

Christian Values and Economic Knowledge: The Implications of Wolterstorff's Epistemology for a Christian Perspective on Economics

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Abstract

This chapter explores the epistemological relationship between values and economic theory. It considers Nicholas Wolterstorff's critique of epistemological foundationalism and his argument that values of various kinds shape how theories are constructed and evaluated. It then unpacks some of the key values in mainstream economic theory as represented by Lionel Robbins's famous 1932 *Essay on the Nature of Economic Science* and compares these values with those derived from what Wolterstorff calls *authentic Christian commitment*. The chapter concludes that mainstream economics is problematic from a Christian perspective and that a reconsideration of economic phenomena is needed that employs alternative Christian values. These will include the values of *grace*, *justice* and *righteousness*, as well as a recognition of God's abundant material provision.

Biography

Peter has a Ph.D. in monetary economics and the history of economic thought from the University of Sydney, and a B.Th. (Hons) from the Australian College of Theology. He is the author of *Money and Employment: A Study of the Theoretical Implications of Endogenous Money* and has published articles in a range of academic journals including the *History of Economics Review*, *Journal of Financial Stability* and the *Review of Political Economy*. Peter's ongoing research interests include the development of macroeconomic models and their application to understanding financial crises and policy responses to such crises. He also works on Australian monetary and banking history, and has a strong interest in ethical perspectives on economics and how the Christian faith should shape our understanding of the economic world. He is also actively involved in his local Anglican church.

1. Introduction

Christians in the field of economics have been asking for some time what implications their faith might have for an understanding of how economic systems work. Answers to this question range from suggesting that biblical material, especially from the Old Testament, provide a blueprint for modern economic *practice* to concluding that the Scriptures deal with matters other than economics, and that Christian economics is simply "good" economics. A further possibility for the faith-economics nexus, however, arises from developments in Christian epistemology in the second half of the twentieth century. Nicholas Wolterstorff argued some time ago that *values* play a key role in theory construction which ever discipline is on view. Since the Christian faith has a great deal to say about values, this suggests that economic analysis begun from a Christian perspective may well generate different theoretical structures than one begun from some other ethical stance. This possibility has not received very much attention.

This chapter, therefore, explores the potential for Wolterstorff's epistemology to provide an entry point for a Christian evaluation of economics. Section 2 outlines Wolterstorff's epistemology, especially his critique of classical foundationalism, and what this critique

implies for the role of values in theory construction. Section 3 attempts to identify the key values that underpin modern mainstream economics. Section 4 provides a preliminary evaluation of mainstream economics from a Christian perspective by comparing these economic values with relevant Christian values derived from the Scriptures. Section 5 offers some conclusions and suggests directions for further consideration of these issues.

2. Wolterstorff's Critique of Foundationalism

In *Reason within the Bounds of Religion*, Wolterstorff advances an argument for the rejection of classical epistemological *foundationalism* and the adoption of an alternative approach to theory construction and evaluation. According to foundationalism, a proposition is epistemically justified, and thus constitutes part of our knowledge, only when it is logically consistent with a chain of supporting propositions that ends with an empirical or introspective observation. The statement "Inflation is caused by excessive increases in the money supply" will thus form part of our economic knowledge if excessive increases in the money supply are regularly observed to precede inflation in the real world. Or the statement "An increase in the price of a good, other things equal, will lead to a smaller amount being demanded by consumers" will form part of our economic knowledge if a logically consistent set of propositions implying this relation between price and quantity demand, can ultimately be linked to a statement about the economic objectives of a representative person, and I can corroborate this statement by looking within myself, and agreeing that this is how I would behave (i.e. by introspection). In general, propositions are regarded as constituting "knowledge" according to foundationalism, only if they correspond in a well-defined way to observed reality.

This approach to determining knowledge received strong support from the *logical positivist school* of the 1920s. This school drew a sharp dichotomy between what they called *analytical* statements, that depend for their truth simply on the rules of logic and language, and *synthetic* statements, that express propositions that may or may not be true but which can be evaluated by comparing them with experience. In logical positivism, knowledge is comprised of only these two kinds of statement. Statements which fall into neither of these categories, do not count as knowledge. Thus the statements "sunrises are beautiful" or "kindness is good" are neither true nor false. They may express *values* or *opinions*, but this is a completely separate category from the expression of truth or knowledge, because these statements cannot be assessed in a clear and definite way against reality. The well-known processes of induction and falsification, used extensively in science, are both examples of foundationalism. They generate specific propositions or theories which imply something about the world (synthetic statements), and these propositions or theories may be tested by observation. It is worth emphasising that such approaches imply that knowledge is "value-free", as frequently asserted in economics. It is about what "is" not what "ought to be".

Wolterstorff observes, however, that there are serious problems with approaching knowledge this way. These problems largely flow from the famous Duhem-Quine critique of logical positivism, advanced in the 1950s, which identified a difficulty with the dichotomy between analytical and synthetic statements. According to this critique, observational propositions are rarely framed as simple statements that may be compared directly with empirical data. Instead, they are made up of complex structures of statements, both analytical *and* synthetic, along with additional or auxiliary statements pertaining to things like appropriate experimental design and data collection processes. When observation predictions from such complex systems are falsified, i.e. when they are *not* consistent with observed reality, it is not necessarily possible to identify which point in the system is responsible for the lack of verification. Verifiability of particular statements is thus very difficult, and even distinguishing

which statements are purely analytical and which are purely synthetic is often not possible. Wolterstorff expresses the implications of this critique as follows:

[E]ven if there is a set of foundational propositions, no one has yet succeeded in stating what relation the theories that we are warranted in accepting or rejecting bear to the members of that set. Even if there is a set of foundational propositions, we are without a general logic of the sciences, and hence without a general rule for warranted theory acceptance or rejection.

But he is very cautious in teasing out the implications of this conclusion. It implies, he argues, neither a denial of objective reality, nor a denial that true belief about such reality is attainable. It simply means that the foundationalist route to such knowledge is insecure and that the only alternative is the exploration of non-foundationalist approaches.

Wolterstorff then offers a non-foundationalist alternative to knowledge construction and theory evaluation. At the heart of this alternative is a comparison of new propositions with the set of beliefs already held by the theorist. These existing beliefs fall into three categories: data beliefs; data-background beliefs; and control beliefs. *Data beliefs* are beliefs about the entities which fall within the scope of the theory. These beliefs are likely to include those relating to certain characteristics of relevant entities and/or their behavior. This first set of beliefs incorporates the empirical into Wolterstorff's process of theory evaluation. They give shape to how the scientist understands the world and it is against this understanding that the theory will be compared as part of its evaluation. *Data-background beliefs* are necessary in order to hold the data beliefs described above. These are beliefs about the processes by which data is collected and measured, and correspond to the auxiliary hypotheses identified in connection with the Duhem-Quine criticism considered above. *Control beliefs* are those pertaining to "what constitutes an acceptable sort of theory". They appear in Wolterstorff's thinking to be fairly wide ranging including what might be called *epistemic* beliefs, those pertaining to the characteristics a good theory ought to have, but they also include "beliefs about the entities to whose existence a theory may commit us, and the like". It is at this point that moral and political values may enter the picture. We might decide, for example, that only explanations of social phenomena that are cast in terms of individuals are acceptable because we have a moral or political commitment to the social autonomy of the individual.

Control beliefs thus function in two ways. They can first lead us to reject theories either because those theories are not consistent with these beliefs, or because, even if they are technically consistent, they do not "comport well" with control beliefs. Secondly, control beliefs also play a role in the *construction* of theories. They lead us to put theories together in certain ways with particular emphases and relations among the various explanatory forces on view. And we cannot avoid the operation of these beliefs, which are likely to be informed by a range of epistemic, moral and political values, because choices about the structure of theories, what to include, what to leave out, and what to focus upon, must be made, and there are no rules apart from the guidance offered by control beliefs that we can rely upon to make these choices. This point has also been made by Vivian Walsh and Hilary Putnam.

For Wolterstorff, *control beliefs* are central for the possibility of a Christian approach to theory construction and evaluation:

My contention in what follows is that the religious beliefs of the Christian scholar ought to function as *control* beliefs within his devising and weighing of theories. This is not the only way they ought to function. For example, they also ought to help shape his views on what it is important to have theories about. Nor does that exhaust their function. But their functioning as control beliefs is absolutely central to the work of the Christian scholar.

The process by which this "functioning" operates revolves around the idea of *authentic Christian commitment* which Wolterstorff defines as:

. . . the complex of action and belief that [realisation of being a Christ-follower] ought in fact to assume.

It is made up of the body of ideas, propositions, principles and values which emerge from belonging to a community that possesses a tradition, part of which is to regard its sacred writings as authoritative for thought and conduct. Those writings then inform and shape the content of authentic Christian commitment, and this, in turn, informs the Christian's control beliefs, and thus the approach he or she ought to take to theory construction and evaluation. A particular Christian thinker may not, of course, actually theorise in this way, and may not explicitly draw upon authentic Christian commitment in the process of formulating and weighing theories in their discipline area. But this raises the question of what values they *are* using in this activity, whether implicitly or explicitly, since, as pointed out above, it is not possible to avoid bringing some values to bear on this process.

Wolterstorff's challenge for the Christian is firstly to develop a self-awareness of this process, and secondly to ask whether the appropriate values to be employed should not be explicitly Christian ones. We now turn to ask what implications this perspective might have for a Christian view on economics, and the first step in this process is to ask what values might already be present in mainstream economics.

3. Values in Mainstream Economics

Wolterstorff's assertion that all theoretical structures are likely to contain embedded values that inform control beliefs suggests that we should be able to identify key values within mainstream economics and then compare these to corresponding values arising from the Christian faith. We may then assess whether these economic values are acceptable from a Christian standpoint, and consider what this implies for our understanding of modern economics.

A useful way to identify the values that might be present in mainstream economic knowledge might be to consider Lionel Robbins's celebrated *An Essay on the Nature and Significance of Economic Science* because it has been so influential in shaping the definition and structure of economics to the present day. One of the striking features of the definition of economics advanced by Robbins in this essay, is that it defines economics not in terms of the issues with which economics deals or the general problems that it seeks to solve, but in terms of a *particular framing* of those problems. Thus economics is *not* about explaining the prices of goods and services, or the level and composition of economic activity, or the material welfare of the citizens of any particular country, but about how unlimited wants can be satisfied in the context of scarcity. Such a framing immediately suggests the presence of values. We may see this by considering Robbins's justification for this framing, centred around the hypothetical case of a shipwreck survivor on a deserted island:

Let us turn back to the simplest case in which we found this [alternative] definition [that according to which economics is about material welfare] inappropriate – the case of an isolated man dividing his time between the production of real income and the enjoyment of leisure. We have just seen that such a division may legitimately be said to have an economic aspect. Wherein does this aspect consist? The answer is to be found in the formulation of the exact conditions which make such division necessary. They are four. In the first place isolated man wants both leisure and income. Secondly, he has not enough of either fully to satisfy his want of each. Thirdly, he can spend his time augmenting his real income or he can spend it taking more leisure. Fourthly, it may be presumed that, save in the most exceptional cases, his want of the constituents of real income and leisure will be different. Therefore he has to choose. He has to economise.

Since the isolated man must make choices about the allocation of his time between activities that serve his wants, Robbins regards the four parameters that constitute this formulation of the

man's problem as fundamental to the nature of economics. These parameters may then be generalised to economic issues in a broader social context.

A number of values may be identified within this argument. The first is a commitment to *individualism* which values explanations of social phenomena that are cast only in terms of the behavior of individuals. Social outcomes are thus *nothing more* than the sum of individual behaviors and *not* the outcome of forces that operate at any higher level of aggregation. That Robbins chooses to frame his analysis of fundamental economic forces in terms of an isolated person on a deserted island, and then generalises the resulting characterisation of those forces, explicitly reflects such a value. We shall categorise this as an *epistemic value*, i.e. a value about how we should theorise, although the possibility that it reflects an underlying ethico-political value according to which respect for individual freedom should be a fundamental feature of society cannot be ruled out.

The second value which Robbins's analysis evinces is some form of *utilitarianism*. That *utilitarianism* is a key feature of the normative aspect of mainstream economics is well known but it is important to recognise that it also plays a role within what is regarded as its "positive" aspect. Its influence is reflected in Robbins's statement that his 'isolated man' does not have "enough of either [real income or leisure] fully to satisfy his want of each". In other words, "isolated man's" welfare is measured by the degree to which his unlimited wants are satisfied, and maximising this welfare is the principle that governs his behavior. The "positive" nature of this explanation of human behavior might be defended on the grounds that such behavior is not being *affirmed* by this explanation, but simply *described* and analysed. It thus reports and analyses what *is* not what *ought to be*. But this is where methodological considerations become crucial. Robbins in particular cannot make this move because of his adherence to the so-called *Verstehen* doctrine.

According to this doctrine, economics is an empirical science because its criterion for whether a proposition counts as economic knowledge depends on whether that proposition can be linked in a logically consistent way to introspective observations about human motivation. This use of the *Verstehen* doctrine is, however, *inherently* value-dependent. For as the economist interrogates his or her own behavior and the objectives that underpin that behavior, he or she is effectively exploring his or her own *values* and how those values operate to shape their economic objectives and behavior. By deciding that *utility maximisation* or the *satisfaction of preferences* is the fundamental objective that underpins all human economic action, Robbins is thus acknowledging that *he* values want satisfaction and that this drives *his* own behavior. He is identifying what he thinks is important enough to govern the decisions he makes in the economic sphere. In addition, by generalising this value to all economic agents, Robbins is also deciding that *this* is the value upon which to focus and the one that should be used to characterise economic behavior generally rather than some other value or motivation, and this imputation carries with it a further dimension of ethical affirmation. This evaluative dimension is evident by the standard depiction in economic analysis of agents who pursue the form of self-interest identified by the *Verstehen* process as "rational".

A third value embedded in Robbins's analysis is reflected in his use of the concept of *scarcity*. The "economic problem", that of how best to allocate resources, arises for Robbins because unlimited wants confront "limited" or "scarce" resources:

The ends are various. The time and the means for achieving these ends are limited and capable of alternative application . . . The external world does not offer full opportunities for their achievement. Life is short. Nature is niggardly.

At one level, this observation is uncontested. The world is finite, and this does appear to place limits on the satisfaction of unlimited wants. At another level, however, this observation too is value-dependent. If my objective of satisfying as many of my material desires as possible is

strong enough to be the determining force underpinning my behavior, as Robbins argues it is, this is likely to *shape* my orientation towards the world and the resources it contains. I am, therefore, likely to *see* the world in terms of scarcity rather than in some other way which I might do if my values and objectives were different. Robbins's "positive" description of resources then as "scarce" may not simply be a "fact" that interacts with the other "fact" of unlimited wants to produce the economic problem, but may be a characterisation that flows from the same value-disposition as the objective of unlimited wants. If this analysis is reasonable, characterisations of the world as "niggardly" and of resources as "scarce" employ what Hilary Putnam calls ethically "thick" concepts in the same way as does the characterisation of economic agents as "rational".

This brief analysis may not exhaust the value-content of mainstream economic theory but it does demonstrate that the conception of economics in Robbins's influential 1932 *Essay* contains at least three value-propositions in contradiction to the often repeated idea that economics is value-free. The next question is whether these values are consistent with what Wolterstorff calls authentic Christian commitment.

4. A Christian Assessment of Mainstream Economic Values

That values can be identified within the structure of mainstream economics is of the utmost significance for the development of a Christian perspective on the subject. Values are generally regarded as being contestable in a way that propositions perceived as being "factual" are not. If economics and the conclusions it generates are value-dependent, then one's acceptance of those conclusions depends crucially on how its embedded values are regarded. If one can offer plausible justification for holding *different* values, and those values are either inconsistent with mainstream economic analysis or require it to be significantly modified, mainstream economic conclusions may then justifiably be rejected. The values outlined in the previous section may, therefore, be compared with pertinent Christian values to ascertain whether or not mainstream economics is consistent with authentic Christian commitment.

A comprehensive survey of Christian values that might be pertinent to economic matters is also beyond the scope of the remaining space in this chapter. What we can do, however, is to reflect on a few central values that might be relevant. Even here we need to be selective, and we will take an *evangelical* perspective in identifying what values will be used.

Our starting point is to consider the *utilitarian* value in economics of maximising want satisfaction. This seems to directly contradict the central Christian principle of *grace* which is used a number of times in the New Testament as a model for the Christian's own motivation and behaviour. With the associated concept of generosity and concern for others, it is central to Jesus' commendation in Matt 22: 40 which evokes the Old Testament law and its associated covenant principles of *justice* and *righteousness*. The Old Testament prophets, of course, witnessed to precisely these principles in condemning Israel's covenant breaches and by encouraging the Israelites to repentance and covenant faithfulness. Wolterstorff summarises the values associated with these passages in terms of the idea of *shalom*, a state of the world within which each person enjoys just and peaceable relationships with God himself, other members of society, and the natural world.

The second economic principle of *individualism* may also be questioned from a Christian perspective. The Bible's conception of Israel as a society places considerable emphasis on the *communal* nature of that society and the character of Israel as a *whole*. Thus, the values outlined in the Mosaic Law were designed to shape and reflect that character. Christopher Wright thus argues that:

[Israel's] very existence and character as a society were to be a witness to God, a model or paradigm of his holiness expressed in the social life of a redeemed community.

Oliver O'Donovan similarly asserts that:

The various ideas associated with 'individualism' in Western thought – the individual contracting into society from a state of nature, the primacy of the self-interested will etc. - are all quite inappropriate to Israel's self-understanding. In the Hebrew Scriptures the holy community is the prior and original fact; the individual member finds his or her significance within it.

This communal dimension is also a feature of the New Testament's conception of the *church* as the spiritual descendant of Israel. Paul's theology of the church, therefore, in such passages as 1 Cor 12:27; Eph 1:22-23; and Col 1:18 has at its centre the idea of the *body of Christ*. It also entails the idea of the *unity* of this body (see, for example, 1 Cor 1:10-17; and Eph 4:4-6) and an emphasis on the church as a *community* of faith with different members having different gifts and functions that are given for the service of the whole body. Thus ideas of "communion" and "fellowship" are central to this doctrine (see Acts 4:32-37 and 1 Cor 12:26).

Within these conceptions, social outcomes may be understood as fashioned, at least partly, by the *parameters that govern the character of society*. That is, the Old Testament law and the principles that flow from the gospel are designed to *shape individual behaviour* so that it conforms to the social vision and in particular the character of God, reflecting that character to the world. This conception of society stands in contrast to the view that social outcomes should be understood as the summation of decisions made by individuals who possess their own, independent objectives. Note also the methodological implications of this perspective. One must be careful not to dismiss this perspective because of its apparent *ideal* nature, arguing that the secular world *does not* share the convictions of Old Testament Israel or the New Testament body of Christ and that individuals *do* have their own independent objectives that affect the nature of society. The *methodological* implications of the Biblical view of Israel and the church *as communities* flow from its embedded ethical value that social parameters can and should shape behaviour and that we may *understand and interpret society in these terms*. The actual social parameters currently in operation in most modern societies may not be closely aligned with those of Old Testament Israel or the church and may even give explicit license to individuals to formulate their own, independent objectives. But the possibility of understanding society in terms of its social parameters is not denied by this state of affairs and this possibility stands in contrast to the individualism of mainstream economics.

Thirdly we may question the mainstream economic value that perceives nature and material resources as scarce or niggardly. The Bible's characterisation of the world's resources is quite the opposite. The Christian doctrine of *providence* stresses God's ongoing, sustaining commitment to the created order and part of this commitment is his provision for the needs of those he has created. His provision for Israel in particular is described in terms that are better characterised by adjectives of superfluity such as "abundant" and "plentiful" rather than "scarce" or "niggardly". Thus we see "the land flowing with milk and honey" promised in Ex 3:8; 33:3 and realised in the economic splendour of Solomon's reign (see 1 Kings 4:20-24), and God's provision for the Israelites in the wilderness where the needs of each person were *more than* met with ample supplies of bread and quail, and where "saving" was unnecessary since this provision was available every day (See Ex 16: 17-18).

In the New Testament, Jesus also affirms God's material provision for the disciples, citing the abundance of nature and comparing it favourably with the splendour of Solomon's reign (Matt 6:28-33). In Paul's encouragement to the Corinthians in 2 Corinthians 8 and 9 to be generous, he assures them that "God is able to provide you with every blessing in *abundance*" (2 Cor 9:8). The word Paul uses here for "abundance" is *περισσευω* which carries the connotation of being "more than enough" or "excess to need", precisely in the sense conveyed about God's provision in the Exodus 16 wilderness episode which Paul explicitly cites in support of his argument (See 2 Cor 8:15). The value which underpins perceiving the world's

resources as scarce or niggardly stands, therefore, in distinct contrast to the perspective of Christian theology.

Each of the three value-propositions identified above as constituting part of mainstream economic theory appear then to be in direct contradiction to central Christian values which can be understood as constituting Wolterstorff's idea of *authentic Christian commitment*. This suggests that serious questions must be asked about the legitimacy of mainstream theory as an acceptable Christian perspective on the science of economics, and that the consideration of alternative approaches which employ the values of grace, justice and righteousness, and which see the world's resources in terms of God's abundant provision must form an important part of the research agenda for Christian scholars in this field. The precise structure that such alternatives might take is beyond the scope of this chapter but useful starting points for consideration might include Sen's 'capabilities approach', Walsh's 'second phase' revival of Classical economics, and Wolterstorff's later treatment of justice in terms of *rights*.

5. Conclusion

It is reasonable to conclude from the analysis presented in this chapter that, despite its assertion of being value-free, mainstream economics *does* contain embedded ethical as well as epistemological values. Those of note include: *individualism*, *utilitarianism* and the characterisation of the world's natural resources as *scarce*. The first of these was interpreted as an *epistemological* value, while the second and third were shown to be *ethical* in nature. These values were then evaluated from a Christian perspective by comparing them with core Christian values derived from a consideration of relevant biblical and theological perspectives which can be understood as constituting Wolterstorff's idea of *authentic Christian commitment*. Included amongst these values were the notions of *grace*, *justice* and *righteousness*, or what Wolterstorff collectively refers to as *shalom*, as well as a recognition of God's abundant provision in the doctrine of providence. These values appear to be inconsistent with those embedded within mainstream economic theory suggesting that a Christian perspective on economics could profitably look to frameworks *other than* this approach for direction and guidance. A number of starting points for building such frameworks were suggested but their investigation must be left to further work.

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