

Economy and Virtue: Essays on the Theme of Markets and Morality

Dennis O’Keeffe (Editor)

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If you abide in My word, you are my disciples indeed. And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.

—John 8:31b–32 (NKJV)

The Christian religion has always asserted that people sin because they are sinners. That is, they behave badly because they are in fact bad. Accordingly, it would seem that human action is inevitably given over to unrighteousness and injustice as people abuse the freedom of choice that God has given and thus pursue their vain desires to disastrous ends. Certainly, anyone making a sober examination of his life will conclude that he has often made decisions to his own detriment.

Fortunately, Christianity does not stop with this truth. There is another truth that provides good news for sinful humanity. That truth is that Jesus has conquered sin and death for anyone who trusts in him. In other words, God has extended his grace and mercy to humanity in a way that provides freedom from sin and death. This grace opens the door of opportunity so that human beings can use the freedom of choice to do good rather than bad. As a result, real freedom is not the freedom to do anything one wants to do, but the freedom to do what one ought to do.

In his essay on the nature of true virtue, Jonathan Edwards argued that the essence of virtue rested ultimately in the love of God. Moreover, Jesus argued that if we loved him, we would keep his commandments. If we each loved God as we should, this world would be transformed into heaven itself. Although we all fall woefully short of this ideal, God’s saving grace is present for all who believe. Moreover, Christianity teaches that God’s grace extends to all people as his blessings fall on believers and nonbelievers alike.

When a person puts his trust in God’s grace and mercy for the salvation of his soul, he expects to be eventually extricated from his sinful nature. This means that our responsive love for God will progressively bring our behavior to heel under God’s moral standard of conduct. Even though humanity is hopelessly lost because of original sin, God is gracious and provides a way of redemption. When a person’s eyes are open to the grace that pours forth from God’s love through Jesus Christ, his spirit is quickened, and he finds a new desire to know and love God in his heart. Finally, in the process of living out his life, the renewed person transforms his way of life, and the choices he makes in this world become more virtuous. In turn, such behavior on the part of God’s people spills out to the greater benefit of all people as society itself is increasingly transformed according to the common grace of God.

It was with this understanding of Christianity in mind that I read *Economy and Virtue*. The book is a small, easy to read volume of essays aimed at illuminating the connection between free markets and virtue. While the book is not written with a Christian worldview in mind, each essay is well written and presented in a way that is generally consistent with Christian thought. In total, these essays provide some excellent insights that demonstrate the moral superiority of free enterprise over socialism.

Chief among these insights is the truth that liberty and freedom of choice are the prerequisite context of all virtuous human action. If our choices to act are not our own, they cannot be praise- or blameworthy. As one of the writers put the matter, “Moral action presupposes choice. Virtue entails an opportunity for vice forgone. The gravest charge against totalitarianism is that its ruthless suppression of liberty dissolves the distinction between virtue and vice, and empties the concept of morality of any meaning.... Deprivation of liberty is a poisonous gas which fatally destroys the essential hallmark of humanity—our capacity to make rational moral decisions” (Marsland, 102–3).

As Marsland goes on to explain, the implications of this truth are devastating for the proponents of socialism because such a political system inevitably reduces the sphere of human action and choice. In essence, the socialist must argue that he can do better than God by taking away the freedom of choice of others in order to design society along the lines that he thinks best. Such an assertion amounts to the ravings of a self-righteous lunatic unable and unwilling to come to grips with his own sin and unwilling to acknowledge the grace of God that leads to true virtue. For this reason, socialism, wherever and to whatever extent it has been practiced, invariably fails and promotes tyranny and immorality.

In another essay, Arthur Shenfield stresses essentially the same point regarding the advancing stewardship of individuals that is promoted by private property rights and free exchange. “Every time we treat it [private property] with care and diligence,” he observes, “we learn a lesson in morality. This is why the private ownership of property lends a moral dimension to the capitalist system. Contrast it with the treatment of so-called public property. No one needs to be told with what carelessness and lack of diligence most of us deal with it, whether in free or in communist countries” (132).

The point being made should be stressed: Liberty is the context in which virtue is perfected because of the natural order of things established by God. One simply cannot escape the reality that a person reaps what he sows. While a free enterprise system generally links rewards to good works, socialism shifts the consequences of bad behavior by imposing them on society at large.

Other authors provide additional ammunition for defending the marketplace from other socialist criticisms. Antony Flew’s article is especially cogent as he moves from point to point, undercutting the presuppositions that serve as the base on which socialists attempt to make their argument that market exchange is somehow immoral. One of the high water marks in this essay is Flew’s taking to task the Aristotelian distinction between the acquisition of a product for household use versus its acquisition for financial gain. Flew argues convincingly that such a distinction does not exist.

Other contributors demolish the notion that equality of results is the essence of justice by articulating a saner understanding of right and wrong. For an educator of undergraduates, Walter Williams' discussion of "poker justice" is particularly useful. In that analogy, Williams asks the reader to determine the circumstances under which one might conclude whether poker justice had prevailed in a particular situation. Within the context of his analogy, it is obvious to any reader that justice depends on the process and not upon the outcome. This is an especially important point for students to come to grips with early in their academic careers.

In my current position, I routinely teach a course on comparative economic systems or political economy. Because this course must inevitably touch upon the theme of the morality and virtue of the political system, this book will be a very useful tool for me to use in teaching that class. In the future, I will definitely include this little volume in the reading list.

—Paul A. Cleveland
Birmingham-Southern College, Alabama

Spiritual Capitalism: What the FDNY Taught Wall Street About Money

Peter and Monika Ressler

New York: Chilmark Books, 2005 (124 pages)

This book is worth reading and reviewing because it deals with quite important issues concerning a monumental occurrence in the United States: the destruction of the World Trade Center by terrorists on September 11, 2001. It is easy reading as an almost pastoral commentary on culture that would be suitable for an introductory business ethics class or for anyone looking for a glimpse into, and evaluation of, certain aspects of contemporary American business culture. The authors seem stunned at the helping and communal atmosphere that emerged on competitive Wall Street in the aftermath of the disaster.

The authors own a search firm in Manhattan, and they renovate property from the profits of the search firm. They also use off-duty firemen to do the renovation because they are hard working and very efficient.

The goal of the firefighters was to get the job done as quickly and efficiently as possible. There wasn't anything they couldn't do and do well. From working with these firemen we realized that firefighters don't know how to say, "No I can't do it." They think only in terms of "We'll figure it out." Nothing was ever sloppy or half-finished. They were perfectionists.... They worked for sixteen hours, slept four, woke up and worked again (24).

One gets the impression that the authors make out very well to be sure. Indeed, the real estate market has been *fantastically* profitable in recent years in New York City. However, the FDNY was to play an even greater role in their lives. The ethic of the FDNY serves as a model for business.