

The essays in *Smithian Morals* leave us with a great deal of thought-provoking ideas, organized around the principles of liberty, justice, and moral judgment. We learn from Smith that overextensions of government power are corrupting, not just inefficient. Justice, in its commutative and legal sense, is precise and corresponds closely with the idea of property and the rule of law. Moral judgment involves give and take in social contexts as well as reflection and sympathy with others and with the impartial spectator—who at the very least has many godlike characteristics. Christians ought to take up and consider many of Klein’s arguments, eclectic as they may seem, that he has derived largely through his muse (and to some extent my own): Adam Smith.

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Scarcity: A History from the Origins of Capitalism to the Climate Crisis

Fredrik Albritton-Jonsson

Carl Wennerlind

Cambridge: Harvard University Press 2023 (290 pages)

This book is about the relationship between nature and the human economy, seen through the lens of scarcity. It is interesting from a couple of points of view. First, the book illustrates the difficulty of reconciling the canons of contemporary contextual historiography with presentist preaching. In this case the urgency of responding to the climate crisis overwhelms historical sensibility. Second, the book is an example of the combination of ignorance and tendentious interpretation that characterizes many treatments of religious thought by contemporary historians who are not specialists in this area.

In relation to historiography, let us see what the authors say about what they are doing:

After outlining the planetary crisis that in their view was caused by faulty ways of conceiving the relationship between nature and the human economy, especially that of neoclassical economics, the authors suggest that historical work can contribute to repairing the planetary crisis. They write: “We hope that readers of this book, by gaining a better sense of how people in the past have conceived of the nature-economy nexus, will be inspired to think imaginatively about alternatives to the neoclassical idea of scarcity” (3). Yet the authors are quick to differentiate themselves from the crowd of existing critics of neoclassical economics, on the basis that they are merely doing history: “To be absolutely clear, this book does not offer a critique of the usefulness or instrumentality of the neoclassical concept of scarcity—instead,

the problem we highlight is that it has been far too successful. That is, by promoting the optimal use of resources and maximum economic growth, it has fostered a world in which the economy and nature are on a collision course. The primary aim of this book is therefore to expand our intellectual toolbox by drawing on how people in the past have understood the sources, meanings, and repercussions of scarcity, so that we can transcend the current hegemony of neoclassical economics” (16). Then, at the end of the book, when the authors are summarizing their achievement, they reiterate that their contribution is merely as historians contextualizing the currently dominant understanding of scarcity and bringing some older ideas about scarcity into the contemporary conversation. They write “We show how a widely accepted normative principle came into being in a specific historical process marked by contest and conflict rather than the rational discovery of universal truth. By uncovering the hidden history of scarcity, we also begin to understand how this idea constrains our vision of the future and obscures alternative ways of seeing the economy. Only by recognizing the historical specificity of Neoclassical Scarcity can we begin the search in earnest for theoretical frameworks that are better suited to guide us as we tackle the challenges brought on by the Anthropocene” (238). Furthermore, “In tracing the history of scarcity, we have uncovered a family tree of alternative interpretations of the relationship between nature and economy. By investigating the concepts and aims that have guided past thinkers, from David Hume to Rachel Carson, we have sought to expand and enrich the horizons of social analysis” (238).

These statements pay due homage to the contemporary contextualist aspiration (represented by historians such as Quentin Skinner and JGA Pocock, and in economics by Donald Winch) to consider past thinkers on their own terms, eschewing judgements of past thinkers, or attempts to derive “lessons of history” for the present. For the contextualist intellectual historian, engaging with the past can do no more than make us wise and perhaps alert us to other ways of seeing things, and history has no direct lessons for contemporary debates. But yet when we turn to the book itself the authors’ strong agenda about the planetary crisis leads them to devote the longest chapter of the book to criticisms of neoclassical economics (chap. 7, 173–202), to condemn contemporary economists who take a different view of the appropriate response to climate change (236), and to offer page after page of praise of their favorite alternative writers on planetary scarcity (including Hannah Arendt, Marcuse, Heidegger, Rachel Carson, Kenneth Boulding, Sahlins, Richard Easterlin, and EF Schumacher (chap. 8, 203–29). To me it looks like the authors’ present-day concerns overwhelm and drive in unhelpful ways the history they offer of relationships between nature and the human economy. The historical chapters seem to just be setting the scene for the sermon in the last chapter about how we must respond to planetary scarcity. It would be hard for their conclusion to be otherwise given that the ideas of nature and human economy that the authors begin with and never question are very much modern secular conceptions.

The second reason why the book is interesting is as an example of the lamentable treatment of the religious context of past ideas by contemporary historians.

It is astounding that almost nothing is said about the religious context of ideas about scarcity in the opening chapter about scarcity before 1600 (chap. 1, 21–45). The authors know that something must be said about religion, but all we get is a few unsatisfactory paragraphs about the biblical creation story in the book of Genesis (21–22). As if the Christian doctrine of creation rests solely on the account of Adam's disobedience and punishment in Genesis chapters 2 and 3. Their highly dubious interpretation of these chapters is that the Christian understanding of nature is anthropocentric. What about Genesis chapter 1, which is anything but anthropocentric? What about God's call for humanity to be stewards of creation? What about the Hebrew prophets' condemnation of the abuse of creation? What about the Hebrew wisdom literature? After the authors' embarrassing few paragraphs about the Christian doctrine of what we now call the natural world, they move quickly on to consider a series of pre-1600 ideas about the natural world, but with almost no reference to religious systems of thought and practice in which they were embedded. As if there was only one Christian view of the natural world before 1600. What about engaging with the literature on the diverse reception of biblical texts about nature? Or perhaps even a quick glance at the biblical studies literature on Genesis and other biblical texts on nature? Barry Gordon's *The Economic Problem in Biblical and Patristic Thought*, though flawed, is completely ignored by the authors even though it deals with the same topic of different accounts of scarcity through time.

I found it bizarre that the dominant view of scarcity before 1600 is labeled Aristotelian. Though the authors do suggest that what they mean is a view of scarcity inspired by the early modern reception of Aristotle. Perhaps then it would be better to attach the name of Thomas Aquinas to that view of scarcity. And perhaps they should engage with Mary Hirschfeld's excellent discussion of Thomas Aquinas and scarcity *Aquinas and the Market*, published just a few years ago by the same press.

The unsatisfactory treatment of the religious dimensions of ideas of scarcity continues in subsequent chapters. They fail to engage with the religious dimensions of Malthus's account of scarcity with its inextricable connection to theodicy, discussed so well by Albino Barrera, John Pullen, Anthony Waterman, and others. Engaging with the religious dimensions of these thinkers means more than noting, as the authors seem to suggest, that the religious commitments of these writers were about as important to their ideas about scarcity as what they had for breakfast.

Whatever we think of Christianity, whether we reject it or embrace Christian faith, it is hard for authors living in contemporary secular societies, with an impoverished education in biblical texts and Christian theology to imagine how pervasive an influence these ideas were in previous centuries. A credible account of ideas about scarcity in times very different to ours needs to do a much better job of the religious dimensions.

Despite these concerns, I found parts of the book to be engaging and illuminating. I particularly liked and learned from the discussions on Swift, Defoe, and Harriet Martineau. The weakest parts of the book were the chapter on pre-1600 ideas, the discussion of Malthus, and the chapter on neoclassical economics. The authors' attempt to explain the changes in economic thinking in the 1870s as some sort of conspiracy against revolutionary agitation (175) strains credulity. As does their other suggestion that neoclassical economics was simply a reflection of the new consumerist spirit. I remain puzzled why there is so much attention to Jevons, Walras, and Menger rather than Lionel Robbins, who was responsible for the definition of scarcity that features in so many contemporary textbooks of economics. It is not as if there is a shortage of literature on Robbins's definition, from the work of Roger Backhouse and Steve Medema, to the recent PhD thesis of Nathan McLellan who attends carefully to the religious dimensions of different ideas of scarcity.

I applaud the authors' stated "goal of universal flourishing within planetary constraints" (246). But is neoclassical economics really the bogeyman? Is the authors' story that locates the fall in the 1870s with Jevons, Walras, and Menger eating the forbidden fruit, and locates redemption in certain late twentieth-century scientists and philosophers really credible?

In my view a better story and solution is found in the biblical account of divine creation, providence, and the eschaton. The partial nature of human understanding and unpredictable results of human action are in my view better accounted for in the biblical account of our fallen state. Here perhaps is an opportunity for *Journal of Markets & Morality* writers who have expertise in environmental science, economics, and theology to offer a better account.

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What We Owe the Future

William MacAskill

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At its best, *What We Owe the Future* is an exercise in not knowing. We do not know what the future holds or what future people will want or value. This uncertainty should condition the way we make decisions which affect future people.

MacAskill argues we ought not assert our own evaluative judgments on future generations who may disagree and will likely have greater insight than we do, just as our insight and judgment differs from past generations. We should keep future possibilities open for those generations (keep the molten glass fluid, to borrow MacAskill's central metaphor) and avoid doing things that "lock-in" our values for