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Scarcity, Isolation, and Dependence: Economic Insight in C. S. Lewis's *The Great Divorce*

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Scarcity, understood as the condition where human desires outstrip available resources, stands at the center of both economic theory and human experience. While many economists and futurists envision the progressive alleviation of material scarcity as a mark of human progress, C. S. Lewis's *The Great Divorce* offers a counternarrative. Through a depiction of Hell as radical autonomy enabled by abundance, Lewis highlights how material sufficiency alone may exacerbate isolation and disordered desire. Drawing on Lewis's anthropology, recent work in humanomics and the moral philosophy of exchange, and insights from Christian economic thought, this paper argues that dependence – both on others and on God – is central to human flourishing. Scarcity, while no intrinsic good, may serve as a teacher that presses us into mutual care and humility, revealing the deeper ordering of desire that points ultimately toward communion with the divine.

Introduction

In C. S. Lewis's *The Great Divorce*, hell is not a place of fire and deprivation but a gray, drizzling town of effortless material provision. Its residents can conjure whatever they desire simply by imagining it. Yet they are ghosts—translucent, insubstantial, drifting into ever-widening isolation. No one needs anyone for anything. The result is not prosperity but desolation: an endless, sprawling anti-community in which souls scatter across millions of miles of empty streets, retreating from one another whenever the slightest friction arises. Lewis depicts a world that has solved the economic problem of material scarcity and arrived

not at flourishing but at what he elsewhere calls "sub-humanity": creatures so diminished by the absence of desire for good things that they have nearly ceased to be fully human.[1]

This depiction should arrest the attention of economists. Scarcity stands at the center of economic science. As Alchian and Allen so poetically put it: "Since the discouraging fiasco in the Garden of Eden, all the world has been a place conspicuous in its scarcity of resources, contributing heavily to an abundance of various sorrows and sins."[2] Lionel Robbins famously defined economics as "the science which studies human behavior as a relationship between given ends and scarce means which have alternative uses."[3] Under a narrow reading of scarcity, focused on the material resources necessary to meet fundamental human needs, a world of true abundance might seem to render economic science largely unnecessary. If every material desire could be fulfilled without requiring trade-offs, there would be little reason to economize, weigh competing uses of resources, or analyze the allocation of finite means among infinite wants. Economic science, in such a world, might survive only as a tool for optimizing luxury consumption.[4]

But this narrow reading misses something essential. Even in a world of radical material abundance, such as in the gray town itself, one form of scarcity remains irreducible: the scarcity of time and the universal fact of opportunity cost. To do one thing means not to do another. We cannot do everything at once, attend to everyone simultaneously, or be in two places at the same moment. Our existence is bounded by time, space, and the finitude of attention. These constraints persist even when every material want can be satisfied at will. The gray town has not abolished economics; it has revealed what economics looks like when material scarcity is stripped away but the deeper scarcities remain.

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1 The phrase appears in Lewis's "Screwtape Proposes a Toast" (1959), where Screwtape complains that modern souls are of diminishing quality. These are not great sinners but "grubby little nonentities" suitable "neither for Heaven nor for Hell; things that, having failed to make the grade, are allowed to sink into a more or less contented sub-humanity forever." The cultural mechanism Screwtape identifies produces the same diminishment that the gray town's economic mechanism produces through isolation. See C. S. Lewis, "Screwtape Proposes a Toast," in *The Screwtape Letters* (HarperCollins, 2001), 190.

2 Armen A. Alchian and William R. Allen, *University Economics* (Wadsworth, 1964), 3.

3 Lionel Robbins, *An Essay on the Nature and Significance of Economic Science*, 2nd ed. (Macmillan, 1935).

4 Roger E. Backhouse and Steven G. Medema, "Retrospectives: On the Definition of Economics," *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 23, no. 1 (2009): 221–33.

It is these deeper scarcities that expose the inhabitants' disordered desires. The ghosts of the gray town do not seem to choose between bread and shelter; instead they choose between patience and irritation, between forgiveness and resentment, between the costly work of sustaining relationships and the effortless comfort of solitude. As always, opportunity costs accompany their every decision: To remain near a difficult neighbor is to forgo the ease of moving away; to listen to another's needs is to forgo one's own undisturbed autonomy. The ghosts do economize, but they economize in favor of isolation, spending their time and attention entirely on themselves. Sartre famously declared that hell is other people; Lewis suggests something closer to the opposite. Hell is yourself, alone, with nothing but your disordered desires for company.

The gray town thus represents a kind of thought experiment that speaks directly to a persistent strain of economic and technological optimism. A long tradition of economists and futurists has anticipated the progressive defeat of material scarcity as the hallmark of human progress. Tupy and Pooley's *Superabundance* documents the dramatic decline in what they call "time prices"—the working hours required to purchase basic commodities—showing that from 1980 to 2018, even as world population grew 71 percent, the time cost of fifty basic commodities fell 72 percent.[5] Looking back further, time prices for twenty-six commodities fell over 98 percent from 1850 to the present. Andrew McAfee, in *More from Less*, describes how modern economies have begun using fewer resources per capita even as production and consumption rise.[6] Peter Diamandis anticipates exponential technological advances capable of solving many material problems through breakthroughs in robotics, artificial intelligence, and biotechnology,[7] and Jeremy Rifkin's *The Zero Marginal Cost Society* envisions economies in which near-costless production renders profit-based exchange increasingly irrelevant.[8] These techno-optimists are united in their conviction that overcoming material scarcity, or at least radically diminishing it, will nudge humanity toward a better and perhaps even a near-utopian condition.

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5 Marian L. Tupy and Gale L. Pooley, *Superabundance: The Story of Population Growth, Innovation, and Human Flourishing on an Infinitely Bountiful Planet* (Cato Institute, 2022).

6 Andrew McAfee, *More from Less: The Surprising Story of How We Learned to Prosper Using Fewer Resources—and What Happens Next* (Scribner, 2019).

7 Peter H. Diamandis and Steven Kotler, *Abundance: The Future Is Better Than You Think* (Free Press, 2012).

8 Jeremy Rifkin, *The Zero Marginal Cost Society: The Internet of Things, the Collaborative Commons, and the Eclipse of Capitalism* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

This optimism has deep roots. John Maynard Keynes, in his 1930 essay *Economic Possibilities for Our Grandchildren*, distinguished between absolute needs, "which we feel whatever the situation of our fellow human beings may be," and relative needs, predicting that within a century humanity would satisfy all absolute needs and the "economic problem" would be solved.[9] Freed from the struggle for subsistence, Keynes was cautiously optimistic that humanity would turn to higher pursuits, returning to "some of the most sure and certain principles of religion and traditional virtue." To varying degrees, the techno-optimists share Keynes's assumption that once liberated from material deprivation, individuals will willingly reorient themselves toward community, creativity, and meaning.

And to a real extent, history vindicates this hope. Food scarcity is no longer an existential problem for much of the global population. Vaccinations, sanitation, and public-health measures have tamed diseases that once ravaged entire nations. Real living standards have risen dramatically over the past two centuries. Few would deny that reducing material scarcity in these domains has yielded enormous human benefits, and it would be morally obtuse to suggest otherwise. The question I wish to raise is not whether alleviating scarcity is good—it plainly is—but whether it is sufficient. Even granting the techno-optimist vision of a world in which basic material needs are met effortlessly, a deeper question remains: What would such a world mean for human relationships, for the communities we inhabit, and for the ordering of our deepest desires? Post-scarcity narratives, whether techno-optimist or Marxist, tend to assume that liberating humanity from material need will carry us from the realm of necessity into the realm of freedom. Lewis's gray town suggests that this assumption is dangerously incomplete. Freedom from material need is not the same as freedom for human flourishing.

Here, Lewis offers a counternarrative. In *The Great Divorce*, material abundance does not liberate the inhabitants of the gray town; it enables their radical autonomy, and radical autonomy yields isolation.[10] Stripped of meaningful dependence on others, the ghosts drift into estrangement and loneliness. As creatures whose needs extend far beyond the material, a world in which we are

9 John Maynard Keynes, "Economic Possibilities for Our Grandchildren," in *Essays in Persuasion* (Palgrave Macmillan, 1930), 321–32.

10 Reggie Weems, "The Psychology of Hell: Privation, Exclusion, and Banishment as Symbols of Hell in the Life of CS Lewis." *Sehnsucht: The CS Lewis Journal* 12, no. 1 (2018): 6.

freed from dependence on others for even our basic needs may tempt us toward the illusion that we no longer need one another at all. Lewis does not write extensively about economic science or policy in his fiction or nonfiction. Yet in *The Great Divorce* he places questions of scarcity at the heart of his depiction of hell. The apparent abundance in the gray town conceals rather than resolves the spiritual poverty of its inhabitants. In Lewis's view, humanity's deepest problem is not material deprivation but disordered desire. Technological abundance may alleviate certain forms of suffering, but material sufficiency alone cannot reorder the human heart. If anything, abundance risks amplifying our tendencies toward isolation, self-sufficiency, and estrangement from both God and neighbor.

Drawing on Lewis's anthropology of desire, as well as recent work in humanomics and the moral philosophy of exchange, this essay argues that dependence—both on others and on God—is central to human flourishing. Scarcity is not an intrinsic good, but it may serve as a teacher that presses us into mutual care and humility, revealing the deeper ordering of desire that points finally toward communion with the divine. My argument proceeds in three stages. First, I examine the gray town's peculiar economy of effortless provision and the isolation it produces, reading Lewis alongside Keynes's optimism about a post-scarcity future. Second, I explore how exchange, mutual dependence, and rightly ordered desire function as the connective tissue of genuine community, drawing on the humanomics tradition, the moral philosophy of markets, and Christian theological anthropology. Finally, I turn to the episode of Frank and the Tragedian, which is perhaps the strongest illustration of Lewis's thesis, to show how the refusal of dependence destroys not only economic community but the possibility of love itself. My argument, then, is not that scarcity should be sought, but that its absence may expose the fragility of human virtue when freed from material need but not yet healed of moral disorder.

Scarcity and Isolation in *The Great Divorce*

In *The Great Divorce*, Lewis depicts the narrator's journey on a bus from a shadowy underworld toward the outskirts of heaven. In the story, the gray town is revealed to the narrator to be "Hell: though if you don't go back you may call it Purgatory." The narrative's central tension revolves around why so many of the ghostly souls choose to remain in or return to the gray town rather than embrace the invitation into heaven's solid reality. As several commentators note, including

Michael Raiger and Amber Dunai, Lewis constructs this metaphysical landscape to dramatize not simply theological doctrines of salvation, but deeper insights into human freedom, desire, and community.[11]

Among the many encounters that structure the narrator's journey, one of the most illuminating characters is the so-called "Intelligent Man" (sometimes called "Ikey"). Through Ikey's commentary, Lewis offers a striking vision of an economy without scarcity. As Ikey explains, the peculiar nature of the gray town allows residents to obtain their basic desires by simply imagining them into existence: "The trouble is [the inhabitants] have no Needs. You get everything you want (not very good quality, of course) by just imagining it." What results is not prosperity but a peculiar kind of desolation. As Ikey observes, the absence of real needs or limitations has led to the town's endless sprawl, as its inhabitants withdraw from one another in ever-widening isolation.

Because no goods must be produced or exchanged, no one needs to remain near anyone else. As Ikey explains, quarrels and inconveniences with neighbors simply lead each ghost to withdraw farther into isolation, perpetually relocating as conflicts arise. Over time, this dynamic produces an ever-expanding city in which souls are scattered across a vast and lonely landscape. The narrator later learns that some, like Napoleon, have withdrawn to the edges of this gray world, pacing alone in a house with "nothing else near it for millions of miles." In this way, abundance becomes not a cure for want but the mechanism of radical autonomy.

In contrast to the material progress imagined by modern techno-optimists, the gray town's residents do not struggle against resource scarcity. There is no production, no meaningful exchange, no trade-offs to navigate. The basic economic problem of allocating finite resources among competing uses, which is so central to both classical economics and modern policy, has effectively been suspended. And yet economics has not been rendered irrelevant. The inhabitants still face the irreducible fact of opportunity cost: To attend to one thing means not to attend to another. Every moment presents a choice: to bear with a difficult neighbor or to move away, to forgive an offense or to nurse a grievance, to

11 Michael Raiger, "The Place of the Self in CS Lewis's The Great Divorce: A Marriage of the 'Two Lewises.'" *Logos: A Journal of Catholic Thought and Culture* 13, no. 2 (2010): 109–31; Amber Dunai, "The Process of Salvation in Pearl and The Great Divorce." *Mythlore* 37, no. 1 (2018): 5–22.

remain in community or to retreat into solitude. The ghosts economize, but they economize in favor of isolation, spending the currency of their time and attention entirely on themselves. This suspension of material scarcity produces loneliness rather than flourishing, as the gray town devolves into an anti-community where each soul retreats ever further from its neighbors.

While the metaphysical mechanics of the gray town are not strictly equivalent to modern visions of material post-scarcity, Lewis's portrayal nevertheless dramatizes the core dynamic: The inhabitants experience no pressing material need that would bind them together in interdependence. Ikey acknowledges that the goods are "not very good," but some basic level of need is met. The situation, at first glance, mirrors the kind of post-scarcity world imagined by John Maynard Keynes in his 1930 essay, "Economic Possibilities for Our Grandchildren."[12] Keynes distinguishes between absolute needs and relative needs, predicting that within a century, humanity may satisfy all absolute needs—those "which we feel whatever the situation of our fellow human beings may be." Thus, Keynes believed "the *economic problem* may be solved . . . within a hundred years,"[13] allowing society to reorient itself from labor to leisure. He was cautiously optimistic that humanity, freed from the struggle for subsistence, would turn to higher pursuits.

The Intelligent Man in Lewis's story offers a very different account of what such a society may become. Lamenting the absence of real needs, he explains, "That's why it never costs any trouble to move to another street or build another house. In other words, there's no proper economic basis for any community life. If they needed real shops, chaps would have to stay near where the real shops were. If they needed real houses, they'd have to stay near where builders were. It's scarcity that enables a society to exist." This assertion is striking in its bluntness: "It's scarcity that enables a society to exist." It is important, however, to attend to *who* is speaking and *how* Lewis frames the claim. Ikey is a ghost in hell, and his diagnosis—however economically astute—is embedded in a character whom Lewis treats with evident irony. Shared needs and mutual dependence can function as a kind of gravitational pull, drawing individuals into relationships of cooperation and exchange. In this respect, Ikey echoes—whether consciously

12 Keynes, "Economic Possibilities," 321–32.

13 Keynes, "Economic Possibilities," 325–26.

or not—an insight found as far back as Bernard Mandeville's *Fable of the Bees* (1714), where private vices and acquisitive impulses are seen as sustaining the vitality of civil society.

But Lewis's satirical intent is unmistakable. When the narrator wonders whether forcing the inhabitants to live closer together might improve their lot, Ikey's response is revealing: He imagines not a community of mutual care but a population that could be "kept a bit quieter" through a police force and "some kind of discipline." His whispered assurance that "it'd be better, you know. Everyone admits that. Safety in numbers," carries the dark comedy of a man who grasps the mechanism of social cohesion but not its meaning. Lewis is parodying precisely the Mandevillian tradition: the notion that private vice might produce public virtue. In the gray town, scarcity reintroduced on Ikey's terms would produce not community but coercion; not mutual dependence but mutual surveillance. Lewis's point is more subtle than either Mandeville or his critics. Scarcity *can* draw people into proximity, but proximity alone does not produce community. What is missing in the gray town is not merely material need but the rightly ordered loves that would give proximity its meaning. The gray town dramatizes what happens when autonomy operates unchecked: Abundance enables escape, and escape yields isolation. But Ikey's proposed remedy dramatizes something equally important: Scarcity without love yields the machinery of control without community.

Lewis's portrayal offers a sharp counterpoint to Keynes's optimism. Keynes assumes that once freed from material deprivation, individuals will willingly reorient themselves toward community, creativity, and meaning. But Lewis suggests that such a transition cannot be presumed. Freed from scarcity, the inhabitants of the gray town simply retreat further into isolation, using their freedom to avoid even the smallest inconveniences posed by others. What Keynes imagines as liberation from toil, Lewis envisions as an opportunity for souls to indulge their worst impulses. The creatures fail to "return to some of the most sure and certain principles of religion and traditional virtue" as Keynes hoped.[14] Scarcity, for all its burdens, functions as a kind of bitter medicine—a constraint

14 Keynes, "Economic Possibilities," 340.

that presses individuals into relation, cooperation, and mutual obligation. Without it, and without the rightly ordered desires that give cooperation its purpose, society itself begins to unravel.

Ikey proposes a solution to the malaise: He intends to reintroduce scarcity to the gray town by finding some "real commodities" to sell. As he explains to the narrator, "Why, at once you'd get a demand down in our town. I'd start a little business. I'd have something to sell. You'd soon get people coming to live near-centralisation. Two fully-inhabited streets would accommodate the people that are now spread over a million square miles of empty streets. I'd make a nice little profit and be a public benefactor as well."

Ikey's self-description as a "public benefactor" is the final touch of Lewis's satire and an echo of Mandeville's claim that the selfish pursuit of gain inadvertently serves the common good. Davidko proposes that Ikey here represents the Christian sin of covetousness.[15] Certainly, there is an element of grasping self-interest at play; yet the object of Ikey's desire—real goods that might sustain social life—is not itself evil. The problem is not that Ikey recognizes scarcity's social function, as on this point he is more perceptive than many of the gray town's inhabitants, but that he approaches that function as an opportunity for extraction rather than for communion. Lewis makes this clear when Ikey later encounters real apples in heaven. Attempting to carry them back to the gray town, he is warned that "There is not room for it in Hell." Instead, he is invited to stay and "learn to eat such apples"—a metaphor for rightly ordered participation in the good. This moment echoes one of the central themes of *The Great Divorce*: Many of the gray town's inhabitants are offered the opportunity to remain in heaven, but only if they relinquish their distorted loves. Lewis's concern is not simply with abundance or scarcity, but with the anthropology of desire itself. True flourishing requires not the abolition of need but the right ordering of the heart toward both God and neighbor.

15 Natalya Davidko, "The Great Divorce: A Dream by C. S. Lewis: A Comeback of the Medieval Genre," *Athens Journal of Philology* (2022): 235.

Exchange, Dependence, and Desire

There is something fundamentally amiss in the gray town's supposed "abundance." While Ikey fixates on the lack of scarcity as a central defect, Lewis points to an even more profound crisis: The inhabitants are emphatically *independent* in the worst sense—unwilling to need or be needed by anyone else. The narrator wonders aloud whether forcing these souls to live closer together might improve their lot. Ikey offers only half-hearted optimism, admitting that proximity might bring "safety in numbers" but also intensifying quarrels. In a world without genuine scarcity where no individual is compelled to rely on another, hell proves no utopia.

For Lewis, this absence of shared needs satirically underscores the necessity of dependence for authentic community. True society arises not merely from abundant resources or from some ideal redistribution, but from "something of value" that unites individuals in reciprocal care. In *The Great Divorce*, the ghosts' misguided schemes to establish currency or shops in hell are darkly comedic attempts to fix a spiritual problem with an economic solution. The implication is clear: While economics may shape the "how" of communal life, it cannot supply the deeper "why" that fosters trust, patience, and love.

Michael Munger's concept of "euvoluntary exchange" sharpens this point. Truly beneficial trade requires not only the absence of fraud or compulsion but also meaningful alternatives for both parties—what Munger calls a BATNA, or best alternative to a negotiated agreement.[16] When neither party is desperate, exchange becomes something like a moral encounter, and an occasion for recognizing another's needs and building trust. Munger's example of a POW camp in which prisoners spontaneously develop exchange relationships even from conditions of perfect initial equality demonstrates that human beings do not merely tolerate exchange as an unfortunate necessity; they seek it out as an expression of their social nature. Guzman and Munger extend this framework, arguing that in conditions of unequal bargaining power, the stronger party bears a moral obligation to exchange rather than to exploit or withdraw.[17]

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16 Michael C. Munger, "Euvoluntary or Not, Exchange Is Just." *Social Philosophy and Policy* 28, no. 2 (2011): 192–211.

17 Ricardo Andrés Guzmán and Michael C. Munger, "Euvoluntariness and Just Market Exchange: Moral Dilemmas from Locke's Venditio." *Public Choice* 158, no. 1 (2014): 39–49.

In the gray town, every condition of euvoluntary exchange has been rendered moot. There is no ownership, since everything is conjured; no meaningful alternatives, since no ghost faces any consequence from failing to trade; and no vulnerability, which is the very precondition that makes exchange morally charged. A world without vulnerability is a world without moral encounter, and a world without moral encounter is a world in which trust, reciprocity, and cooperation have no occasion to develop. The gray town is not merely a place without markets; it is a place without the conditions that make markets and the human relationships they foster possible.

Underlying all this is Lewis's particular anthropology of *desire*. Throughout his works—from *Mere Christianity* to *The Weight of Glory*—Lewis insists that our infinite longing is a signpost to an infinite Good.[18] In *The Four Loves*, he bluntly asserts that "Nature cannot satisfy the desires she arouses," highlighting the mismatch between what we crave and what purely material means can deliver.[19] If, as Lewis suggests, our hearts are made for something beyond the finite goods of this world, then an environment that pretends to remove all material constraints misleads us into self-sufficiency. We risk losing sight of the deeper source that fulfills us. In the gray town, for instance, conjuring up the next illusory house or comfortable facade only cements one's estrangement from others and from God.

McCloskey has argued across several works that love, not merely prudence, is essential to understanding commercial life. In an essay in *Commerce and Community*, McCloskey draws on Lewis's *The Four Loves* and *The Screwtape Letters* to develop the claim that markets depend on and cultivate genuine human affections, not merely self-interest.[20] McCloskey and Carden extend this theme, relaying Jeffrey Tucker's observation that trade is "an occasion for love" and citing Lewis on *storge*: the everyday affection that is "responsible for nine-tenths of whatever solid and durable happiness there is in our natural lives." Tucker characterizes market affection as "structural love, a system-wide devotion to benefaction."[21]

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18 C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (Simon & Schuster, 1996).

19 C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (Harcourt, Brace, 1960), 21.

20 Deirdre McCloskey, "Bourgeois Love," in *Commerce and Community: Ecologies of Social Cooperation*, ed. Robert F. Garnett Jr., Paul Lewis, and Lenore T. Ealy. (Routledge, 2014).

21 Deirdre Nansen McCloskey and Art Carden, *Leave Me Alone and I'll Make You Rich: How the Bourgeois Deal Enriched the World* (University of Chicago Press, 2020). McCloskey and Carden are drawing from Tucker's brief discussion of C. S. Lewis in Jeffrey Tucker, *The Market Loves You: Why You Should Love It Back* (American Institute for Economic Research, 2019).

If commercial life cultivates *storge* through the habits of daily exchange and cooperation, the gray town is a world in which all four of Lewis's loves have lost their occasions. There is no everyday affection where everyone has retreated beyond the range of habitual contact, and no friendship where no one depends on anyone; friendship, after all, requires the shared vulnerability of a common enterprise. There is no eros in the sense Lewis intends, since no ghost requires what another might offer. And there is no agape, since every perceived desire is self-satisfiable and the soul sees no reason to reach beyond itself toward anything transcendent. The elimination of material need has not freed the inhabitants for higher loves; it has eliminated the occasions through which those loves are practiced and cultivated.

The Great Divorce is profitably read as a treatise on desire, both when it goes wrong and when it goes right.[22] In this way, Lewis brings to his readers an authentic part of Christian theology and practice. St. Augustine's insight that "Our hearts are restless until they rest in [God]" underpins Lewis's point about infinite desire.[23] Lewis follows Augustine in criticizing our misplaced desires rather than desires as such. As Lewis puts it, "No soul that seriously and constantly desires joy will ever miss it."[24]

Economists have not always missed the idea that our inherent desires point far beyond the satisfaction of material needs. Keynes acknowledges, "Needs of the second class, those which satisfy the desire for superiority, may indeed be insatiable."[25] Even earlier, Adam Smith explored the role of desire, and our moral sense of the good, in pushing us to become praiseworthy rather than merely be praised. Smith recognizes that man is thoroughly a social animal, and that mere utility maximization is an insufficient explanation of our behavior. He writes of man "not only with a desire of being approved of, but with a desire of being what ought to be approved of."[26] In addition to this moral perspective, Smith posits a "natural propensity to truck, barter, and exchange," not merely as a mechanism of utility maximization but as an expression of man's fundamentally social nature.

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22 Raiger, "The Place of the Self," 109–31.

23 Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. R. S. Pine-Coffin (Penguin Classics, 1961).

24 C. S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce* (HarperOne, 2001), 68.

25 Keynes, "Economic Possibilities," 321–32.

26 Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, ed. Dugald Stewart (London, 1853).

McCloskey's "Bourgeois Era" trilogy (2006–2016) develops the Smithian insight, arguing that commercial life at its best requires and reinforces not merely prudence but the six other principal virtues: justice, temperance, courage, faith, hope, and love.[27] A world governed by prudence alone, stripped of the other six virtues, would produce precisely the spiritual desolation Lewis depicts. McCloskey insists that the great enrichment of the modern world was caused not by material accumulation alone but by an ideational revolution wherein a new dignity was accorded to ordinary people pursuing trade and innovation. This revolution succeeded because it honored the full range of human virtues, not just the calculative ones. *Bettering Humanomics* develops this into a methodological argument: Economics must recover "the immense amount we can learn about human action from broader human speech and reflection," including the insights of theologians, poets, and philosophers, if it is to understand the human person rather than model a "utility-maximizing sociopath."[28]

Vernon Smith and Bart Wilson bring experimental evidence to bear on these questions, defining humanomics as "the study of the very human problem of simultaneously living in two worlds, the personal social and the impersonal economic."[29] Drawing on Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, they argue that human societies are held together by "fellow feeling"—the moral sentiments of sympathy, gratitude, and the desire to be praiseworthy rather than merely praised. In experimental trust games, subjects consistently cooperate and reciprocate at rates far exceeding the predictions of utility-maximizing models, guided by gratitude for trust offered and resentment for trust betrayed. The gray town is a world in which this fellow feeling has no occasion to operate. Without the need for exchange, there are no occasions for gratitude, no basis for trust, no reason for justice, and no opportunity for the kind of beneficence that Smith regarded as the ornament of social life. A recent symposium on humanomics in *Public Choice* has explored these themes from multiple angles,

27 Deirdre Nansen McCloskey, *Bourgeois Equality: How Ideas, Not Capital or Institutions, Enriched the World* (University of Chicago Press, 2016).

28 Deirdre Nansen McCloskey, *Bettering Humanomics: A New, and Old, Approach to Economic Science* (University of Chicago Press, 2021).

29 Vernon L. Smith and Bart J. Wilson, *Humanomics: Moral Sentiments and the Wealth of Nations for the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge University Press, 2019).

demonstrating that the moral norms generated in face-to-face communities of mutual dependence carry into and sustain the broader impersonal exchanges of market life.[30]

Yet in the gray town, the impetus to exchange all but vanishes. If Smith's description is correct, the gray town necessarily distorts human nature itself by frustrating the very relational structure embedded in our design. Under conditions of illusory abundance, the ghosts prefer to wander off, eschewing the company of neighbors whose "obnoxious traits" they refuse to tolerate. Without scarcity, man all too easily drifts apart, and frustrates his own inherent desires.

This view resonates with a thread in economic and theological scholarship that treats scarcity not solely as a hindrance but as a *teacher*. Julian Simon famously argued that scarcity, by prompting innovation, becomes a catalyst for growth: When resources tighten, entrepreneurs and innovators devise better solutions.[31] Indeed, Simon observes that "new developments leave us *better off than if the problems had not arisen.*" While this insight certainly has its limits in a theological sense, it rightly identifies that in matters of economics and society, scarcity—along with other unpleasant facts of our existence—may serve, in God's providence, as an instrument for moral and social development. Carden and Fuller develop this insight in explicitly Christian terms. In *Mere Economics* they argue that through voluntary exchange "we bear one another's burdens" and that the division of labor and knowledge makes us profoundly reliant on strangers. They suggest this reliance is not a defect of the human condition but a feature of created order: one of the ways image-bearers practice the Golden Rule and fulfill the Pauline injunction to "look not only to [one's] own interests, but also to the interests of others" (Philippians 2:4, RSV). In many cases, once we remove material scarcity, we remove both the price system and the occasions for this mutual burden-bearing.[32]

Lewis is not alone in diagnosing this danger. As Zeller and McMullen demonstrate, Solzhenitsyn mounted a parallel critique of both Soviet communism and Western consumerism, driven by the conviction that "a proper anthropology

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30 Special Issue: Humanomics, *Public Choice* 202, nos. 3–4 (2025).

31 Julian L. Simon, *The Ultimate Resource 2* (Princeton University Press, 1996).

32 Art Carden and Caleb S. Fuller, *Mere Economics: Lessons for and from the Ordinary Business of Life* (B&H Academic, 2024).

should posit a purpose for humanity beyond material wealth."[33] Importantly, Solzhenitsyn did not regard Western capitalism and Marxist communism as equally culpable: As Zeller and McMullen observe, he recognized that Western capitalism does not *require* a materialistic view of humanity, even if it does not prevent one from developing, whereas Marxist communism has such a deformed anthropology at its foundation. Like Lewis, Solzhenitsyn's target is not commerce itself but the spiritual disorder that abundance can amplify and the replacement of transcendent moral purpose with what Solzhenitsyn called the "slavish worship of all that is pleasant, all that is comfortable, all that is material."

By most modern standards, the ideal of "abundance" goes hand in hand with independence. A society that eliminates material need is assumed to free individuals from reliance on neighbors or institutions. Catherine Pakaluk, however, argues for an economic and theological anthropology that inverts this assumption, arguing that dependence is not merely an unfortunate byproduct of human limitation, but integral to who we are. She writes that the reciprocal exchange of gifts—a form of dependence—"is what the Catholic tradition has called love," and the unity formed by such gift-giving "is what we call solidarity—or social charity."[34] In other words, needing and being needed fosters not just survival but authentic community.

According to Pakaluk, individualist and socialist ideologies alike frequently assume that "dependence rooted in nature is interpreted as against liberty, rather than constitutive of it."[35] Here, she pinpoints a key fallacy: If we presume that liberty is defined exclusively as "the denial of dependence," we obscure deeper relational dimensions of human flourishing. For her, true freedom includes the paradoxical acceptance of dependence—both on God and on one another—as an expression of our metaphysical reality as social creatures. Indeed, Pakaluk asserts that "it is not possible . . . to overstate the case for dependence as the chief characteristic of the metaphysical reality of man."[36] Horn and Pakaluk develop these themes further within the framework of Catholic social teaching,

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33 Camryn Zeller and Steven McMullen. "The Moral Critique of Consumerism in Solzhenitsyn's Economic and Political Thought," *Journal of Markets and Morality* 24, no. 2 (2021): 309.

34 Catherine R. Pakaluk, "Dependence on God and Man: Toward a Catholic Constitution of Liberty," *Journal of Markets & Morality* 19, no. 2 (2016): 232.

35 Pakaluk, "Dependence on God and Man," 234.

36 Pakaluk, "Dependence on God and Man," 240.

arguing that the principles of subsidiarity and solidarity alike presuppose genuine interdependence. On their account, any system, whether socialist or radically individualist, that eliminates the need for voluntary cooperation thereby eliminates the conditions for both subsidiarity and solidarity. The gray town is, in this light, a *reductio ad absurdum*: a world where material needs are trivially met but where subsidiarity collapses, solidarity dissolves, and charity becomes impossible because no one lacks anything that another might provide.[37]

This intuition is not unique to modern Catholic anthropology but reflects a much older current in Christian moral philosophy. Francis Hutcheson, writing in the Scottish Enlightenment tradition, argued that "while we are only intending the good of others we inadvertently promote our own greatest private good," insisting that benevolence and self-love are not opposed but mutually reinforcing.[38] Similarly, Joseph Butler emphasized that "benevolence and self-love are not naturally in a state of opposition" but operate in consonance when rightly ordered.[39] Both authors reflect an underlying truth that Lewis dramatizes: Human beings are designed for communion, and flourishing arises not from severing our dependence, but from exercising it rightly. Even our personal well-being is realized most fully when we are embedded within networks of charity, gift, and mutual obligation.

Lewis's depiction of the gray town in *The Great Divorce* dramatizes this very point. Characters conjure illusions of abundance—effortlessly "building" new homes to move farther and farther away—only to discover that their isolation leaves them at the mercy of both their own dissatisfaction and external threats of an unknown nature. In spurning dependence, they close themselves off from love, solidarity, and the deeper satisfaction that only comes through relationship. Lewis thus offers a cautionary parable: a purely individualistic "abundance," unmoored from mutual reliance, becomes a counterfeit freedom. Thus, in *The Great Divorce,* complete independence, which is hell, is metaphorically accompanied by material abundance. Dewatripont and Tirole, working within the *doux commerce* tradition of Montesquieu and Hume, provide formal economic

37 Trent Horn and Catherine R. Pakaluk, *Can a Catholic Be a Socialist? The Answer Is No—Here's Why*. Catholic Answers Press, 2020.

38 Francis Hutcheson, *An Inquiry into the Original of Our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue* (London, 1753).

39 Joseph Butler, "Upon the Love of Our Neighbour," in *Happiness: Classic and Contemporary Readings in Philosophy*, ed. Steven M. Cahn (Oxford University Press, 2008), 77–86.

support for Lewis's intuition. They demonstrate that markets function as moral coordination devices, aggregating and transmitting ethical preferences across otherwise unrelated individuals: Responsible consumers reward ethical suppliers, ethical investors accept lower returns for meaningful work, and these moral signals propagate through the price system. Without the necessity of exchange, this coordination mechanism collapses entirely.[40] The *doux commerce* insight that trade creates trust among strangers maps directly onto the gray town's inverse: Without exchange, residents have no mechanism for expressing, transmitting, or coordinating moral preferences, and they literally move farther and farther apart.

The ghostly citizens of the gray town have no impetus to solve problems collectively, to innovate, or to cultivate virtue. As soon as quarrels erupt, they move further away into an ever-expanding sprawl. Their "goods," easily imagined into existence, lack any real value precisely because no labor or shared purpose stands behind them. If we read this allegory through an economic lens, we see that hell's refusal of dependence effectively stifles the "natural propensity to truck, barter, and exchange." The mutually beneficial exchange that sits at the heart of economic activity does not necessitate the same kind of dependence as the creature has for the Creator—but even that lesser need for one another is evaded by the souls of hell. This stifling of exchange is not merely a failure of market efficiency: It erodes the very fabric of human communion.

Carden, Carini, and Snow deepen the insight, connecting James Buchanan's concept of "artifactual man" to the Christian doctrine of the *imago Dei*. Buchanan's central insight is that human beings are not creatures with fixed preferences but "becoming" beings who construct themselves through their own choices. Carden, Carini, and Snow argue that this artifactual capacity reflects the image of a Creator God and that productive economic activity under constraint participates in a divine vocation.[41] If this is right, the gray town represents not merely an economic failure but a theological one. Where everything can be conjured effortlessly, there is nothing to choose among, nothing to create through costly effort, and no self to construct through the discipline of exchange.

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40 Mathias Dewatripont and Jean Tirole. "The Morality of Markets." *Journal of Political Economy* 132, no. 8 (2024): 2655–94.

41 Art Carden, Jaime Carini, and Nathanael David Snow, "Artifactual Man and the Image of God," October 7, 2024, SSRN, https://ssrn.com/abstract=4979253 or http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4979253.

The *imago Dei*, expressed through creative activity and relational encounter, is effaced in a world without constraint. Self-authorship, as Buchanan insists, requires both community and limitation; the gray town offers neither.

At root, Lewis's theology of desire deepens this entire critique. Desire, properly understood, is not a mere appetite for material satisfaction but a longing ultimately ordered toward God himself. On this account, post-scarcity illusions—like those conjured in the gray town—do not eliminate longing; they redirect it into self-indulgence and isolation. The real measure of "progress" is not whether material scarcities have been erased, but whether hearts are rightly ordered and turned outward toward God and neighbor, rather than inward in self-sufficient pride. Salter makes a complementary argument: Christian economists should employ efficiency as a descriptive tool but not as a normative guide. Unrealized gains from exchange signal that people could be made better off. This is valuable information, but efficiency as such cannot constitute right action, because "both wondrous and horrible things are efficient."[42] The gray town is, in a peculiar sense, perfectly efficient: no waste, no unmet preference, no unrealized gain from exchange because there is no exchange. Yet this efficiency is spiritual death. The damned souls get exactly what they want, and this is precisely their damnation. Salter's insistence that "the tragedy of sin means we want things that God does not want for us" mirrors Lewis's deeper point: Satisfying every desire, including the desire for total autonomy, is not salvation but its opposite.

This disordered inward turn emerges not only in the gray town's economy of effortless production, but in the very way the various ghosts understand possession itself. Many of the souls depicted in *The Great Divorce* struggle with distorted forms of possession: the mother who cannot relinquish her son to God's care, the artist who clings to his own reputation, or the self-pitying man who demands his "rights." As Dunai observes about the over-possessive mother, her desires are "hindered by her fierce need to claim the long-dead son as hers and hers alone." As with the other ghosts, her struggle concerns the improper claiming of persons, roles, or identities as *property* to control. In economic terms, their vice is not acquisition per se, but the misordering of what Adam Smith called "a becoming use of what is one's own." They fail to

42 Alexander William Salter, "What, to the Christian, Is Economic Efficiency?" *Faith & Economics, forthcoming Free Market Institute Research Paper* 4613082 (2024).

distinguish between legitimate stewardship of goods and the idolatrous attempt to transform all relationships into forms of self-possession. In this sense, Lewis's critique extends beyond scarcity or plenty to the moral structure of ownership itself. True possession, like true abundance, is always derivative—received as gift and oriented toward charity. Disordered possession seeks autonomy; ordered possession participates in communion.

Scarcity itself, of course, is not a positive good, nor is it part of the eschatological vision of redeemed creation. The scriptural mandate to exercise dominion, cultivate the earth, and alleviate suffering remains fully intact. Indeed, Lewis himself affirms the good of creaturely abundance when received as gift. As Kotter demonstrates through his time/wage framework, the dramatic reduction in the cost of basic goods over the past two millennia means that opportunities for generosity, gratitude, and worship are far more plentiful today than in the first century, and this is both a genuine and a praiseworthy achievement.[43] Yet within the limits of our fallen condition, scarcity may function as a kind of bitter medicine that reminds us of our dependence, curbs our illusions of self-sufficiency, and prompts both innovation and cooperation. Hell's fatal flaw lies not in abundance itself, but in the refusal of interdependence that makes even abundance destructive. The entrepreneurial fantasies in the gray town parody the idea that purely economic or technological "fixes" can substitute for moral and spiritual transformation. The question is not whether material scarcities can be alleviated—a proper human task—but whether abundance, when achieved, will be received as gift or grasped as possession. The critique that emerges from *The Great Divorce* is not of abundance per se, but of abundance that blinds us to our deeper emptiness and undercuts the virtue that emerges when we must need one another. Scarcity, ironically, may serve as one more signpost, a teacher urging us to seek the real good we have been longing for all along.

The Tragedian and the Ordering of Independence

Among the many encounters that structure *The Great Divorce*, the episode of Frank and the Tragedian may be the strongest illustration of this article's central thesis and the richest site for understanding what Lewis fears about a world

43 David Kotter, "The Time/Wage Index: A Framework for Applying Christian Ethical Teachings to Modern Economic Systems," *Journal of Markets & Morality* 27, no. 2 (2025): 181–91.

without authentic need.[44] Frank Smith, a ghost from the gray town, arrives at the borderlands of heaven accompanied by a towering, theatrical figure: the Tragedian, which is his own self-pitying persona made visible and grotesque. He encounters his wife, Sarah Smith—now simply called "the Lady"—who has become one of the most radiant and solid persons in heaven's landscape, attended by a joyful retinue of spirits, animals, and musicians. The contrast between them could hardly be starker. She is substantial, overflowing with love; he is translucent, diminished, and entirely absorbed in the performance of his own suffering.

The Tragedian's strategy is one of emotional extortion. He demands that Sarah be miserable on his behalf, that she match his grief, attend to his pain, and demonstrate that his absence from heaven has cost her something. When she refuses to be diminished by his misery, the Tragedian escalates: performing ever more theatrical displays of anguish, each one an implicit demand for tribute. As George MacDonald explains to the narrator, there are many souls engaged in this kind of manipulation, "trying to blackmail the universe," using their melancholy as a trump against others' joy.

Frank's behavior represents a precise inversion of true exchange. In economic terms, he demands a one-sided transfer: Give me your joy, your attention, your grief on my behalf, and I will offer nothing in return except the spectacle of my suffering. He insists on receiving without giving. He requires attention without offering reciprocity. He weaponizes his own need while refusing to acknowledge anyone else's. If Munger's framework identifies vulnerability, reciprocity, and the willingness to be changed by encounter as the moral substance of exchange, Frank refuses every one of these conditions. He will not be vulnerable, because vulnerability would require abandoning the Tragedian's theatrical armor, nor will he reciprocate, since reciprocity would mean attending to Sarah's reality rather than demanding she attend to his. Above all, he will not be changed by the encounter. Frank demands love as possession; Sarah offers love as gift. The two are incompatible.

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44 The reviewer for this journal identified this episode as potentially "the strongest textual proof" of the paper's argument. I am grateful for this suggestion.

The Lady's response is the key to the episode and to a broader tension in Lewis's thought. Lewis does not condemn all forms of independence. Elsewhere in his writings, he praises the self-sufficient gentleman: the man who chooses "to live his life in his own way, to call his house his castle, to enjoy the fruits of his own labour, to educate his children as his conscience directs, to save for their prosperity after his death."[45] This is not the language of a thinker who regards all self-sufficiency as sinful. Lewis's gentleman is independent, but his independence is ordered outward: toward stewardship, education, posterity, and moral freedom.

Sarah Smith, in the borderlands of heaven, is this ordered independence perfected. She is the most self-possessed figure in *The Great Divorce*—joyful, radiant, complete in her love for God. She does not need Frank. She is not diminished by his suffering. Her sufficiency overflows outward in a love so abundant that it fills the landscape around her. When she tells Frank that she is "in Love"—meaning in the love of God—she is describing a fullness that enables generosity precisely because it is secure. This is not the counterfeit independence of the gray town, where self-sufficiency is a withdrawal from others; it is the genuine article, where self-possession becomes the condition for self-giving.

Frank, by contrast, represents disordered independence: autonomy oriented entirely inward, demanding everything while offering nothing. His refusal to be changed and to "learn to eat such apples," in the language of Ikey's episode, is the refusal of dependence that defines the gray town. And the consequence is devastating. As the scene unfolds, the Tragedian grows larger and Frank himself grows smaller, until at last the real Frank vanishes altogether, consumed by his own performance. The self that refused dependence has, in the end, consumed itself. Lewis's imagery is precise: Disordered autonomy does not preserve the self; it annihilates it.

Scarcity functions as a teacher not because deprivation is virtuous but because it presses us toward this ordered dependence, creating the occasions through exchange, cooperation, and the division of labor in which the virtues of community are practiced and cultivated. When material scarcity is removed but disordered desire remains, as in the gray town, the result is not the ordered

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45 C. S. Lewis, *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics,* ed. Walter Hooper (Eerdmans, 1970), 244.

independence of Sarah Smith but the disordered autonomy of Frank and the Tragedian: a self that demands without giving, performs without risking, and ultimately destroys itself by refusing the one thing that could make it real.

The gray town, then, is not merely a world without scarcity. It is a world in which every occasion for ordered dependence has been eliminated, and every soul has been left free to choose between the self-giving of heaven and the self-consumption of hell. That they overwhelmingly choose the latter is Lewis's darkest and most economically literate insight: Freedom from material constraint, far from guaranteeing the good, merely reveals the true ordering of the heart.

Conclusion

At the heart of these reflections lies a simple but often neglected truth: Human flourishing requires not independence from others, but rightly ordered dependence. The drive to alleviate material scarcity—whether through technology, innovation, or policy—can bring genuine relief from suffering. But material abundance alone cannot heal our broken desires and, given our other shortcomings, may lead us to withdraw into lonely isolation rather than turn to higher goods. As Lewis shows in *The Great Divorce*, the souls of the gray town use their material self-sufficiency to cut themselves off not only from one another, but even to refuse heaven itself. Yet as the contrast between Frank and Sarah Smith reveals, the alternative Lewis envisions is not a return to desperate need. Sarah embodies an independence grounded in fullness rather than refusal: the ordered self-sufficiency of a soul whose desires have been rightly directed toward God and neighbor. The gray town's ghosts, by contrast, represent disordered independence: autonomy turned inward, consuming itself.

Scarcity, in this light, functions not as an intrinsic good, but as a condition through which we are drawn into mutual care, interdependence, and ultimately, toward the God who alone fulfills our deepest desires. The goods of creation are intended as gifts—finite goods that point us toward an infinite Good. When we attempt to overcome the ties of dependence, treating abundance as license for autonomy, we distort both our desires and our flourishing. First, scarcity provides the occasion for community: Shared material needs draw individuals into relationships of cooperation, exchange, and mutual obligation. Without these occasions, as the gray town demonstrates, society itself begins to unravel. But second, scarcity alone is not sufficient. Ikey's scheme to reintroduce scarcity through smuggled commodities would produce not community but coercion;

not mutual dependence but mutual surveillance. Right ordering of desire is essential, as is the willingness to receive abundance as gift rather than grasp it as possession, and to need others not merely for material survival but for the practice of love.

It is at this point that confusion often enters our discussions about scarcity, as economic and theological framings sometimes speak past one another. As Jordan Ballor rightly observes, critics of "scarcity" often conflate distinct domains, treating an economic observation (finite resources, opportunity costs) as though it were a sweeping judgment about divine generosity or human dignity.[46] The result is a kind of category error: What economics describes about trade-offs in a finite world is not a theological statement about God's abundant goodness. The humanomics literature, represented by McCloskey's "Bourgeois Era" trilogy, Smith and Wilson's *Humanomics*, and a recent symposium in *Public Choice*, offers a promising framework for holding these domains together, demonstrating that the moral norms generated in face-to-face communities of mutual dependence carry into and sustain the impersonal exchanges of broader market life. This tradition insists, as Lewis does, that economics must attend to the full range of human virtues if it is to understand the conditions under which abundance becomes a blessing rather than a curse.

Contemporary techno-optimists, in their excitement over exponentially improving technology, appear to make a kindred misstep. They interpret decreasing material scarcity—cheaper energy, abundant food, near-costless gadgets—as an essentially unambiguous good. In part, they are right: The alleviation of hunger, toil, and disease represents real and meaningful human achievement. Yet, as Lewis's gray town warns, the mere absence of material constraints does not guarantee flourishing. Our desires for self-determination, unmoored from the constraints of scarcity, may fracture the relational bonds that cultivate patience, generosity, and love. History and experience suggest that comfort and autonomy often erode our capacity for community rather than elevate it.

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46 Jordan J. Ballor, "Interdisciplinary Dialogue and Scarcity in Economic Terminology." *Journal of Markets & Morality* 23, no. 1 (2020): 131.

The tension between Keynes's optimistic portrait of a leisure-based future and Lewis's bleak gray town highlights the need to hold two truths together: Yes, we rightly seek to alleviate material deprivation wherever possible; but we also recognize that our finitude, and the needs that arise from it, are not merely regrettable burdens but integral features of human flourishing. In the words of St. Catherine of Siena, "I have not placed [all gifts] in one soul, in order that man should, perforce, have material for love of his fellow . . . that they should be My ministers to administer the graces."[47] Our limits direct us toward one another and toward God.

In economic terms, true elimination of scarcity could only occur by eliminating desire itself—a prospect fundamentally alien to human nature. As Augustine wrote, "Our hearts are restless till they rest in Thee." The creatures of the gray town are not fulfilled; their material independence leaves them hollow. *The Great Divorce* thus offers a warning: Material abundance, pursued as an end, may erode rather than advance our humanity if it detaches us from the very dependencies that cultivate virtue.

Finitude is constitutive of who we are. Scarcity, rightly understood, becomes neither a curse to eliminate at all costs nor a virtue to be idealized, but a teacher. By recognizing our needs, we learn to give and receive. Through mutual dependence, we are drawn into cooperation and charity. Through longing, we glimpse the shape of a fullness that only God can provide. We may cheer for every genuine alleviation of suffering, but we should neither scorn scarcity nor imagine that emancipation from need is the telos of human life. Finitude, properly embraced, becomes the stage on which the drama of love, dependence, and self-giving unfolds—until that final abundance for which we are made, when dependence on God is no longer a discipline but a delight, and the independence we sought in all the wrong places is at last fulfilled in communion.

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47 Catherine of Siena, *The Dialogue of the Seraphic Virgin: Dictated by Her, While in a State of Ecstasy*, trans. Algar Thorold (Burns, Oates & Washbourne, 1925).