

the new millennium—most importantly, what role the corporation will play in ensuring a vibrant US economic middle-class in an era of contract employees, underemployment, and ongoing automation.

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Economic Freedom and Human Flourishing: Perspectives from Political Philosophy

Michael R. Strain and Stan A. Veuger (Editors)

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It is rare in economics, where the overall production of goods and services is encouraged and has no natural limit, that less is more. But when it comes to this collection, it certainly is. Surveying the entire tradition of Western political philosophy from Aristotle to Marx on subjects as difficult to define as economic freedom and human flourishing in less than two hundred pages is quite an achievement. Due to its brevity as well as to the clarity of the individual contributions, this volume is an excellent introduction to the complex relationship between economics and political philosophy.

The relationship is complex for a number of reasons. Political philosophy aims at a comprehensive understanding of the city and man and, especially, of justice, whereas economics studies how scarce resources can be allocated most efficiently. Political philosophy often takes an “Olympian” view, looking down on subjects such as economics, but it also begins with the “commonsensical” view of the citizen as a starting point. Socrates was interested in the political opinions of others, especially those who were purported to be wise, in order to arrive at the truth about matters such as justice, love, and friendship; he was executed in the process. The economist, on the other hand, is typically indifferent to questions about “the good life,” and the virtues are likely considered exogenous factors in his calculations; modern economics furthers the Lockean end of comfortable self-preservation.

Indeed, the use of the term *human flourishing* rather than virtue and the good or best life is indicative of a change in perspective from political philosophy to economics. To suppose there is a particular way of life that is qualitatively better than others would limit or at least influence our choices drastically. Democratic pluralism is threatened by such questions, whereas a person can “flourish” in any number of ways. Economics is more interested in the “pursuit of happiness,” leaving each to define happiness in his own way. Economists do not ask what happiness is. There will be many more economists than political philosophers in a liberal society.

All but one of the contributors favors the perspective of political philosophy. Not surprisingly, Harvey C. Mansfield’s treatment of Aristotle, a mere eight pages long, sets the tone:

Happiness [in the modern commercial world] is regularized by being reduced to something less than the flourishing life of a gentleman or lady, let alone a philosopher—to a more

attainable life such as bourgeois virtue. Bourgeois virtue has not been an unqualified success, however. It turns out that the morality that is more easily attained is also less satisfying, less interesting. A new concern for the boredom of bourgeois society arises, and *ennui* becomes the problem (6–7).

Enterprising readers will turn to Aristotle's treatment of economics in the *Politics*, book 1, chapters 8–11, which criticizes making money from money as unnatural but ends with a rather surprising defense of money-making and goods-getting for households and even more so for cities. Aristotle even tells us that there are those engaged in politics "who are concerned only with these matters" (1259a35).

Aristotle's treatment is a reminder that economics, understood as the study of the management of the household as well as the city, has always existed in some form or another. People have always bought and sold, produced and consumed; individuals as well as societies need money and material goods to survive and thrive. The questions have always been: How much of the former and which ones of the latter?

What is so new about modern commercial society? How did we go from business being an important but perhaps "vulgar" part of life to its central activity? In some way, economics had been controlled and limited by religion and politics. Making commerce king meant putting down other claimants to the crown.

The chapters "Hobbes, Locke and the Problems of Political Economy" and "Adam Smith and Human Flourishing" by Peter B. Josephson and Ryan Patrick Hanley respectively, provide very accessible overviews of the philosophic basis for a liberal, commercial society. Unlike most modern economists, Hobbes, Locke, and Smith thought deeply about what kind of persons such a society would produce and what the alternatives to this society would be. These chapters helpfully guide the interested reader to the relevant passages in the challenging and voluminous works of these authors.

The most important critic of commercial society was, and in my opinion remains, Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Readers of this journal likely associate Rousseau with the French Revolution and virtually every left-wing, anticapitalist cause ever since. This association is correct as far as it goes, but there is much more to Rousseau than that.

John T. Scott argues that Rousseau's primary concern was human happiness defined as the unity and, interestingly, the "size" of the human soul, a happiness that is promised but actually diminished and threatened by bourgeois society. Given the prevalence of psychological maladies and therapeutic remedies in contemporary society, it is hard to argue that Rousseau was wrong. Rousseau also attacked commerce from the perspective of the citizen, paving the way for the economic nationalism currently on offer by Putin, Orbán, and Trump, to name a few. Defenders of the commercial society ought to take Rousseau more seriously, if only to be able to counter better the attacks coming from all sides.

Susan Meld Shell's chapter on Immanuel Kant is the longest of the book and unfortunately the least accessible. Perhaps the fault is Kant's or mine. Shell's focus is on redistributive justice, and she seems less convinced of the goodness or necessity of economics, which I've found to be the case with many professors of political philosophy (though thankfully not in this volume). Kant remains an important figure for his promotion of

human dignity and *autonomy*, terms that have become commonplace, even as there are fewer professional Kantians around than there used to be.

Yuval Levin's contribution on Edmund Burke is the best of the collection. Burke is known as the father of modern conservatism primarily for his attack on the French Revolution, in contrast to his support for the American one and for the Irish and Indian peoples under British rule. While Burke was critical of the abstract, rationalistic, calculating ways of economists, he disliked technocratic liberalism even more. Burke seems to have grasped the economic way of thinking while placing it in its proper context, that is, within a traditional, prudential, or "organic" society. Levin wisely questions whether Burke should have foreseen "the social dislocation, insecurity and breakdown" brought on by the industrial economy.

The chapters on Alexis de Tocqueville (by Steven Bilakovics) and John Stuart Mill (by Richard Boyd) can be read together as an "aristocratic liberal" critique of commerce. Tocqueville and Mill are liberals because they favored the spread of liberty and equality to people who had been denied them; they are aristocratic because they were concerned about how people will use their freedom and equality. Tocqueville was more "conservative" in his concerns because he worried about the growth of the State at the expense of human liberty and greatness; Mill was more "liberal" and more willing to use the State to promote human achievement. Both ultimately regarded politics as more noble, important, and, therefore, necessary to form and/or guide economic activity.

The book's final chapter on Karl Marx, authored by its sole economist, Deirdre Nansen McCloskey, is very different in style and substance. It is a delightfully cheeky takedown of Marxist critiques of capitalism. McCloskey takes Marx more seriously than Marxists do. Unlike Mansfield, McCloskey is an ardent defender of the bourgeois virtues. She takes economics, and especially economic history, more seriously than the other contributors, outlining just how much good and even happiness have come from allowing people (mostly the poor) to trade and travel freely. It is hard to do so from the Olympian heights of political philosophy, but everyday reality must be given its due.

Despite the protests of libertarians, economics is often considered a subpolitical subject. Perhaps the early moderns were correct in treating "political economy" together and more comprehensively, seeing the two as forming a particular, singular subject known as the polity. Yet Aristotle tells us that politics is the most important subject if man is the highest being (cf. *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1141a22–23). The *if* is crucial because it implies that God, especially the one proposed by a universalistic, transpolitical religion like Christianity, may be the highest being in the cosmos; saintly living here on earth leading to eternal life with God would then be the ultimate form of human flourishing. For this reason, this volume, very much worth reading as it is, should be complemented with one such as *Wealth and the Will of God* by Paul G. Schervish and Keith Whitaker.

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