

## ETHICS AND ECONOMICS

### The Common Good: An Introduction to Personalism

**Jonas Norgaard Mortensen**

Frederiksværk, Denmark: Boedal Publishing, 2014 (132 pages)

Danish author Jonas Norgaard Mortensen offers in *The Common Good*, as the subtitle indicates, an introduction to the social/philosophical perspective of personalism. Mortensen's political experience includes "head of communications at the Danish Youth Council, secretary general of the Christian Democratic party ... leading and developing projects concerned with dialogue, democracy, and development in Egypt, Lebanon, and Syria" during the Arab Spring, and "chief of communication in the Christian Trade Union Movement in Denmark," all while "running his own lecture and consulting business." Apparently, all while also reading a considerable number of works of contemporary philosophy and political thought.

In the introduction to his book, Mortensen makes the goal of the book plain:

The book's thesis is that we have created a *depersonalized* society—a society which is increasingly moving away from the very basics, from the close relations between dignified humans engaged in their communities, replacing such things with ideology, economics, systems, institutions. The result is an ever greater mistrust of our fellow citizens and of society itself. This mistrust causes a meltdown of society and leaves us unable to handle the serious challenges we face.

The goal of *The Common Good*, then, is to "outline the potential contributions of personalism in this situation." The book is introductory and formatted like a textbook; it "makes no pretense of treating its themes and problems exhaustively." Given that qualification, I would, with the following reservations, recommend the *The Common Good* to

teachers who want an accessible introduction to personalism, so long as they are able to address its shortcomings in class discussion or with other readings.

The book is divided into the following four chapters: “The Relational Human,” “The Engaged Human,” “The Dignified Human,” and “Challenges to Personalism,” which also serve as a good summary of the essential components of personalism to Mortensen: relationality, social action, and human dignity. In addition to his accessible writing style (hampered only, unfortunately, by occasional typos), *The Common Good* features informational boxes throughout, profiling basic concepts and a diverse array of major figures in the personalist tradition, such as Nicholas Berdyaev, Martin Buber, Emmanuel Levinas, Martin Luther King Jr., Jacques Maritain, Emmanuel Mounier, Max Scheler, and Karol Wojtyła (Pope John Paul II) among others. Mortensen writes from a religiously neutral perspective while nevertheless acknowledging the importance of theism of various types for many personalists. In addition, he helpfully ends the book with a brief history of the origins of the concept of the person in the Trinitarian theological debates of the early Church.

The major shortcomings of the book involve two recurring oppositions, namely personalism versus liberalism and personalism versus capitalism. While admirably advocating for the dignity and freedom of the individual and political decentralization, Mortensen does not seem to be able to admit that these commonalities make the personalism he describes a species of liberalism and capitalism, not an alternative. This evinces, as well, his misunderstanding of both of these terms. Liberalism is so broad a tradition as to include *both* Edmund Burke *and* Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Capitalism, as a general economic system, includes *both* F. A. Hayek *and* John Maynard Keynes. Of course, these include many figures that fall between (and beyond) these poles.

The effects of this misunderstanding are seen in broad statements that conflate liberalism and atomistic individualism or capitalism and consumerism. These abuses, however, do not accurately represent either liberalism or capitalism. For example, note the following from Frank H. Knight, one of the founders of the Chicago school of economics: “The individual cannot be a datum for the purposes of social policy, because he is largely formed in and by the social process, and the nature of the individual must be affected by social action.” Knight would agree with Mortensen that individuals do not exist in isolation but are profoundly formed by their relationships with others. While Knight agrees that taking the individual as given is a common error of liberalism, he also writes, “in the nature of the case, liberalism is more ‘familism’ than literal individualism. Some sort of family life, and far beyond that, some kind of wider primary-group must be taken as they are, as *data*, in free society at any time, until they change or are changed ... into other forms.” Such counterexamples could be easily multiplied from a vast variety of liberal and capitalist authors. Mortensen’s presentation in this case is not simply too inexact: It is also misleading and inaccurate.

What seems to emerge is a resistance to man as *homo economicus* (economic man). While I agree that *reducing* human beings to rational utility maximizers is depersonalizing, conversely failing to acknowledge the economic aspect of our nature properly is

dehumanizing. To coin a few terms, instead of *homo non economicus* (non-economic man), what is needed for a fuller picture is *homo supra economicus* (more than economic man). The former could indicate the latter, if it was taken to mean “not [merely] economic man,” but that is not the picture that emerges from *The Common Good*.

The latter case (*homo supra economicus*), however, has been made in the last twenty years by none other than a group of scholars who, in fact, have identified as economic personalists—for example, Gregory R. Beabout, Edward O’Boyle, Ricardo F. Crespo, Peter Danner, Patricia Donahue-White, Daniel K. Finn, and Gloria L. Zúñiga among others—and who acknowledge antecedents within the liberal tradition. While Mortensen briefly highlights the distributism of G. K. Chesterton and Hilaire Belloc as built on personalist premises (which it is), he fails to engage or even note the significant body of work of those who see personalism as augmenting, rather than opposing, capitalism and liberalism. Perhaps a second edition could temper these too-sharp dichotomies that do not reflect the nuance and care of the rest of the book.

One opposition in *The Common Good* turned out to be enlightening though: personalism versus existentialism. One reason this opposition is better is that Mortensen more readily admits that there is significant overlap between the two and more of a difference of emphases than fundamental incompatibility. That difference of emphases caught my attention: (1) “Existentialism views the surrounding world as meaningless and hostile, whereas personalism sees the world as fundamentally meaningful”; (2) “Whereas for existentialism the Other is an enemy ... personalism sees others as friends”; (3) “For existentialism, the goal and the norm is freedom; for personalism, it is the good of individual, community, and society alike.”

While Mortensen’s goal is to promote personalism over or against existentialism, he instead convinced me that both touch on significant aspects of reality as we know it: birth (and hence relation) and death. No one is born into Locke’s state of nature—his variety of liberal anthropology *would* be at odds with personalism. Instead, we are born to a mother and a father, into families, communities, and societies. This is basic to all human existence and deserves the emphasis accorded to it in personalist philosophy and social thought.

Nevertheless, to borrow a phrase from Richard John Neuhaus, we are also “born toward dying.” We are mortal—and not just individuals, but marriages, families, communities, and societies die as well. Although born with the dignity of “children of the Most High,” to quote the psalmist, we all “die like men” (Ps. 82:6–7 NKJV). The existentialists are right to bring to our attention the haunting mystery of nothingness, meaninglessness, and chaos. It is the problem of evil, and it is a problem for everyone that cannot be solved by being ignored or rationalized away.

The contribution of the gospel, above and beyond both of these, is not a way to cheat death, but rather that “we who live are always delivered to death for Jesus’ sake, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh” (2 Cor. 4:11 NKJV). Our philosophy and social policy ought to reflect the realities of relation and dissolution, and Mortensen does a good job, all things considered, introducing and exploring the former.

Yet beyond that, from a theological perspective, Christians ought to be able to offer even more. Although we must do all we can to attend to our infinite dignity and sadly finite existences, we must also know our need for grace and the hope of the resurrection.

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## The Fair Trade Scandal: Marketing Poverty to Benefit the Rich

**Ndongo S. Sylla**

**David Clement Leye (Translator)**

Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2014 (179 pages)

This new book by Ndongo Sylla is an insider's critique of the fair trade model as practiced by Fairtrade International (FLO, or Fairtrade Labelling Organizations). (The book has been translated from French, and I found the translation to be quite readable and engaging.) Based on his own experiences working for FLO, Sylla seeks to point out the flaws in the fair trade system. As with most research about fair trade, Sylla's focuses primarily on the fair trade coffee initiative. In the fair trade coffee system, cooperatives of small coffee growers pay thousands of dollars to FLO to join the network and for compliance fees. In exchange for ethical production, the growers receive a guaranteed minimum price for each pound of their coffee sold as "fair trade."

In chapter 1, "On the Inequalities of the International Trade System," Sylla articulates what he perceives to be the inherent injustices of the current system of international trade. Sylla is rightly critical of the slanted trade policies faced by the world's poorest. His arguments here channel similar themes expressed by Stiglitz and Charlton in *Fair Trade for All: How Trade Can Promote Development* (Oxford UP, 2006). For Sylla, the poor cannot compete on a level footing with developed nations engaging in protectionist policies. Indeed, Sylla refers to policies such as the subsidies paid by the United States to its own cotton growers as a form of "dumping" (28). Sylla also notes that while the United States is relatively open to trade with already rich nations, it exacts the largest tariffs from its poorest trading partners. For example, citing data from the Progressive Policy Institute, Sylla observes that the United States collects more tariff revenue from Cambodia and Bangladesh than it does from England and France (31).

In the chapter, "The Fair Trade Universe," Sylla describes the origins of the fair trade movement as well as its current operations. Sylla's accounting in this section is first-rate. For starters, the author carefully distinguishes between the commodity-driven model practiced by FLO and the Alternative Trade Organization (ATO) model. While the FLO model provides modest price supports for common agricultural commodities produced in the FLO network such as coffee, tea, sugar, and bananas, the ATO model seeks to connect poor producers of unique products with consumers who would not otherwise find them. (Ten Thousand Villages is probably the best-known ATO.)