

Introduction to Economic Personalism

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Aside from exploring the relationship between economics, theology, and moral philosophy, *Markets and Morality* also exists to develop and promote economic personalism. Some may be wondering what economic personalism is. Others may have heard of it but have questions or concerns about it. To this end, therefore, I want to provide a working definition of economic personalism and a brief sketch of its history. As with any definition, however, it is impossible to account for every type of issue. In composing the volumes in the *Foundations* series, we decided to acknowledge this limitation and, instead, to view our definition more as a heuristic device to stimulate further discussion than as a definitive statement of economic personalism. It is in this light that the following provisional definition is offered.

What is economic personalism? Boiled down to its essence, economic personalism is a research program within Christian social ethics that draws from various intellectual currents—Christian personalism, the natural-law tradition, and Christian social thought—to build a more adequate anthropology of the person for use in economics and social ethics. From the beginning of its short lifespan, scholars have sought to bring ever-increasing clarity to the concept of economic personalism. The result of this has been to understand economic personalism in three divergent but mutually overlapping ways: as a school of thought, a method, and a philosophical position.

First, as a *school of thought*, economic personalism is one participant among others in the centuries-old tradition of Christian reflection on the ethical character of socioeconomic life. It is concerned, above all, with developing

a deeper understanding of the moral dimension of economic, political, and civil activity. For this reason, it is engaged in promoting a meaningful dialogue between Christian social ethics, the natural-law tradition, and the discipline of economics. Yet, on these grounds, economic personalism may also be described, second, as a *method* for thinking through the moral, economic, and political dilemmas posed by the modern world. Finally, as a *philosophical position*, economic personalism draws from the Christian humanist and personalist traditions and is characterized by its desire to help create a free and humane economy within a free and virtuous society. It thus functions as a means for bringing the intellectual resources of the Christian moral tradition to the public square.

As a school of thought, economic personalism is only about seven years old. In 1996 the Acton Institute created the Center for Economic Personalism—its internal research department—to increase scholarly awareness of economic personalism. *Economic personalism* is an umbrella term that signifies one, particular, interdisciplinary initiative that aims to promote integrative thinking among the fields of moral philosophy, theology, and economics.

In August 2001, twenty-five scholars gathered in Grand Rapids, Michigan, to participate in the Interdisciplinary Congress for the Development of Economic Personalism. The combined reflection of both speakers and participants developed the ten-point “Statement of Principles for Economic Personalism,” which is accessible via our website (www.marketsandmorality.com). The Statement addresses such issues as human dignity, the social nature of the person, the role of government, the importance of social institutions, and economic liberty, among others. In February 2002, Lexington Books released the *Foundations of Economic Personalism* series, which consists of three, jointly authored monographs, each closely examining a significant dimension of economic personalism’s unique interdisciplinary initiative.

Yet, I do not want to imply that *only* economic personalists attempt to relate theology and economics. Ample precedents exist among social economists, Kuyperians, Catholic social thinkers, and mainstream Christian economists. Two recent examples of such integrative work are Richard Bayer’s *Capitalism and Christianity: The Possibility of Christian Personalism* (Georgetown University Press, 1999) and Peter Danner’s *The Economic Person: Acting and Analyzing* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2002). These authors argue that a more adequate anthropology of the person is the only way to avoid reductionism in economic analysis. Economic personalists insist that the human person must be placed, once again, at the very *center* of economic activity and calculation.