

Editor's Note: *In issue 9:1 of the journal there appeared a review by Giacomo Costa of God and the Evil of Scarcity by Albino Barrera, O.P. In response to a request for a reassessment of the book and the review, the journal's editors commissioned executive editorial board member Ricardo Crespo, whose appraisal was published in issue 9:2. The editors here provide the opportunity for Professor Costa to respond to that appraisal. This will be the final entry in this exchange, which has covered issues of critical importance to the journal's focus on the intersection of theology and economics, and that interested parties are encouraged to continue outside the pages of the journal.*

I am grateful to Mr. Crespo for his discussion of my review of *God and the Evil of Scarcity*. His strictures sent me back to it in some concern. Although I do not agree that there is much in it that is inaccurate, the book is puzzling, and the problems it deals with are of general interest. I should, therefore, like to take this opportunity to write a brief restatement, clarification, and development of my earlier discussion. If I concluded my initial review by avowing my inability to identify Barrera's notion of scarcity, it was not because of lack of familiarity with the content of the book, including its appendices, but because of the difficulty of interpreting vaguely defined concepts.

Barrera's main argument is that, because God is benevolent, he cannot have let the world go unprovided. The world must have all that is necessary for the sustainability of the human race, no matter its size and its temporal and geographic location ("material sufficiency," 15, 25, 37, 38). Moreover, because God, being good, wishes our good (in the Thomistic sense of perfection according to our mode of being and operation), he wants us also to develop to the fullest our ethical potential. Therefore he has left the world in such a situation that, only if we are sufficiently generous will it happen that nobody suffers from lack of material goods ("conditional material sufficiency," 16, 37, 38). However, if his invitation to partake in his goodness meets with a more or less disguised refusal on our part, then the consequences are very bad for us. Clearly, argues Barrera, we have then drawn them upon ourselves and God is not to blame (38).

Although Barrera's theodicy is restricted in scope (it is only concerned with the evil of scarcity), it resembles many theodicies in envisioning God's creation as an optimizing act: "God could have easily spared humans from the dismal lot of Malthus' principle of population through a simple recalibration of the earth's initial endowments.... But God did not" (xi, 16; see also 161, 163). The resemblance to Leibniz, that might occur to the reader, is, however, only superficial. Leibniz's aim was to offer a proof "that a world with as much evil as ours and both created and ruled by a benevolent and almighty providence is not an inherently impossible or self-contradictory entity," a proof that implied that "we can never know *how* it is not self-contradictory" (see Leszek Kolakowski, *Religion* [1982], 34). Barrera believes that he has penetrated much further, that he has "revealed and resolved the paradox" (xv, 178): "It is scarcity, not [God given] overflowing abundance, that gives us access to the heights of human perfection" (200; see also 179.) He seems to argue, unconvincingly, that economic activity is more "perfective" than any other (30–31, 35). More than, say, politics? Moreover, this "highest of all heights" should be compared

to the associated deaths and suffering of innocent victims, and nowhere does Barrera even hint as to how one should go about doing it.

Perhaps (I dearly hope not) Barrera believes that God should not take suffering into account: “God created humans with the immediate invitation to share in divine life and happiness. Suffering is incidental and consequent to the human failure to respond to such a proffered gift” (9; see also 185), but the issue of responsibility is not germane to the nature of the divine plan. It would be a harsh God, indeed, who purposefully ignored the amount of human suffering associated with a particular model of the world. As Christians, we have a built-in tendency to identify with innocent victims and, therefore, not only do we not find that a compelling argument has been put forward but, faced with such triumphant statements as the one above, feel at odds with ourselves and with the world. We should prefer a theodicy with a little more mercy.

Let us turn to the contention that God has endowed the world with “conditional material sufficiency,” that is, “sufficiency contingent on human response and cooperation” (37, 199). This appears to be a property of the world, and a property that Barrera derives from the goodness of God. Admitting that such a property can be defined, Barrera’s suggestion is not a strict deduction. After all, God might have reasons not to endow our world with it. What is this property? Under (absolute) sufficiency, we would see manna fall on us, or perhaps the angels glide down bringing us breakfast. Is there a residue of sufficiency in conditional sufficiency? One could expect that, whenever human intervention is impossible, needy people would be somehow relieved. Is this what happens? If conditional sufficiency, on the other hand, does not set any restrictions on the range of possible events, if there is no way to appeal to experience to establish whether it holds or not, it would seem to be empty, a rhetorical way of saying that in this world man must learn to fend for himself.

It is, at the same time, precisely this lack of content that allows the author to maintain that “the interminable state [of scarcity] is ultimately traceable to moral failure” (188; see also 200), a sort of Kafkian presumption of guilt for indeterminate offenses committed by indeterminate defendants that does not admit of any exculpatory evidence. (One is reminded of the doctrine of evil put forward by Job’s friends when they visit him while he is in his bed of sorrow: his present troubles, they argue soothingly, *must* be due to some earlier sin of his.) This perhaps can also be turned into the unobjectionable, if weak, statement that we human beings share some responsibility for one another.

A curious aspect of the notion of conditional sufficiency brings us directly to Malthus’ principle of population: conditionally sufficient *for whom*? For all and everybody, Barrera would answer (38). At any time, a thousand times the highest number the world population will ever reach? A notional maximum population, computed by some algebraic formula, that evolves with actual human technology? Conditional sufficiency would seem to require an exogenously determined trend of population size.

If human population size is, or has been, determined by natural, biological forces; or, at the other extreme, by deliberate individual decisions; or by demographic policies aimed at influencing those decisions; or by mortality reducing health programs, the notion

collapses. Barrera, in contrasting “Malthusian” and “participative” theodicies, argues that while the former are grounded on the principle of population conceived as a law of nature, the latter deny precisely the law-likeness (not the descriptive power) of Malthus’ principle (xiv, 183–84). Here at last, it would seem, conditional sufficiency is given a minimum bite on reality.

However, it is the wrong bite, based on a misconception of the nature of economic-demographic laws. The principle of population was a hypothesis devised to explain the dynamics of the market real wage and, by implication, the poverty existing in preindustrial England. Under the assumptions of Malthus’ model, it is true, but this only means that the model is consistent. Another matter is whether it has been empirically validated. It implies that the size of the family is inversely correlated to its rank in the income (or wealth) scale, and already Adam Smith had shown that the data did not confirm this. Still, many historians believe it is not a bad model for some preindustrial societies. What Thomas Aquinas may have thought of it (183) or whether it or its negation can be deduced from the goodness of God by way of Thomistic theology (xiv, 227) is neither here nor there. This is not the proper way to have theology illuminate social science.

Although Barrera admits that the industrial revolution has made the *principle of population* inapplicable, he believes that *Malthusian scarcity* is a feature of the social world that persists and is widespread (sometimes in the book these two expressions seem to be used synonymously.) Malthusian scarcity, moreover, constitutes precisely the evil of scarcity (15–16, 35). What then is Malthusian scarcity? “Most people view scarcity as a state of destitution in which essential needs go unfulfilled and people live in indigence, unable to secure the means of at least a decent, if not a full, human life” (207). Perhaps Malthusian scarcity means poverty, but the author has nothing to say about poverty, except the semi-tautological suggestion that its presence shows that not enough transfers have been made to the poor (207–8). (It would be entirely tautological to say that the poor do not have enough money.)

It is unlikely that Barrera means the poverty observed and described by Malthus, for that, as is well known, belongs to the past: “Poverty may not have been eliminated but its continued presence does not reflect the ineluctable necessities of life in an economy in which output per head was bound to be low and to fluctuate alarmingly from one year to the next, but the characteristics of particular social, economic, and political systems (E. A. Wrigley, “Peoples, Cities, and Wealth” [1987], 2). So perhaps by Malthusian scarcity he means present-day poverty. If so, one should distinguish at least between the poverty existing in developed countries and the poverty of less-developed countries. In the former case, the apparent problem of lack of money turns out to be one of socialization and education, in the latter, of institutional change. (See chapter 6 of Michael Novak, *The Catholic Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* [1994].) In neither case can transfers to the poor achieve anything. There is no evil of scarcity.

Let us accept, for argument’s sake, the naïvely materialistic view of poverty espoused by Barrera. Then, we could perhaps try to give conditional sufficiency some content by formulating it as follows: At any time in the world, given the network of transportation

and communication existing at that time, there is a practical way to reshuffle existing resources that allows all present people to subsist with unimpaired life expectancy.

As it stands, it is very likely false. Still, it might be conjectured that some such idea is behind Barrera's dire statements on the "sins of omission and commission" to which Malthusian poverty is causally attributable. However, this conjecture would appear to be false. Barrera—spurning the neoclassical economist's usage of the term—warns that, to him, demand means the requirement of goods necessary to satisfy basic needs. He maintains that under Malthusian scarcity "demand greatly exceeds supplies," and there is "general unmet demand" (207–8).

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