

God and the Evil of Scarcity: Moral Foundations of Economic Agency

Albino Barrera, OP. 2005. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press. 272 pages. ISBN: 0-268-02193-7, \$22.00.

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Theodicy is a branch of theology that attempts to demonstrate the coexistence of the divine attributes. A coherent conception of “God” requires a being which is all-powerful, all-knowing, all-good and all-wise. Yet these are inescapably anthropomorphic categories. We can only understand what is “good,” for example, in human terms. If millions are wiped out in Africa by famine, AIDS, or tribal warfare; if innocent men and women in Europe are deliberately exterminated in gas chambers, or by “ethnic cleansing”; if American schoolchildren are slaughtered in their classrooms by a mad gunman, or if one of our loved ones is tortured to death by cancer, we call these things evil: which is the negation of *good*. And if we wish to believe in God we are compelled to face the question: “Why does your God allow it?” This is the notorious “Problem of Evil,” the most intractable—perhaps the only truly intractable—objection to religious belief. Many believers have lost their faith after some signal personal or public tragedy; many more have been deterred from faith by what appears to be its logical impossibility.

Theodicy has been with us for a long time. A famous biblical example is the book of Job. Indeed the whole of the Bible may be read as an extended theodicy, beginning with paradise lost and its endless train of dire consequences. Only in the eighteenth century, however, did the enterprise assume a formal, philosophical character, beginning with Archbishop William King (1702), closely followed both in time and in approach by G. W. Leibniz (1710) who coined the term. According to King and Leibniz some evil is “metaphysical” and therefore nobody’s fault: simply an inevitable consequence of the fact that any created entity is necessarily limited. The rest is either “natural”—or “physical” (such as earthquake, fire and flood), or “moral” (such as murder, theft and adultery). Natural evil is clearly God’s fault, and we have to find good reasons why He allows (strictly speaking, *causes*) it. Moral evil is our fault: God gives us freedom and we misuse it. But the boundary between the two is sometimes uncertain. If famine in Ethiopia is partly caused by the wickedness and folly of government in face of harvest failure, is that “natural” or “moral” evil?

What has all this to do with economics? Nothing until 1798. Malthus' first *Essay on Population* is the great watershed in the history of economic thought, for it put scarcity at the centre of our discipline for the first time. His "ratios" imply a diminishing-returns "food" production function, with human inputs and fixed land. Therefore as human bodies and productive inputs increase, per-capita "food" must fall to the point at which many or most must live in poverty and population becomes stationary. Why did God do it? Why did He create a world in which we are faced with a choice, as Malthus put it, between "misery" and "vice"? Though Malthus was a faithful cleric of the English church he was an amateurish theologian and his attempt to answer this question was a failure. He was persuaded to drop theology from subsequent editions of his *Essay*, and the theodicy of scarcity was put on a more secure basis by William Paley and John Bird Sumner, with valuable supplements by Edward Copleston, Richard Whately and Thomas Chalmers (Waterman 1991). Their achievement is the starting point of Fr. Albino Barrera's project (chapter 1), which is to provide a theodicy that is technically superior to that of these Christian Political Economists (CPE), and which avoids the politically conservative implications of their work.

As one might hope from a Dominican, Fr. Barrera begins his task with the metaphysics of St. Thomas Aquinas (chapters 2, 3). Since "God is the final end of all creatures, the activity of the universe as a whole...is necessarily geared towards reaching out to God." This is the "external order" of the universe (p. 22). Yet "despite being a single entity, the universe nevertheless consists of a diversity of creatures with varying grades of perfections" (p. 22). These "diverse beings are oriented towards each other in such a way as to bring the whole universe (and every constituent part) to its final end in God" (p. 22). "This dynamic is called the internal order of the universe" (p. 23). The Thomistic schema is used "to trace material scarcity to various limiting formal perfections in the order of creation" (p. 198). "Human beings, as free and intelligent secondary causes, are capable of correcting...destitution and effecting...material sufficiency for all as part of the goodness of God's...causality" (p. 198). The proper human response to scarcity—which "gives rise to economic activity"—is therefore a "sharing in God's goodness and providence," which is "perfective" (p. 198). Scarcity is good for us because it helps us to become more like God. It would seem to follow from this that Fr. Barrera prefers to view scarcity rather as a "moral" than a "natural" evil. God, because He is the kind of being we believe Him to be, *i.e. by definition*, makes sure there's always enough to go round. It's up to us to share it out fairly. This bald summary is grossly unfair to the subtlety and sophistication of Fr. Barrera's

exposition in Part I of this book (“Participation in God’s Goodness”) and the three technical appendices—which independently of whether they get us anywhere are a pleasure to read. But Scholastic metaphysics, elegant and attractive as it is, is a strictly analytical exercise—very like economic theory—and therefore can generate no new knowledge. Its conclusions are latent in its premises, and its value (which is not to be sneezed at) lies in helping us to sort out the implications of what we already believe on other grounds.

Part II (“Participation in God’s Righteousness”) is twice as long as Part I and reports a great deal of recent biblical scholarship on “a necessary economic dimension to God’s in-breaking in human history” (Old Testament) and “economic agency in kingdom discipleship” (New Testament). According to the former, “YHWH, as the Lord of both nature and history, envisions (sic) and intends the created world to be one of material sufficiency, if not abundance, *although one that is merely conditional*—contingent on human need and human response” (p. 74, italics in original). The latter is dependent almost entirely on the epistles of St. Paul, from which “we are able to glean...a complete framework that encompasses Christology and eschatology, an examination of their implications for moral life, and an articulation of specific admonitions on economic relations” (p. 108). According to Pauline doctrine, Christians are allowed and required to participate in “the righteousness of God” through their membership in the Body of Christ. Because the Church is the extension of the Incarnation in our present world, “to encounter and live up to God’s will is to situate oneself...in the concrete setting of human affairs, just like Christ in his Incarnation” (p. 121). Participated righteousness is both “incarnational” and “instrumental” (chapter 6, *passim*). Therefore for Christians “economic agency” is “participation (or lack thereof) in God’s righteousness;” and—because of the Cross—has to be “self-sacrificing” (p. 142). He further explains: “At the root of theological economic ethics is an ethos of burden-bearing: foregoing one’s own economic claims so that others may satisfy their own, accepting, and sacrificing one’s own welfare to improve others” (p. 142). Since the “goods of the earth” are “finite”—which seems to be Fr. Barrera’s understanding of “scarcity” in this context—the “call for self-sacrifice in economic agency is...all the more meaningful” (p. 142). Scarcity is good for us because it helps us to become more like Christ.

Even more than with Part I, my summary of Fr. Barrera’s argument must fail to do justice to its many virtues. Part II is scholarly, thorough (sometimes almost too thorough, as in its extended treatment of the dead issue of “faith” vs. “works”), and “catholic” in the best and truest sense

of that much-contested word. It remains a question, however, whether it provides the only or best account of economic ethics that might be consistent with Holy Writ. It is an even more serious question, given the aims of this book, whether the arguments of Part I and II together can supply a theodicy of scarcity that is much superior to—or even very different from—that of CPE. To these questions we must now turn.

Feasibility is a necessary condition of any ethic, for there can be no obligation to do the impossible. Frank Knight (1939) argued powerfully that biblical ethics are unfeasible in the modern world. The economic ethics of the Old Testament arose in a tribal society in which all were subject to patriarchal rule, and were not intended to apply to hostile tribes competing for the same territory. Those of the New Testament were framed for a community which expected the end of the world. The Jerusalem base of this small society was communistic, and therefore in continual need of handouts from churches of the Jewish Diaspora whose members continued to work and trade. In each case, economic decisions were made face-to-face among those known to each other, by individuals who could have some knowledge of the effect of their acts upon all others. But today's industrialized, world-wide economy, in which none can know more than a few of the ramifying consequences of his economising acts, must be governed by impersonal rules, not by private goodwill. Our duty lies in attending to our own needs within the rules of the game, and thus we may best help others. So held Knight. His arguments have been widely considered but never answered. Fr. Barrera writes as though none of this mattered.

What of theodicy? In one fundamental respect, the argument of this book differs profoundly from that of Malthus and his successors. "Scarcity" for Fr. Barrera quantifies an exogenous *vector* of resources; for CPE it is a *functional relation* between resources and human beings. The more human beings, to be sure, the more production. But when some essential input such as land or water is inelastic, diminishing returns set in and some of us have to go short. It follows that voluntary restriction of population is a solution to the problem of scarcity as experienced by humans—though not by the rest of animate creation of course. Malthus (1803, p. 11) and his followers recommended "moral restraint": meaning abstinence from marriage "not followed by irregular gratifications." But there is no mention in *God and the Evil of Scarcity*, not even a hint, of any functional dependence of scarcity upon population. It is possible that Fr. Barrera's commitment to the doctrine of *Humanae Vitae* (Paul VI, 1968) deterred him from considering the population side of "scarcity."

That encyclical rules out artificial birth control by married couples, but not the virtuous postponement of marriage and procreation. The latter is at least as self-sacrificial for most normal men and women as the voluntary redistribution of goods that Fr. Barrera favours. (And just about as likely to happen, cynics might add.) It turns out, therefore, that his theodicy is not so different from that of CPE as he supposes. Both maintain that the evil of scarcity can be dealt with by ethical human behavior. Both recognize that such behavior is personally very costly, and therefore that economic life can and ought to be a school of virtue. But Fr. Barrera seems to believe—wrongly, I believe—that his own approach may point to a less “passive” social policy than that of CPE.

What’s the bottom line? In theology as in economics there are no right answers. Professional skill lies in weeding out all the obviously wrong ones and attending critically to the few that remain. One of these latter was supplied by CPE, and Fr. Barrera is correct in noting some of its theological deficiencies. But his own contribution, by assuming away diminishing returns, can hardly be regarded as a very great improvement.

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