism, the great German economist Wilhelm Röpke presciently captured the necessity of authentic exchange and engagement between a theologically informed ethics and economics: "If we want to be steadfast in this struggle, it is high time to bethink ourselves of the ethical foundations of our own economic system. To this end, we need a combination of supreme moral sensitivity and economic knowledge. Economically ignorant moralism is as objectionable as morally callous economism. Ethics and economics are two equally difficult subjects, and while the former needs discerning and expert reason, the latter cannot do without humane values."[2]

The responsibility to listen well and engage authentically goes both ways, of course.[3] Economists should not be dismissive of theology because it does not offer accounts that are easily digestible in terms of economic models or methods. Theological methods may not yield tractable results the same way that mainstream economics does, but that does not make theological truths any less valid on their own terms. Christian economists of goodwill often have difficulty understanding the salience of particular critiques or claims made by theologians, even when those contributions may well have solid theological grounding. Lunn and Klay, for instance, have expressed doubts about the Christian idea of "stewardship" as leading to a fruitful agenda for economic research.[4] Part of the difficulty may simply arise from the difference in the default perspective of theologians and economists, the former tending to emphasize eschatological ideals while the latter focus on incremental improvements and tradeoffs.[5] In my own quite limited experience, however, I have more often encountered genuine curiosity, generosity of spirit, and intellectual integrity among economists (Christian or otherwise) who are attempting to grapple with the insights of religion and theology than I have among Christian theologians who are dealing with economics. The default posture of Christian theologians seems more often to be one of critical judgment rather than collegial dialogue. The exceptions to this I have encountered are all the more remarkable because of their relative rarity.

I am reminded of the salient observation by Murray Rothbard: "It is no crime to be ignorant of economics, which is, after all, a specialized discipline and one that most people consider to be a 'dismal science.' But it is totally irresponsible to have a loud and vociferous opinion on economic subjects while remaining in this state of ignorance."[6] This latter phenomenon is corrosive and utterly destructive, both intellectually and practically, but it is one that is encountered all-too-often in interdisciplinary engagements between moralists of various kinds (including but not limited to theologians) and economists.

The first necessary step in authentic dialogue, beyond beginning with an understanding that one might actually have something to learn from someone else, is to find a common language. When God wanted to prevent anything constructive from taking place at Babel, he made sure to confuse the language of those engaged in a common undertaking. And perhaps the most common error I encounter in dialogues between economists and theologians is a confusion of terminology. This can happen with virtually any important term, whether it is used more generally or more technically in the discourse of one or the other discipline. Marvin Minsky identifies what he calls "suitcase-words," drawing particularly from the discipline of psychology, which refer to our tendency to pack all different kinds of meanings, connotations, and value-judgments from various perspectives into the same word.[7] Words in normative discourse are especially apt to manifest this kind of usage. Consider the word *justice*, for instance, which the philosopher David Schmidtz has rightly identified as a reference for something that does not have a simple, univocal reality.[8] In his landmark essay on corporate social responsibility, Milton Friedman stumbles on the possible meaning of each one of the key words: *social*, *responsibility*, and *business*.[9] Other examples are terms such as *efficiency*, *self-interest*, and *value*.

Scarcity

As an illustration of the various challenges in interdisciplinary dialogue, particularly with respect to theology and economics, the remainder of this essay will focus on the economic concept of *scarcity* and its typical reception and use by theologians. One of the most common errors in interdisciplinary dialogue is to take a technical term used in one field and apply to it a nontechnical or mundane meaning. In the case of scarcity, this would take the form of understanding its meaning to be simply something like "lack" or "poverty."[10] When theologians think of scarcity, we, perhaps like most people, commonly conceive of a scorched-earth vista, starvation, or deprivation. The immediate reaction is one of horror and sorrow: Scarcity is a result of sin and thus is not the way the world is supposed to be. The answer to the problem of scarcity is thus clear: God is the source of all good things and he gives bounteously, first in creation and, after the fall into sin, in the context of his ongoing providential care.

The basic distinction in this case is between economics as a science of scarcity, which is concerned with material deprivation and poverty, and a broader understanding offered by theology, which emphasizes divine abundance. The implication, whether left implicit or made explicit, is that economics, by taking scarcity as a defining feature of its analysis, is at best inadequate and at worst fundamentally flawed. We can find this basic approach in more popular as well as intellectual and even scholarly theological engagements with scarcity. The renowned Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann contrasts divine abundance with scarcity, calling the latter a "myth." The Bible, says Brueggemann, "starts out with a liturgy of abundance." There is in the creation mandate "an orgy of fruitfulness," in which "everything in its kind is to multiply the overflowing goodness that pours from God's creator spirit." By contrast, scarcity comes about because of the fall into sin, and specifically because of the greed of Egypt: "Pharaoh introduces the principle of scarcity into the world economy. For the first time in the Bible, someone says, 'There's not enough. Let's get everything.'" In this way greed is the result of living according to the principle of scarcity. Brueggemann identifies this conflict as so basic to the human condition that he claims "the central problem of our lives is that we are torn apart by the conflict between our attraction to the good news of God's abundance and the power of our belief in scarcity—a belief that makes us greedy, mean and unneighborly. We spend our lives trying to sort out that ambiguity."[11]

Brueggemann may well be right about the fundamental dynamics of greed, anxiety, and uncharity in our world. But the question of whether this is best understood as a consequence of scarcity is asserted rather than argued. No doubt the connection is supposed to be self-evident, but moving easily from the idea of scarcity in economic theory to the actual workings of market economies and the motivating factors of economic actors in the world today would take a great deal more work to actually demonstrate rather than to merely assert.

The theologian D. Stephen Long directly engages economic theory in his treatment of scarcity, as he writes, "Capitalist economics assumes scarcity." Citing Baumol and Blinder on the fundamental economic dynamic of scarcity, defined as "the fact that all decisions are constrained by the scarcity of available resources," Long goes on to observe that "while this lack assumes a scarcity of resources, it assumes a more fundamental scarcity—in *anthropology* itself," and indeed, is thereby a theology of scarcity.[12] There is some lack fundamental to human beings and in the God whose image they bear. Long concludes: "Theologians must deny this narrative of scarcity for it forces our language and actions into the inevitable embrace of death."[13] This is a rejection of scarcity in economics not taken on its own terms—as for example a manifestation of opportunity costs—but a rejection of scarcity in metaphysical terms. For, writes Long, "God is not defined by lack: God is an original plenitude never able to be exhausted."[14] Whether or not Long is making a legitimate move here from a basic economic definition of scarcity (related to finite available material resources relative to immaterial desire) to his more grandiose metaphysical critique, it should be acknowledged that his understanding of scarcity is in fact *different* than that used by economists in their disciplinary work.

A closer analogue for the economic understanding of scarcity in theological terms would be, in fact, something like the idea of *finitude*. God is not finite, but human beings and creation itself are, by definition in classical theology. Perhaps Brueggemann and Long would challenge the idea that finitude (rather than scarcity) is constitutive of humanity, but in that case they would be engaged in a project far more ambitious than simply transmuting the technological terminology of economics into something else.

Theologians, who generally can be acknowledged as having received more technical training in hermeneutics than practitioners of many other disciplines, including economics, should be wary of the dangers of what might be identified as an instance of "illegitimate totality transfer" when dealing with technical terminology of other disciplines.[15] The application of a basic dictionary meaning of a word in its everyday use may not only distort but actually corrupt and destroy the possibility of interdisciplinary engagement when it is applied in a specialized context.[16]

Part of what needs to be done in responsible interdisciplinary dialogue, then, is a kind of translation. When theologians read "scarcity" in an economics text, their first response should not be to picture a post-apocalyptic nightmare. Instead they should bring to mind something like the theological idea of creaturely finitude, particularly in dimensions relating to temporal existence and material goods.

Theologians seeking to critically engage other disciplines, particularly economics, should be encouraged in such efforts. But we must also be reminded to approach other disciplines with a spirit of humility rather than arrogance. Theology truly does have something to learn from other disciplines, and the posture of theologians in interdisciplinary contexts should reflect that truth. And while theologians should not shy away from offering insights, corrections, and criticisms where appropriate, we would do well when engaging other scholars and disciplines, and particularly those with which we are less familiar or whose methodology is more foreign to us, to keep in mind the biblical injunction Christ provides: "Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her" (John 8:7 ESV).

Notes

1. Bonhoeffer was referring particularly to his experience at Union Theological Seminary in New York during a visit in 1930, but what he says might be more broadly applied to the mainstream of American theological education, then as well as now: "The students—on the average twenty-five to thirty years old—are completely clueless with respect to what dogmatics is really about. They are not familiar with even the most basic questions. They become intoxicated with liberal and humanistic phrases, are amused at the fundamentalists, and yet basically are not even up to their level." See Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Barcelona, Berlin, New York: 1928–1931*, ed. Clifford J. Green et al., trans. Douglas W. Stott, vol. 10, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2008), 265-66.
2. Wilhelm Röpke, "The Conditions and Limits of the Market," in *The Humane Economist: A Wilhelm Röpke Reader*, ed. Daniel J. Hugger (Grand Rapids: Acton Institute, 2019), 77. For a survey and theoretical sketch of the proper relationship between theology and economics, see Jordan J. Ballor, "Theology and Economics: A Match Made in Heaven?" *Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies* 26 (2014): 115–34.
3. For the purposes of this essay, I am taking as a foundational assumption the basic goodwill of all participants in interdisciplinary dialogue. But the possibility of intentional obfuscation, whether in service of esoteric purposes or in response to the institutional contexts of academic communication, must be acknowledged. Sometimes scholarship is deliberately made difficult for nonexperts to understand (e.g., to limit the availability of knowledge to "experts" via jargon) rather than accidentally (e.g., a scholar has not yet learned to write well and communicate effectively).
4. John Lunn and Robin Klay, "The Neoclassical Model in a Postmodern World," *Christian Scholar's Review* 24, no. 2 (1994): 157: "It is not clear to us how a model founded on the call to stewardship could be the basis for economic research."
5. On this point, see David VanDrunen, "The Market Economy and Christian Ethics: Refocusing Debate through the Two-Kingdoms Doctrine," *Journal of Markets & Morality* 17, no. 1 (Spring 2014): 11–45.

6. Rothbard was talking about "anarcho-communists" rather than theologians as such, but there is perhaps more practical overlap between those two than might be otherwise hoped. See Murray N. Rothbard, *Egalitarianism as a Revolt Against Nature and Other Essays*, 2nd ed. (Auburn, AL: Ludwig von Mises Institute, 2002), 202. At the same time, Rothbard himself is not the economist I would recommend as most conducive to productive interdisciplinary engagement with theologians. He may in fact be wrong about whether or not there is a moral duty for religious leaders to have some familiarity with the basic structures of social life, including economics.
7. Marvin Minsky, *The Emotion Machine: Commonsense Thinking, Artificial Intelligence, and the Future of the Human Mind* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006), 110–12.
8. David Schmidtz, *Elements of Justice* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).
9. Milton Friedman, "The Social Responsibility of Business Is to Increase Its Profits," *New York Times Magazine*, September 13, 1970.
10. See, for instance, the treatment of scarcity in terms of poverty in Kathryn Tanner, *Christianity and the New Spirit of Capitalism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019), 102–24.
11. Walter Brueggemann, "The Liturgy of Abundance, the Myth of Scarcity," *Christian Century*, March 24–31, 1999.
12. D. Stephen Long, *Divine Economy: Theology and the Market* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 143. The reference is to William Baumol and Alan Blinder, *Economics, Principles and Policy*, 5th ed. (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1997), 49. There is a further statement and development of this "metaphysical" critique of economics, including a rejection of the economic idea of opportunity cost, in D. Stephen Long and Nancy Ruth Fox with Tripp York, *Calculated Futures: Theology, Ethics, and Economics* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2007), 41–42.
13. Long, *Divine Economy*, 146.
14. Long, *Divine Economy*, 146.
15. See James Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Languages* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961), 218–22.
16. Long dismisses the salience of this danger. To wit: "Scarcity is scarcity. Just because it is grounded in want rather than need does not make the concept difficult to understand." See Long, *Calculated Futures*, 42.