

The Finn—Gronbacher Debate

Gabriel J. Zanotti
Associate Professor of Philosophy
Universidad Austral
Buenos Aires, Argentina

As is known to readers of this journal, Gregory Gronbacher and Daniel Finn have engaged in an interesting dialogue about economic personalism. It is not my intention to review here all that they have written. My objective is to show that their dialogue not only touches upon key aspects of the Christianity—classical liberalism debate but also that it is fruitful in itself, since it leads to a series of additional considerations that enhance our understanding of economic personalism. These additional considerations will not be concerned with the details and divergences in Gronbacher's and Finn's respective positions. Instead, I will attempt to make clear the "horizons of understanding" that informs their writing. In doing so, it will be possible, using Gadamer's terminology, to establish a fusion of horizons.

What Is Finn's Concern?

Why does Finn respond as he does? From where is he coming in his response to Gronbacher? Gronbacher has evidently done something quite simple. He asked for a dialogue between Christian personalism and the three schools of free-market economics. So, what is the problem? What could be objectionable in such a proposal? One hypothesis is that in Finn's horizon of understanding—as in many other authors—this dialogue is *a priori* impossible. Finn's essays refute this hypothesis. Clearly, he is not making that argument.

I propose instead the hermeneutic hypothesis¹ that much of the disagreement between the authors has to do with the use of the word *synthesis*. In the introduction to his first essay, Gronbacher uses the word *synthesis*² to describe the relationship that he proposes between Christian personalism and free-market thought, so I conjecture that the title of Finn's response ("The Economic Personalism of John Paul II: Neither Right Nor Left"³) must be seen as a response to Gronbacher's proposed synthesis. Finn argues not only that John Paul II is not as favorable to the free market as Gronbacher implies, but that there is a complicated relationship between free-market theories and Catholic social thought. Finn raises a simple but important logical point.

We can try to establish a dialogue between faith and reason, and that is, in fact, the main task of Thomism.⁴ When reason and faith are mixed as if they are on the same footing, then we encounter problems. However, I am not denying

that a hermeneutic circle exists between them; I am just saying that a dialogue consists of at least two sides. The question-and-answer process explained by Gadamer is in complete accordance with this point.

So what? a reader could say. The point is that we all accept that for philosophy and theology, but sometimes it is forgotten in social science dialogues. In Catholic social thought this has been and still is an important issue. When the popes “teach” about political and economic issues, what are they talking about? Are they teaching moral issues or technical points in the social sciences?

The answer seems to be that they teach moral issues but, in each case, it is difficult to specify precisely. If a pope writes about the just wage and adds that a free market is not enough to achieve that moral ideal, what economic theory is he assuming? Is that economic theory a universal moral principle of Catholic social thought? Are economic theories and political theories the same as the moral principles that belong to the first and the second orders of the natural law?⁵

From the reader’s side: What is a person “waiting for” when he or she reads a social encyclical—only moral teachings or technical points in favor of his or her opinions? I conjecture that the reader is waiting mainly for technical issues. Please excuse me for not providing examples, but it goes without saying that there are interpretations of papal documents done in this way. If not, why did so many people in the 1970s think that interventionist policies were the Church’s teaching? And why does it seem now that John Paul II has “embraced” a free economy? What does the word *embrace* mean in this context? Is the free market a moral issue or a technical point? I will answer only what is necessary to understand Finn’s position.

If we want to avoid those problems, we do not need an “exact rule” but a main hermeneutic point, which does not require algorithmic exactness.⁶ We have to distinguish between first and second order moral laws and technical points not only by their nature but also by their logical relations. There are certain moral principles, especially those that belong to the first and the second orders of the natural law that are universal, and, therefore, should be logically included in Catholic social thought. We can say that the universal moral principles of Catholic social thought are deduced from the moral principles of the Catholic faith. Therefore, we have to proceed with caution, because those principles are highly important and, at the same time, few and far between.

There are other social issues that can be judged from a moral point of view given the presence of free will. However, they are not universal, because they require the “mediation” of certain points that are, by definition, not part of the

Catholic faith: principles of social science, the interpretation of history from the point of view of those principles, and the application of those principles to a single historical situation. To say that those points are “not part of the Catholic faith” is not to say that they are in opposition to Catholic social thought. The distinction I am drawing is between those issues that are deduced from Catholic social thought and those issues that merely do not contradict Catholic teaching.

For example, if I am a Keynesian economist, I will recommend deficit spending for the unemployment problem. It would be my technical opinion that deficit spending is not contradictory to Catholic social thought, but I do not have any right to claim that it is either “the” correct interpretation of Catholic social thought or something “deduced from” Catholic social thought. In the same way, if I am an Austrian economist and I recommend free banking for the problem of inflation, this position is neither contradictory to Catholic social thought nor can it be considered “the” correct interpretation of Catholic social thought. In neither case is it necessary to have my theory or economic policy “blessed” by the pope. Nevertheless, technical issues can be focused from a moral point of view, as can free human action, but only in a negative way.

Given these principles, How do we interpret the paragraphs of John Paul II and of any other pope that seem to be “in favor” of free-market policies? If we read those paragraphs only from an Austrian, Chicago, or Public Choice horizon of understanding, we are going to be tempted to “mix” the moral point with the technical point, so that we could succumb to a “clericalism of the market” without realizing it. I conjecture that this is Finn’s main concern, which is the reason that he alludes to many other issues where John Paul II and Catholic social thought seem to be critical of the free market.

Gronbacher’s “Clarifications”: The Need for Dialogue

Now we are able to understand the main point of Gronbacher’s response: “Neither I nor the work of the Center for Economic Personalism advocate blind acceptance of free-market economics.”⁷ The key word is *blind*; that is to say, a complete mix of Catholic social thought and free-market theory without proper distinctions. Gronbacher’s central point is that the philosophical and anthropological foundations of free-market theories must be reformulated. This reformulation, this “new foundation,”⁸ may include phenomenology, neo-Thomism, Karol Wojtyła’s view of the acting person,⁹ and other philosophical viewpoints that are closer to a Catholic worldview and, therefore, closer to the moral foundations of Catholic social thought. Even in this case, we do not have to “mix,” but, given the proper distinctions, to work with Chris-

tian philosophy in a Gilsonian way. It is important to affirm that economic theory is not *directly* “deduced” from this new foundation, but this foundation acts as a bridge for the dialogue that Gronbacher proposes. Following our previous distinction, those new foundations are able to rebuild certain economic theories (Austrian economics, for example, with which I am most familiar) so that their relation of “not being contradictory” could be more clear. In this way, Gronbacher’s call for dialogue is the key to solving the tension between Catholic social thought and the classical liberal tradition. It is not a matter of mixing traditions or of advocating a market clericalism, as I said before, but of developing a conversation between both traditions. Gronbacher has realized that this conversation would be impossible without first attempting to reformulate the anthropological foundations of many of the philosophical and epistemological issues that ground free-market economics. But a new question arises: Can such a conversation be carried out successfully?

Not So Fast!

Now we can understand Finn’s latest response.¹⁰ He has never sought to end the conversation. All the problems he discusses in his responses can be summed up in the expression: “Not so fast!” What about the methodological foundations of the three schools as stated by Gronbacher? Can we embrace the methodological individualism of free-market economics? Is the juridical framework that John Paul II discusses consonant with the juridical assumptions of Mises and Hayek? What about consumerism? Is it enough to say that consumerism is not a systemic problem of free-market thought, but an anthropological problem confronting all economic theories? One final question, Will free-market economists be compelled to accept this new foundation? If not, is that a problem? These questions should not be seen as objections, they are simply important matters to be discussed in their own right. This, at least, is my *intentio lectoris* of Finn’s responses. Can the problems that Finn identifies be solved? Yes, I think so. Yet, as Finn’s essays communicate, there is a great deal of work to be done.

Notes

1. See H. G. Gadamer, *Verdad y método* (Barcelona: Guadalupe, 1991).
2. See Gregory M. A. Gronbacher, “The Need for Economic Personalism,” *Journal of Markets and Morality* 1, no. 1 (Spring 1998): 3.
3. Daniel Rush Finn, “The Economic Personalism of John Paul II: Neither Right Nor Left,” *Journal of Markets and Morality* 2, no. 1 (Spring 1999): 74–87.
4. See M. F. Sciacca, *Historia de la filosofía* (Barcelona: Luis Miracle, 1954); E. Gilson, *La filosofía en la Edad Media* (Madrid: Gredos, 1976); and Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975), I, 1–9.

5. For more on the natural law, see Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* (Torino: Marietti, 1963), I–II, 90–96. On the division between first and second order natural-law principles, see *ibid.*, I–II, 94, a, 5c, and J. Hoffner, *Manual de Doctrina social de la Iglesia* (Madrid: Rialp, 1974), 3d part, 2, 4.

6. See Gadamer, *Verdad y método*, 385–86, and his lectures published under the title of *El problema de la conciencia histórica* (Madrid: Tecnos, 2000).

7. See Gregory M. A. Gronbacher, “The Humane Economy: Neither Right Nor Left. A Response to Daniel Rush Finn,” *Journal of Markets and Morality* 2, no. 2 (Fall 1999): 254.

8. I am not using the word *foundation* in a Cartesian way, but merely to clarify my use of the term so that it will not be confused with pragmatism.

9. In this instance it is important to refer to Karol Wojtyła and not to John Paul II.

10. See Daniel Rush Finn, “On the Choice of Method in Economics: Options for Humanists. A Response to Gregory Gronbacher,” *Journal of Markets and Morality* 3, no. 2 (Fall 2000): 224–37.