The Economics of Sin: Rational Choice or No Choice At All?

Samuel Cameron

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As the story goes, the devil and a companion were walking along and saw a man find a piece of the truth. The companion asked the devil, “Doesn’t it bother you that this man found a piece of the truth?” The devil replied with a smile on his face, “No, not at all. I shall have him believe that is the only truth to be found.” Sadly, the man in this story does not seem to be unlike many of today’s rational choice theorists; the truth that they find in economics becomes the means by which they attempt to explain the entire reality of human action.

In his new book, *The Economics of Sin: Rational Choice or No Choice At All?*, Samuel Cameron attempts to extend the realm of rational choice theory into yet another realm, the realm of sin. To facilitate the discussion of what sin is and how economics can be applied to it, Cameron uses as reference the traditional seven deadly sins. The book is laid out in three parts. The first part consists of chapters that introduce the application of economics to sinful behavior, briefly describe rational choice economics, and then explore the economics of religion. The second part explores the deadly sins in convenient groupings, and then the third part looks at concrete examples of sinfulness, including matters of life and death, addiction, adultery, and prostitution.

Beginning with the proposition that economics studies any and all human choice under scarcity, regardless of monetary involvement, Cameron asserts that choices such as religion and sin fall within its boundaries. Furthermore, he says, “the economic approach to sin corresponds broadly to what is termed ‘modernist’ philosophy” (12). The assumptions of rational choice are taken without question, and the explicit result is ethical relativism. Hence, there is no “attempt to deduce notions of the good from tenets beyond welfare maximization” (12).

Without stating it, Cameron has elevated economics to a self-contained ethical theory. Devoid of any concept of virtue or duty, we are left with a consequentialist framework to discuss the “sins” that are included in this book. Sin, however, is by its (Christian) definition, an offense against the law of God. To accommodate his book’s consequentialism, Cameron presents most sins as “the breaking of a taboo” or a convention that “brings anguish costs to the individual” (12). Hence, sin is reduced to something that can be modeled into a utility function.

Sin is not the only thing forced to fit into an economic model. In chapter 2, the path to sainthood is displayed as a game tree, with the key decision node being whether or not to go into retreat, where temptation levels are lower. The probability of heaven and the utility of the beatific vision will presumably be used to calculate an expected value. In chapter 3, discussion begins on the “marker leaders in world religion” (41). Religions are portrayed as firms, selling the product of sin removal. Strength of religious conviction is represented as a quantity of “GAC (God Appreciation Capital)”

(44). Cameron even goes as far as to call the Fall a fable. Clearly, the Thomistic view that religion belongs to the virtue of justice because it involves giving to God what is his due plays no role in the economics of religion.

In his chapter on greed, lust, sloth, and waste, Cameron goes out of his way to detach these words from their Christian meaning. For example, rather than place lust in the context of properly ordered human sexuality, he misdefines it as a basic emotion that simply has guilt attached to it in certain circumstances. Because they are modifying the tenor of the deadly sins through vocabulary changes, "we encounter economists serving the function of being the new secular priesthood" (69). With these new definitions, we should no longer call them "sins," for "the economic world sees them as both bad and good depending on the situation and is thus highly relativistic" (89). Even lying is granted as having possible positive economic effects.

Some of the most bizarre economic interpretations of reality come in part III of Cameron's book. In chapter 7, "Matters of Life and Death," a discussion ensues on the supply of murder, using an expected utility function. The chapter also devotes much time to the concept of cannibalism. Cameron goes as far as to say that "welfare-maximizing cannibalism is a possibility," but only "if one permits the right to trade away one's life.… [S]ome may freely choose to be eaten if they were adequately compensated" (147). In his chapter on adultery, Cameron prefers to refer to the sin by using the neutral term "partner outsourcing." Marriage also is reduced to a utility function with utility being determined by sexual services, companionship, and a composite variable. By extending the model further by bringing in the value of the outsourced partner, the probability of detection, and the expected disutility of punishment, we may now calculate the conditions that will lead a person rationally to cheat on his spouse!

When Adam Smith formulated his self-interest hypothesis, he did not claim that all man's actions are self-interested. He did not even claim that all his actions are rational, for he recognized that man is predisposed to certain passions and that he may deceive himself about what course of action he should take. Samuel Cameron's documentation of how rational choice treats the problem of sin shows us how far the discipline of economics has traveled from its roots. Man is so thoroughly divorced from his nature as a spiritual creature that the most simple and true economic analysis of sin is never brought up: "For what doth it profit a man, if he gain the whole world and suffer the loss of his own soul? Or what exchange shall a man give for his soul?" (Matthew 16:26).

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