

Social¹ and economic ethics and the basis for public policy

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Oxford Developing a Christian Mind programme³: Social Sciences stream

Final draft: September 2016

[Note. This paper is based on the lecture given as part of the Social Sciences stream over a number of years. It is intended to provide an overview of its subject, not an exhaustive treatment. So it is light on scholarly references, and reflects a selective approach to the various literatures addressed. A bibliography is attached at the end, to guide readers who want to explore the themes in more detail.

The hope is that this written version of the lecture will stimulate others to follow up the themes and provide more substantive treatments of the relevant literatures.]

The comments of Paul Billingham, Michael Lamb, and Tom Simpson are gratefully acknowledged. This revised version will not, I suspect, please any of them, so they are absolved of any blame for the remaining errors of interpretation and infelicities of expression.

¹ ‘Social ethics’ is intended to mean those ethical norms that relate to the social and economic organisation of whole communities, in contrast to norms for personal conduct.

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Social science has always had a normative content, seeking to inform social and economic policies. Indeed the desire not only to understand the world, but also to change it, has been the main stimulus to the development of social science disciplines over the years. Economists and other social scientists (including lawyers) have been in the forefront of the formation of public policies in all areas of human life from the late 19th Century onwards, and now play a central role in government all over the world. The question addressed has been: ‘What social and economic arrangements are most conducive to human flourishing?’, though this has often been implicit rather than explicit in policy formation. To answer the question requires indicating what is meant by ‘human flourishing’. This was explored in detail in the previous paper in this series, ‘What does it mean to be human? Christian and social scientific understandings of human beings in society’. But social scientists are often guilty of being less than careful in making clear what understanding of human flourishing is the basis of their policy proposals. So as we review different approaches to social ethics within the social sciences, we need to identify their foundational understandings.

The structure of the paper is as follows. First, we review two theological approaches to the derivation of social ethics: we begin with biblical social ethics with a focus on the Old Testament, and then turn to Natural Law and Catholic Social Teaching. As these approaches are possibly unfamiliar to many Christian social scientists, we will illustrate them with examples of social ethical principles applied to particular social and economic problems. In the next three sections of the paper, we give brief accounts of the three main approaches taken by social sciences currently: the utilitarian model that forms the basis for much economic policy prescription (but is also present in social policy generally), the liberal tradition associated with the writings of John Rawls, and the libertarian approach of Hayek and Nozick. We will also give an account of how these streams of thought about social and economic ethics contribute to the actual practice of public policy which tends to be eclectic in its approach. Finally, we will consider an approach which begins with an explicit sociological understanding of human personhood, and goes on to consider human flourishing and basic goods. This approach draws on natural law, seeking a dialogue between theological approaches and the work of secular philosophers, notably Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum.

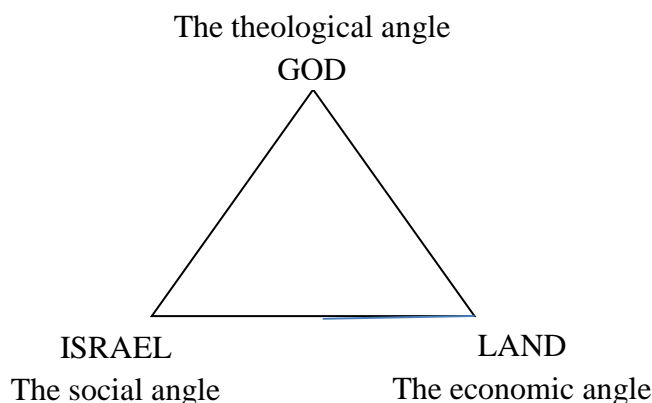
The aim of the paper is to provide an outline of Christian thinking about social and economic ethics, to sketch overviews of different approaches widely used in the social sciences, and to indicate how the former might be deployed to critique the latter. The discussion inevitably lacks depth⁴, and should be taken as an invitation to readers to take the arguments further, perhaps with emphases on the sub-disciplines of economics. It is an introduction to the territory, not detailed route map.

⁴ The references are, for example, sparse, and only utilised to indicate significant sources for the arguments deployed.

1. Biblical social and economic ethics

The use of Biblical materials immediately raises hermeneutic issues, the resolution of which lies beyond the scope of this paper. Our provisional resolution of those issues is as follows. First, the biblical prescriptions for God's people living in community are intended to describe a model ('a light to the Gentiles') which has ethical implications for all humankind. Second, it is possible to infer from those prescriptions principles for human flourishing which transcend their particularities of culture, economy, location, and historical period. Third, these derived social principles can be 'applied' in very different cultures, geographies and historical contexts⁵.

In this section we focus on the Old Testament, following the exposition of Chris Wright (Wright (2004)). There are a number of reasons for preferring the Old to the New Testament in this context. The first is simply that for many Christians, the Old Testament material is much less familiar. Concretely, the OT material is more obviously social ethics in its content: even though it is set in a very specific historical and cultural context, it clearly provides guidelines for how the Israelite community should organise and regulate its community life. By contrast, the NT material is less obviously applicable, since it does not refer to a community with a specific geographical area and related culture and governance. We begin our analysis of the OT material with Wright's diagrammatic representation of the theological context of OT social ethics.



The three key elements are God, the covenant people Israel, and the land. These three elements are arranged in a triangle, with the sides of the triangle linking the three elements, and representing key relationships or covenants.

The *theological angle* turns upon the character of God. God speaks and acts in creation, establishing the natural order. He redeems his people from Egypt and sets them free. He speaks to them at Sinai, revealing his will for the pattern of their lives. His purposes for them are reflected in the covenant, with the pattern of promises and responsibilities which is elaborated in the book of Deuteronomy. At the centre of the responsibilities is the concept of

⁵ For a discussion of how Biblical materials may appropriately be used to derive social and economic ethics, see Biggar and Hay (1994), and for an example of the approach in practice see Hay (1989) which makes extensive use of NT materials as well as the OT in deriving economic ethical principles.

God's 'way': to 'know' God is to reflect his character and to understand his righteousness and justice, with the covenant responsibility to 'walk in the way of the Lord'. One motivation for ethical living is the blessing of God's goodness and favour towards his people: if they walk in his way, they will experience his blessing. Another motivation is the recognition that living as God requires of his people is intrinsically right, reflecting commitment to him as the God who has rescued them from Egypt and taken them into the promised land, and giving him praise and thanksgiving.

The *economic angle* is summed up in the Land, which was the basis for the Israelite economy. The Land plays a key role in Israel's history as part of the covenant promise to Abraham: loss of the land is the consequence of disobedience and apostasy on the part of God's people. As spelt out in Deuteronomy, the Land is a divine gift to the whole nation as part of the covenant. So landholdings were initially evenly spread across all the Israelite families (see Numbers 26 and 34, and Joshua 13-21). But as Leviticus 25: 23 makes clear, the Land remains under divine ownership, with the people described as 'tenants and aliens'. With landholding came responsibilities: (a) to God, in the form of first fruits and tithes; (b) to family, since the family land was inalienable, and if lost for any reason, there was an obligation on kin to recover or redeem it; (c) to neighbours, for land rights were to be respected (boundary stones not to be moved), gleaning rights to be extended to the landless, and labourers to be well treated and paid promptly; and (d) to the natural order, in ensuring that the land also enjoyed 'sabbatical rest', and that animals were well treated.

The *social angle* reflects the fact that Israel is God's covenant people, placed in the Land. They had four defining characteristics or roles. First, they were chosen as a redeemed community (Genesis 18: 17-19, the covenant with Abraham), specifically so that all nations can be blessed through them. Second, in important ways they were different from their Near Eastern neighbours. While other nations were feudal and hierarchical, Israel was decentralised and non-hierarchical. Among neighbouring peoples, land was held by the king, and all land users were tenants who owed a part of their crops and animals to him: in Israel, the land belonged to God, and the kings were (in theory) not permitted to accumulate land holdings. In other nations, power was centralised on the king and his entourage or appointees: in Israel, power was decentralised, probably to the clans, and accretions of power by the kings were strongly condemned. Third, the worship of Yahweh (the Lord) and community life were closely related. 'They were to be a model of what a redeemed community should look like, living in obedience to God's will'⁶. Finally, they were to be a light to the nations, an example to be followed. So in Exodus 19:4-6, Israel is called to be 'a kingdom of priests and a holy nation' in the context of **all** nations and the **whole** earth. Wright notes⁷ '... [these scriptures] render to us a paradigm, in one single culture and slice of history, of the social values that God looks for in human life generally.' A paradigm, according to Wright, is both a matrix of fundamental values and a specific example of how those values work out in practice in a particular circumstance. So it combines both principles of social ethics and an example to emulate. To work out how to use the paradigm we need to distinguish the

⁶ Wright p 62

⁷ Wright p 65

principles and the examples in different parts of the biblical narrative. This is best illustrated by a ‘worked example’, and we focus on the task by first addressing the principles for economic life and activity in the OT.

1.1 Principles for economic life in Old Testament

We begin by noting four contrasts between our world as it was intended to be in creation, and what it has become as the outcome of the Fall:

- (i) In the creation narratives of Genesis 1 and 2, humanity is given responsibility for the whole created order, as God’s vicegerent. So in Genesis 1: 26-29, the human race (male and female) is to respond to the injunction ‘... let *them* rule over ...’ with the emphasis on the plural. Wright interprets this as follows⁸: ‘Since the earth was given to all humankind, its resources were meant to be shared and available to all. Access to, and use of, the resources of the whole planet constitute the legacy bequeathed to the whole human race’. Access to resources is for humanity as a whole to share. Yet after the Fall, as the rest of the OT history makes abundantly clear, there is conflict over access to land and resources generally.
- (ii) The creation account emphasises humanity’s responsibility and right to work with the natural order, with work being part of our created human nature. So in Genesis 2: 15, Adam is put in the Garden of Eden ‘to work it and take care of it’. But in Genesis 3, the Fall leads to the corruption of work, which becomes a necessity and a bondage. As the writer of Ecclesiastes eloquently notes, human work in a fallen world is futile and often hard.
- (iii) In Genesis 1: 28, humankind is enjoined to ‘be fruitful and multiply’, commencing a theme in the OT of material goods as a blessing, a theme that is emphasised in Deuteronomy. But the same source also notes that in a Fallen community, material goods may no longer be a blessing, but become an end in themselves (effectively an idol), generating greed from those who have too much, and discontent from those who have less.
- (iv) Genesis 1: 29 also indicates that the material blessings of the natural order are for everyone to share. So the right to enjoy and consume the fruits of one’s labours is limited by the obligation to ensure that the needs of all are met first. By contrast, in a Fallen community, ownership rights over the product of one’s own labour and resources are asserted, and responsibility for others is ignored.

These four contrasts set the scene for the restoration of creation values in Israel’s economic system. The purpose of the covenant was to restore the relationships indicated in the triangle diagram above: between God and humanity, between God and the natural order, between humanity and the land, and within the ‘social angle’ between members of the covenant community. In particular, economic relationships were to be based on love for neighbour, particularly the poor and disadvantaged, and on care for the created order. This was to be

⁸ Wright p 147

achieved by structuring the agrarian Israelite economy in such a way as to encourage good behaviour and discourage bad.

As we have already noted, the economy of Israel was based on shared access to resources ensured by an initial equitable distribution of land safeguarded by the stipulations for the year of Jubilee in Leviticus 25 that land could not be sold in perpetuity, thus preventing the concentration of land holdings over time. This arrangement also ensured that every member of the community (unless they were landless) had an opportunity to work to sustain themselves and their families. Those who for whatever reason were not able to work on their family land, should be given employment by others in the community until they could recover it. They were to be well treated with fair wages paid, and to be given opportunities to gain release from bonded labour. It is unclear how far these regulations about land and labour were implemented. At least from the time of Solomon onwards the monarchy and its henchmen accumulated land and resorted to forced labour for royal construction projects, for which they were roundly condemned by the prophets.

The expectation of economic growth and trade ('be fruitful and multiply') featured prominently in the Deuteronomic covenant. But in Deuteronomy 8, the capacity of the Land to produce abundance was coupled with warnings against forgetting that material plenty is God's blessing, and not solely the outcome of a family's hard work and capabilities. There were to be limits on accumulation and sabbatical rest for the land. The people were enjoined to share the harvests of the land: the produce was God's gift and so did not confer exclusive rights to consume. So compassion for the vulnerable (Deuteronomy 15: 7-11) and generosity to the poor was to be part of the community's life. Indeed, responding to poverty was so embedded in the provisions of the Law that it merits further consideration in the next section.

1.2 Responding to poverty

The OT understanding of the origins of poverty identified: the role of natural events, such as the famine in Canaan in the time of Jacob and his family; the effects of laziness (notably in the aphorisms in Proverbs, though not elsewhere in the OT); and, the most cited cause, oppression. Oppression could take a number of forms: exploitation of the socially weak, including widows, orphans and aliens; exploitation of the economically weak, such as debtors, wage labourers and slaves; and oppression of ethnic minorities (implicit in the story of Ruth). More systematic oppression was associated with royal excess, abuse of power and corruption, with outstanding performances from Solomon, Ahab and Jehoiachim, all of whom were 'successful' rulers. And finally, there was the corruption of justice that the prophets railed against: the inability of the poor to get justice in the courts against wealthy oppressors.

The required responses to poverty in the OT Law reflect a concern for the poor rooted in the redemption of God's people from Egypt. Poverty must be addressed, not ignored (Leviticus 25), and care for the poor is a criterion of covenant obedience (Deuteronomy 26: 12-15, and generally in the prophets). The provisions for the poor in the community are generally addressed to those with economic or social power – creditors, employers, land owners, slave owners – and not to the poor themselves. The family and kinship structure is the key to lifting

a person out of poverty: for example, the responsibility for redeeming land that has been lost through debt falls on the immediate family members and close kin. There is a systemic ‘welfare system’ in place for those without land (the gleaning laws, and the triennial tithe for the poor in Deuteronomy 14: 22-29), and sabbatical year rules for cancellation of debts for those who have fallen into debt. Finally, there are repeated warnings, in the prophets, that there should be equality for the rich and the poor in the administration of justice.

In this section we have shown that biblical social and economic ethics can be derived from the diverse materials of the OT. The ‘trick’ is to look for the underlying principles that inform the provisions for life in the community of the people of God, who are intended to be a model of a redeemed community living in obedience to God’s will. This expression of God’s will is not arbitrary, but based in God’s understanding of his created order, including humankind, and the need to mitigate the damage to that order arising from the Fall. These underlying principles can then be used to inform the ordering of human life in communities that are culturally and geographically distant from the world of the Bible. The purpose is as far as possible to promote human flourishing in all its dimensions, most notably care for neighbour and for the natural order.

2. Natural law and Catholic Social Thought

In this section we explore the contribution of the body of writings that make up Catholic Social thought. Developed since the encyclical *Rerum Novarum: the Condition of Labour* of Pope Leo XIII in 1891, these writings outline a distinctively theological approach to questions of social ethics.⁹ In the recent period, especially since the Vatican Council II (1962-65) there have been many more encyclicals and related writings on CST, notably *Laborem Exercens: on Human Work* (1981) and *Centesimus Annus: on the hundredth anniversary of Rerum Novarum* (1991), both issued in the name of Pope John Paul II. The whole corpus up to the early 21st century has been helpfully summarised in the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (2005). These documents comprise a very substantial body of thought, including some quite detailed policy prescriptions, which have for example informed the development of social and economic policy in the European Union.

2.1 The development of Catholic Social Thought

The ultimate origins of Catholic Social Thought (CST) are to be found in the work of Thomas Aquinas (1225-74), with the rediscovery and appropriation of Aristotelian ethics in the 13C. His philosophical and theological teachings were crystallised in the system known as Thomism which evolved over the subsequent centuries.

⁹⁹ There are of course other theological approaches, for examples: Calvinist/ Puritan drawing on the teaching of John Calvin in Geneva (see the analysis of Bieler (English translation, 2005)); and Anglican social thought, notably the contribution of Archbishop William Temple (1942).

According to Curran (2002), ‘Neo-Scholasticism’ was the narrow version of Thomism which informed the emergence of Social Encyclicals in the period after 1891. It had three linked elements¹⁰. The first is that human reason is a part of the ‘goodness of creation’, so that human beings can and should uncover by reason what God wants us to do. The approach is deductive from first principles rather than inductive: there is, for example, no attempt to use Scripture as a source of ethical understanding or rules, or to address evidence from actual human experiences. Second, the idea of ‘natural law’ is central, and is defined as what contributes to human goodness, fulfilment and happiness. This provides an ordering of reason for human living, which is commanded because it is good for humanity. The third element is teleology: ‘Natural law is human reasoning directing human beings to their ultimate end in accord with nature’. So it is fixed, unchanging and universal. It evidently depends on the definition of the ‘ultimate end’ or purpose of human life. This Neo-Scholastic schema of thought provokes some questions from Protestant theological approaches: notably that it stands apart from Scripture, human fallenness is not explicitly addressed, and the role of Jesus Christ and the gospel is absent.

Vatican II (1962-5) introduced additional and innovative themes to the development of CST, as evidenced by its document *Gaudium et Spes: de Ecclesia in Mundo Huius Temporis (the Pastoral Constitution of the Church in the Modern World)* (1965). It affirmed an essential role for Scripture and the centrality of Christ and his kingdom. One consequence is that many of the chapters in the *Compendium* begin with an exposition of relevant biblical themes, and all the social encyclicals since 1965 have paid close attention to biblical themes. Moreover the document laid an emphasis on discerning the ‘signs of the times’, with the second half given over to a discussion of urgent social and economic problems. The whole reads much more as an engagement with these issues, and is more evidence-based and inductive in its conclusions. Not surprisingly perhaps, the notes to the document make it clear that it does not carry the full authority of an encyclical, though this is not intended to undermine its significance for the life and mission of the Roman Catholic Church worldwide. The document also notes the diversity of cultures and situations in which the church is situated across the world, and accepts the need for local communities of Christians to interpret CST for their own situations.

The papacy of John Paul II witnessed something of a reaction against Vatican II, with a reaffirmation of the natural law tradition, but with some shifts in emphasis within that tradition. In particular, in his encyclicals there is a focus on ‘persons as subjects’ rather than the natural law focus on human nature, continuing a theme that was strongly affirmed in *Gaudium et Spes*. The focus on ‘persons’ results in a fresh impetus to the rhetoric of freedom, equality, and participation. This is linked to a change in the mode of ethical thinking, with a shift from teleology to a discourse of ‘relationality’, expressed in human responsibilities to God, other people, and the created order. These new themes are evident in a number of CST encyclicals, and particularly in Pope Benedict XVI’s *Caritas in Veritate (Charity in Truth)*,

¹⁰ Note that these elements should **not** be ascribed to Aquinas himself, whose work was much more comprehensive in its sources including the Scriptures and the Fathers of the Church, and focused on virtues such as prudence in deciding what should be done. For Thomas, the charge of deductivism is misplaced. I am grateful to Michael Lamb for putting me right on this matter.

issued in 2009. Four key themes have come to dominate CST in the modern era: human dignity, common good, solidarity and subsidiarity. The ‘common good’ is a term of art: it involves the conditions that enable people (individually or in groups) to reach their fulfilment as human beings. This is a responsibility for the whole community, but is an especial task for the political authorities as they make laws and provide for public services. A strong underlying theme in recent CST is the need to counter the excessive individualism of market liberalism.

2.2 Examples of Catholic Social Thought

The depth and scope of CST is best understood by considering examples: and here we sketch its thinking about work, private property, and the relief of poverty.

Work

CST in respect of human work is fully explored in *Laborem Exercens: On Human Work* (1981), which identifies two priorities. First priority is given to the worker as a person. Following Genesis chapters 1-3, where Adam is given dominion over the natural order, and instructed to subdue it, CST argues that work is central to human nature. So human beings are called to be workers, and they have the right and obligation to work if able to do so, primarily to sustain themselves and their families. A second priority is that of the subjective aspect of work (the worker) over the objective aspect (the good or service produced). Work has value primarily because it is a person who does it, not because of what the activity produces (as in modern neoclassical economics).

The implications of giving priority to the worker are striking. First, the wage should be related to the needs of the worker and his or her family, not the output produced: ideally the wage should meet the criterion of a living wage for a family, but at the very least there should be a minimum wage that reflects living costs in the place where the worker lives. Second, ‘worker as subject’ requires that the worker has effective participation in the whole productive process, not just as an ‘input’: the ideal organisation for work is a cooperative, but many benefits of cooperatives can be achieved by the adoption of appropriate governance for the enterprise. Third, worker solidarity is to be welcomed as a proper and necessary element in the organisation of work. So associations of workers, and worker controlled companies, are to be encouraged: the Catholic trade unions in a number of European countries are the direct results of implementation of these ethical requirements.

Private property

The second example concerns the basis for private property, and a possible conflict with the doctrine of the ‘universal destination of goods’¹¹. Both arise from natural law arguments, but of different kinds. The ‘universal destination of goods’ is based on God being the owner of

¹¹ The concept of the ‘universal destination of material goods’ is introduced in paragraph 31 of *Centesimus Annus: On the Hundredth Anniversary of Rerum Novarum*, Encyclical of Pope John Paul II, 1991.

all creation, but humanity is graciously given the use of the natural order to support human flourishing and endeavour. The gift is for all humanity, which implies that goods should be treated as if ‘common’, to serve the needs of all. In contrast, Aquinas believed that the necessity of private property arose from considering conditions for human existence in a (fallen) world. Private property is necessary to ensure due care for property, is conducive to good order in society, and renders community life more tranquil because each person can be satisfied with his possessions. The encyclical *Rerum Novarum: ‘The condition of labour’* (1891) of Leo XIII came down on the side of Aquinas. It made two points in support. First, it noted that the *purpose* of work is to obtain property with power to dispose of it or to hold it. This is consistent with the argument developed by John Locke that the ‘fruits of nature’ can generally only be made available through effort of body and mind: so it is just for a person to possess for himself the ‘fruits’ that he has generated by his labour.¹² In more recent encyclicals, the ‘universal destination of goods’ has tended to be given greater emphasis in CST, not least in the ‘preferential option for the poor’, to which we now turn.

Relief of poverty

The natural law tradition has developed teachings on the just distributions of material goods and burdens in society. The just distribution of goods draws upon the doctrine of the ‘universal destiny of goods’. The fundamental criterion for distribution is human need: a minimally decent existence for every person by reason of his or her humanity. The ideal is work enabling the acquisition of sufficient goods so it is important that wages should be ‘just’, sufficient to provide what is needed for that existence. For those who cannot work, there must be a welfare system to provide the same level of existence. Once the minimum has been achieved for everyone in the community, then differences in wealth and income are acceptable, so long as they are not so great as to be inimical to solidarity. The just distribution of burdens requires that taxation should be progressive, to fund the social goods and welfare system (social justice). These measured proposals for social justice have been given radical shape in the ‘preferential option for the poor’ (POP). Some have claimed to find traces of this doctrine in *Rerum Novarum* (1891), but the phrase had its first outing in *Centesimus Annus* one hundred years later (1991), where human solidarity is advanced as its basis. The other source was liberation theology, which was taken from its Latin American roots into mainstream Catholic thought by the US Catholic Bishops in 1986 in a radical document entitled *Economic Justice for All*. Following the lead of Vatican II, and the hermeneutic of liberation theology, the document builds its analysis on biblical texts, directly from materials in the Old Testament such as the Exodus story, and indirectly via the doctrine of the Incarnation in the New Testament. The claim is that the biblical texts reveal God as actively ‘prejudiced’ in favour of the poor, not detached and aloof. The requirement for the church is to reflect on the Scriptures as advocating liberating praxis and commitment to change. They are, it is claimed, addressed to the heart rather than the head.

¹² Locke added two important provisos. First, ‘enough and as good’ had to be left for others. It was not acceptable to appropriate everything. Second, ‘no waste’: it would be unjust to appropriate more than could be used to provide for themselves and their families.

This brief exposition of CST is intended to whet the appetite. Our hope is that sufficient has been said to make the case that CST is an impressive structure of thought about social and economic ethics, and that the application of the methods of CST generates some striking ethical conclusions which are counter to much secular thinking about these matters in the social sciences. The transition from exclusive reliance on Thomistic thinking in the natural law tradition to a more eclectic mix of bible, natural law arguments, and analysis of contemporary social issues is to be welcomed. But it means that some clarity has been lost: the issues are complex and resist simple recipes for their resolution. The tone of what has emerged is broadly optimistic about human nature and our ability to tackle those issues effectively. Concerns about the sinfulness of human nature, and the necessity for the good news of Jesus Christ, remain muted.

In the next sections we review the three main secular frameworks that inform much social science. The first is utilitarianism, which has been the dominant ethical system in economics and has informed much economic analysis in the sense that even positive analysis is devoted to exploring outcomes so that they can be subsequently valued. The second framework is modern liberal thought, and in particular the version proposed by John Rawls, which has become the mainstream in policy discussions outside economics and notably in political philosophy. The third is libertarianism which can be classified as an extreme version of liberalism, though many liberals would contest that characterisation. In practice much public policy operates with an eclectic approach, drawing on a variety of ethical themes, rather than being tied to a single ethical system. We will explore this briefly in a further section.

3. Utilitarianism as a social ethical system

As already noted, utilitarianism is the key ethical tool underlying modern economic analysis: the sub-discipline of ‘welfare economics’ continues to be the core normative element in most microeconomic texts and infuses the whole discipline. The crucial issue is the relation between individual and social welfare: the claim is that there is no collective welfare that is not reducible to individual welfares. The individual is assumed to be the best judge of his or her own welfare (or ‘wellbeing’ or ‘happiness’ in other formulations, which does not have to be hedonistic in principle, but invariably is in neoclassical economics). So the problem is how to aggregate individual ‘scores’ to arrive at a social welfare evaluation, since the aim is to provide a social decision rule for public policies. One possibility is to measure the individual scores in ‘utils’ which could then be aggregated to give an overall societal value. The problem with this approach is that ‘utils’ cannot be directly measured even for an individual, and even if they could, it is not possible to compare the ‘utils’ of one person with those of another.

Various approaches have been tried over time to escape from this impasse. The first ingenious solution was that of Paretian economics, which proposed (not unreasonably) that social welfare has increased (for example, following an economic policy change) if at least one person is made better off, without any individual being made worse off. This proposition proved to have some far-reaching implications. Thus trades between two persons, freely entered into, definitely meet the Pareto criterion, since at least one of them must gain for the

trade to be concluded. Most remarkably, it can be shown that rational economic actors within a perfectly competitive market system, given their initial endowment of resources, will act in ways that lead to outcomes that are Pareto optimal. That is, there is no other allocation of goods or use of resources that would give a Pareto improvement. Unfortunately, for all its elegance, the Pareto rule proves not to be of much use in actual policy formation: almost all policy measures involve gains for some and losses for others, and the rule is unable to deliver a decision in these cases.

An alternative, not requiring the measurement of individual welfare or wellbeing, is to base social decision rules in individuals' preference orderings. Individuals express their preferences by rankings of alternative states of the world. The hope was that it might be possible to aggregate these rankings to arrive at a social ranking, for example by getting individuals to vote on alternatives. Unfortunately, Arrow's 'impossibility theorem' showed this to be infeasible under quite general conditions, such as ruling out any social ranking that depends solely on the ranking of one individual (the 'no dictatorship' rule). Arrow's theorem generated a vast literature on social decision rules, but his conclusion should not perhaps have surprised anyone, since it rules out any information about the strength of feeling about any particular ranking. For example, imagine a two person community with persons A and B. Suppose person A, when asked to evaluate states of the world x and y , finds it difficult to distinguish them, but when pressed to decide just prefers x . But person B hugely prefers y to x . This 'quantitative' information cannot be utilised in the decision rule based on preferences alone, and an impasse results. Common sense might dictate a social decision rule which favours y in such circumstances¹³. 'Welfarism' also excludes from consideration any prior information about desirable social states, such as a bias to allocate more to the disadvantaged in society. Equally it does not rule out *any* preferences however morally repugnant they may be to society at large, as in the case of white supremacism.

In practice, economists and policy makers use cost-benefit analysis that estimates the monetary values of costs and benefits, and then sums them. The decision rule is that a positive value indicates a social benefit. One objection is that an additional dollar of cost or benefit means much more to a poor person to a rich one. But how much more it means is not determined, since values are not interpersonally comparable. A related objection is that costs to one person cannot be justified by gains to another, given that they are distinct persons.

There is of course an extensive philosophical literature on classical utilitarianism which is hedonistic in assigning value. The generally accepted definition is that the value of an action lies solely in its consequences, and that right actions are those which maximise utility or preference-satisfaction (consequentialism). There have been many lines of criticism:

- the problem of an infinite chain of consequences which cannot be identified;
- individual preferences may change according to the state of the world that eventuates, making evaluations tricky;
- no preferences, however disgraceful, are ruled out;

¹³ But a social decision rule that took into account the strength of preferences will need some means to weight that 'strength', and immediately encounters the problem that there is no measure that is 'interpersonally comparable'. That is, we have no way to weigh one person's strength of preferences against another's.

- the 'utilitarian' is a very thin concept of what it is to be a human person;
- it scarcely seems right to allocate fewer goods to a person with disabilities because they are less able to convert goods into personal utility;
- the role of the political authorities is to maximise social utility, while other criteria such as freedom and individual rights are ignored, except in so far as they register in the preferences of individuals.

Layard (2005) has made a brave attempt to resurrect Bentham's 'Greatest Happiness' principle. He notes that 'Happiness is feeling good; misery is feeling bad', and claims that this can be measured, either by asking people to express their feelings via psychologically rigorous questionnaires, or even by monitoring brains. The latter is not perhaps operational, but his argument is 'in principle'. He then claims that it is possible to aggregate from private happiness to social happiness, using a principle of fairness which is that everyone's happiness is equally important, an assertion that he derives from the Golden Rule plus impartiality. He reviews numerous empirical studies which show that the major contributors to a person's happiness are family, financial security, work, community and friends, health, personal freedom, and strength of personal values. Surprisingly, other factors such as age, gender, physical appearance, IQ and education, are not significant determinants of personal happiness. The major negative factors are relationship breakdowns, unemployment, poor health, and loss of freedom. Layard claims that the social values that underlie these findings are security, trust and status. He uses these findings to advocate a number of quite sensible policy initiatives. For example, he suggests increasing the resources given to cognitive behavioural therapy which has been shown to help many people to cope with circumstances that create unhappiness. However, many of his policy proposals do not require the support of his Benthamite framework: they can be supported on other ethical grounds. For example, the list of factors that contribute to human happiness does not come as a surprise to those familiar with Catholic Social Thought.

A specifically Christian critique of utilitarianism might make the following points. First and foremost, for a Christian, the 'good' is defined not only in relation to the individual herself, but also in relation to other persons. We are required to love God and our neighbour as ourselves. The hedonistic version of utilitarianism is entirely self-regarding: the good is what subjectively matters to me. Second, states of the world are to be judged by conformity to what God requires of human beings: *not* efficiency, growth and equality of material goods, *but* stewardship, satisfying work, care for the disadvantaged, preservation of family life. Third, society is more than the aggregate of individuals (and social welfare is more than an aggregate of individual wellbeing): the sustaining of community and its institutions is a good in itself, as that permits everyone to flourish in relationship with one another (a point made powerfully by the prophet to the exiles in Babylon in Jeremiah 29). Fourth, the role of the political authorities is much more than just maximising social utility: they have responsibilities for promoting justice, keeping the peace, and protecting the weak. The Christian view of society and its values emerges as a much richer conception of human flourishing than the rather 'thin' understanding that motivates utilitarianism.

4. Alternative modern ethical frameworks

In this section we will review two alternative modern ethical frameworks for social ethics that have had increasing influence in social and economic policy in the past fifty years. The first is the modern liberal tradition most notably as developed by John Rawls in his contractualist¹⁴ theory of justice. The second is the libertarian tradition following the thought of Hayek and Nozick. We will conclude the section by a review of the actual practice of public policy in the UK, focussing on due process and principles of distribution. The approach is best described as eclectic.

4.1 Modern liberal tradition: John Rawls's theory of justice¹⁵

Rawls's theory of justice as fairness builds on a long tradition of liberal thought. In a free society where citizens have disparate world views, there can only be *one* law or set of rules for society. The issues are the legitimacy and stability of that law. Legitimacy requires that if the law is to be enforced by the power of the people as a collective body, then it must be exercised in accordance with a constitution that all reasonable citizens as free and equal may be expected to endorse. The 'reasonable' citizen is defined as a person who wants to live in a society in which the citizens will cooperate with their fellow citizens, even to the extent of abiding by mutually agreed rules that may require some sacrifice of their own interests. The law will be stable if there is a sufficient overlapping consensus on the rules even if individual citizens have different conceptions of the good life or society. For this to happen, there has to be prior commitment to seeking agreement on fundamental political issues by reference to public values and public standards of inquiry and decision, not by reference to particular world views. The public standards include principles of reasoning and evidence that all reasonable citizens could endorse, such as common sense, logical reasoning, established facts, or scientific consensus. Discussion has to proceed on a basis of civility: justifying decisions on the basis of acceptable public reasons.

Rawls aims to define a political conception of justice that is freestanding, not dependent on any comprehensive world view. He draws on Western political culture to identify the fundamental ideas that all citizens are free and equal, and that society should embody a fair system of cooperation. He then asserts that the liberal conception of a just society will include at least the following. First, all citizens have the same basic individual rights and liberties, such as free expression, liberty of conscience, and choice of occupation. Second, those rights and liberties are to be given priority over any requirement to further the general good of society. Third, every citizen should have access to sufficient means or resources to enable them to make effective use of their freedoms: rights and liberties will count for little to a person who is destitute. What is the basis for Rawls' assertion of these three elements?

For him, justice concerns the distribution of benefits and burdens within a scheme of social cooperation among equal persons. The principles are derived from a thought experiment, 'the

¹⁴ 'Contractarian' theories specify motivations of individual agents that ground the contract as self-regarding (as in Hobbes or Gauthier): in 'contractualist' theories other-regarding moral motivations play a significant role, as we show in the discussion of Rawls.

¹⁵ The discussion in this section draws substantially on the careful summary of Rawl's thought in: Wenar, Leif, "John Rawls", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2013 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2013/entries/rawls/>>.

original position', in which the concept of the 'veil of ignorance' - the parties do not know their place in society - plays a major part. The veil of ignorance excludes all morally irrelevant factors about the parties' identities, and rules out any 'comprehensive conception of the good'. The parties are seeking an answer to the question: 'To what terms or principles for the distribution of benefits and burdens would free and equal citizens give consent?' The outcome of the thought experiment are principles for the just distribution of primary goods, such as rights and liberties, opportunities and powers, and income and wealth. Implications for societal structures follow from these principles. The basic intuition is impartiality: the device of the veil of ignorance makes the procedure fair, and thus generates a just set of principles.

Rawls then argues (in his *Theory of Justice*) that this thought experiment results in the following principles:

1. Each person is to have an equal right to the most extensive total system of equal basic liberties compatible with a similar system of liberty for all.
2. Social and economic inequalities are to be arranged so that they are both: (a) attached to offices and positions open to all under conditions of fair equality of opportunity; and (b) to the greatest benefit of the least advantaged members of society (the 'difference principle')

The first principle is to be deployed in the design of a political constitution. It affirms the basic liberal rights and freedoms (conscience, freedom of speech, liberty of the person, equality under the law), which are to be ascribed to all citizens equally. These are to be given priority, not traded off against other social goods. In respect of political liberties, it requires substantive equality in such areas as opportunities to hold political office and influencing the outcomes of elections.

Part (a) of the second principle gives strong endorsement to equality of opportunity. Access to educational and economic opportunities should depend only on talents and willingness to use them, and not on accidents of birth. Natural personal endowments are undeserved: but those who have greater capacities are permitted to use them to further their own interests so long as so doing contributes to the good of those who are less well endowed. The 'difference principle' (part (b)) requires social and economic institutions to be arranged so that any inequalities of wealth and income work to the advantage of those who will be worst off.

How do these principles work out in practice? Here are some suggestions in application to issues of equality and inequality.¹⁶ First, maximising the benefits for the least advantaged group in society requires attention to the prospects of those who work in the lowest skilled, least productive jobs, and might include wage subsidies (in-work benefits), a 'living' wage, and a guaranteed minimum income. It might also require universal access to high quality education and training. Second, ensuring fairness in the exercise of political liberties must include preventing economic inequalities leading to political inequalities: measures might

¹⁶ With acknowledgements to Paul Billingham, 'Equality and inequality: perspectives from political theory', DCM Social Sciences stream, March 21st 2015

include blocking the influence of wealth in politics by setting limits on private donations to political groups, anti-corruption laws, and public funding for political parties. Third, Rawls suggested that the principles imply the ideal of a property owning democracy, including a dispersed ownership of wealth and capital (a 'predistribution'). This might be achieved by supporting home buyers, ensuring that everyone has some savings, and high levels of taxation on bequests and inheritance to prevent accumulations of wealth over generations.

Sen (2009) has developed a detailed critique of Rawls's analysis¹⁷, which he contrasts with his own approach. The distinction he makes is between Rawls's 'transcendental institutionalism', and his own 'realization focused comparisons'. Rawls is seeking an ideal ('transcendental') institutional framework against which to judge existing political and economic arrangements, with a view to directing change in non-ideal societies. Sen argues that this is not necessary or practical, as the issue is generally pair-wise comparisons of non-ideal states of the world to examine whether a particular political programme or policies will lead to a more just outcome. Comparison with an ideal is far from straightforward, particularly if there are a number of dimensions of justice that have to be satisfied. Sen also challenges some key elements of Rawls' argument. First, he points out that Rawls argues that his two Principles will emerge from the 'veil of ignorance': but he cannot exclude the possibility that there are other principles that rational deliberation might generate. Second, the priority given to the first Principle is not fully explained: some abrogation of freedoms might be helpful to ensure that Principle 2(a) is satisfied. For example, it may be necessary to restrict the freedoms of the richest people in society to ensure that they don't exclude others from economic opportunities. Third, there remain uncertainties that actual behaviour will be effectively constrained by the agreement in the original position. Even if all parties agree that the Principles are just, they may revert to self-promotion when it comes to implementation. Not everyone conforms to Rawls' conception of moral behaviour.

The most obvious Christian responses to Rawls might be as follows:

(a) Emergence of the two Rawlsian principles depends on a degree of ethical commitment that reflects a very high estimation of human worth, and recognition of the worth of others (implicitly, the Golden Rule), so it is unclear that the principles are culturally independent of the historic Christian contribution to ethical thinking in the Western tradition. It might be difficult, for example, to get a fundamentalist Muslim to ascribe human worth to those who are not of the faith, or even to those who come from different sects within Islam.

(b) The process does not engage with the inconvenient truth of human fallenness, assuming a degree of goodwill and common sense rationality. 'Reasonable citizens' are presumed to be endowed with two moral powers: a sense of justice and a capacity for a conception of the good. But human nature and reason are flawed, and it is far from self-evident that everyone

¹⁷ The reader may wonder why I have chosen to privilege Sen's critique rather than considering the immense philosophical literature that Rawls's work has generated. The reason is that Sen's intellectual roots are in economic analysis rather than political philosophy, so his approach to the issue of justice is quite distinct. This may assist readers whose main academic discipline is economics or sociology, rather than philosophy. But there is no suggestion that Sen is the most significant commentator on Rawls, or that his critique should be especially valued.

will display these desirable traits in order to reach a convenient consensus: suppose someone just ‘doesn’t get it’ or possibly ‘doesn’t want to get it’. Moreover not everyone will agree that consensus on the terms for social cooperation in an ideal world should constrain what happens in the non-ideal world. Rawls outlines a sequence in which the veil of ignorance is progressively lifted: first, with respect to the society’s political culture and economic development to craft a constitution; second, the realization of the two principles within the constitutional framework, by agreement on specific laws and policies to fit the specific circumstances of the society; and finally implementation of those laws and policies by judges and administrators in particular cases. In practice those with resources and power may be unwilling to accept the constraints on their action implied in the second principle, and will seek to direct this sequence to serve their own interests.¹⁸

(c) Participants in the process are not allowed to bring to the discussion any prior conceptions of the ‘good’, which effectively rules out a contribution from Christian ethicists who have a very clear perspective on what is good for humanity. The objection to this criticism is that the Rawlsian process is about justice, not about the ‘good’. That is right, but the critic might respond that the two Rawlsian principles are too narrow a foundation for the range of issues that we might want to address in terms of political constitutions and economic institutions in the liberal society. Christian political and economic thought has a wider agenda for human flourishing in society, a vision for a society which is both just and good for humankind. Some of this may overlap with Rawls, but not necessarily all.

There has been some ambivalence in the responses of Christian thinkers to Rawls’ *Theory of Justice*. This was epitomised the evaluation presented by Barkley (1985, 1986), which attracted a response by Jones (1988). Their discussion illustrated a number of contrasts between Christian ethicists in their ‘take’ on Rawls’ work. Barkley understands Rawls as confronting a serious dilemma for modern liberal societies, which he describes as follows: ‘How can an evaluation of the distribution of rights, duties, benefits, and burdens which society necessarily imposes on all of its citizens be faithful to Christian beliefs without forcing others to accept the distinctive moral implications of beliefs they do not and should not be required to share?’¹⁹ Beckley insists that this dilemma is real and pressing. In a careful exposition of Rawls, he suggests that a Christian commitment to *agape* love provides a basis on which Christian ethicists can participate in the Rawlsian project. He argues that the original position requires just three moral beliefs on the part of participants – that all human persons are free, rational and equal –and that all three are supported by *agape*, interpreted as ‘equal regard’ for others. He envisages a willingness on the part of Christian believers to bracket knowledge of their particular beliefs to make room for agreement on principles of justice that can be embraced by all, on the basis of common human experience. His claim is that the original position is a device which enables the parties (Christian and non-Christian)

¹⁸ This criticism is not, of course, specific to Rawls. Any social ethics that appeals to ideal principles and institutions has to deal with the fallenness of human beings when it comes to actual implementation and policies. That includes Christian social ethics as outlined in this essay.

¹⁹ It should perhaps be noted that Barkley and Jones are writing implicitly about the situation in the United States, where groups have been vociferous in seeking to promote ‘Christian’ social and other policies on the basis that Christianity represents the mainstream culture.

to lay aside their different conceptions of the good and to look for what they have in common in their understanding of justice. This claim is consistent with the later interpretation of Rawls's thought, which focuses on overlapping consensus between parties with very different worldviews and particular moral values. Parties to the procedure reach a reflective equilibrium in which they lay aside particular moral views to reach agreement on a limited conception of the good in respect of the distribution of primary goods in society. Evidently that requires participants to give considerable weight to the overarching desirability of reaching agreement.

Jones's critique of Barkley (and hence of Rawls) begins with questioning whether the dilemma posed by Barkley is as pervasive as he suggests. There is something slightly odd about the assumed capacity of representative individuals with moral commitments to persons being free, rational and equal, to reach agreement behind the veil of ignorance; but it being impossible to do so in an open discussion as envisaged in the overlapping consensus interpretation of Rawls. Either people have a sense of justice and a desire to pursue it, or they don't. What is needed outside the original position is no more than an understanding and desire to promote the good of others, which is surely a corollary of *agape* defined as 'other regarding'. Jones also notes that Rawls and Barkley are remarkably sanguine about the desire of human beings to seek for justice: an optimism that is not shared either by Christian theology or Aristotle! Jones's third criticism echoes the thinking of Amartya Sen about the 'transcendental institutionalism' of the Rawlsian project. His suggestion is that we need to follow Alasdair MacIntyre (1984) in noting the moral bankruptcy of Western societies. Instead of proposing grand ethical schemes *a la* Rawls to reform the constitutions of our political and social institutions, we should focus our efforts (as Christians) on rebuilding societal institutions to focus on justice in practice, creating places of moral formation and growth in character. This approach is reminiscent of the Christian social and economic ethics explored in section 1 of this paper, with their particular emphasis on the role of institutions such as the family, the local community, or the work organisation, as required by subsidiarity. Finally, Jones wonders whether the Rawlsian approach, requiring the Christian to bracket out some particular ethical values in order to achieve agreement on principles of justice in the original position, entails too great a concession to non-Christian culture. He proposes Christians should be less willing to compromise, and more willing to proclaim distinctive Christian values as part of the proclamation of the gospel. The church needs to be counter-cultural, not in thrall to the liberal tradition.²⁰

4.2 The libertarian tradition: Hayek and Nozick

The libertarian tradition has its origins in Hobbes and Locke. It is discussed here because it has become an important ideology in its own right and, as such, has informed policy makers in the Anglo-Saxon economies, especially the United States (consider for example the influence of Milton Friedman, not only in monetary policy, but more widely in economic

²⁰ Nigel Biggar (2011) argues that Christian integrity may sometimes require distinctiveness, but often there will be issues on which Christians and non-Christians can agree, which is precisely the claim of Barkley in respect of the *agape* ethic and Rawls's conceptions of justice.

decisions of government)²¹. The modern libertarian doctrines of Hayek, and especially Nozick, are built around four key elements.²² The first is the primacy of negative freedom: independence of the arbitrary will of another; lack of interference of any kind by another; and lack of coercion by another including any political authorities. There is an acknowledged hierarchy of freedoms – intellectual and moral freedoms are preeminent, followed by political, and then economic freedoms. Second, in the version proposed by Nozick, the libertarian theory of property rights is based in justice in acquisition and justice in transfers. Property acquired by one’s own effort or mental exertion is just, and if that property is transferred to others by freely entered into exchanges, then the resulting ownership is also just and must be protected²³. Third, a free market economy is central to the libertarian vision, and is assumed to arise spontaneously once property rights have been secured and a minimal framework of law has been established to protect transactions and contracts. Fourth, the authorities in society are also assumed to emerge spontaneously from the state of nature, as ‘protective associations’²⁴. These associations are created by agreement of the independent persons in the community, to prevent outsiders from taking action outside the agreed legal frameworks. The association is ceded a de facto monopoly to punish deviant behaviour, and thus maintain the functioning of free markets. But it acts as an agent of the community, and does not have any independent powers - and in particular it cannot determine other matters affecting the liberties of members of the community.

A Christian critique of the libertarian propositions might focus on the following. First, freedom defined as the right of the individual to do exactly what he or she wants, without interference from others (and particularly from the authorities), does not conform well to the Christian understanding that we are social beings with obligations to others. So there are justified limits to freedom, which libertarians will not recognise. Even if a libertarian personally recognises social obligations, he will not accept that these are enforceable by others. Second, the concept of property rights embedded in the libertarian vision is not consistent with the Christian understanding that property is a divine *gift* to be stewarded carefully for all humanity. The biblical concept of Jubilee also undermines property rights in land: it can be neither bought nor sold in perpetuity. Third, the libertarian understanding of markets is that they are that and no more: they facilitate economic freedom in both supply and demand of commodities, services and factors of production. But the market has no God-given *telos* or purpose, e.g. to enable economic activity to contribute to human flourishing. The fact that in a fallen world a market economy may allow all sorts of evils to flourish, and is indifferent to the needs of the poor, is not generally a concern for the libertarian. Fourth, the libertarian understanding of the political authorities does not include the biblical concept of being responsible to God for doing justice in the community, including economic justice.

²¹ The libertarian tradition has also been espoused by the conservative Right in the United States, including many Christians.

²² The exposition that follows is based on Nozick (1974) as an exemplar of libertarian thinking.

²³ It does not assist the argument that it is easy to demonstrate that not all property has been accumulated in this benign manner, but that is not seen to be a problem. The theory is based on a ‘just-so’ story, not an historical account.

²⁴ This is also a ‘just so’ story to justify the existence and powers of the governing authorities, not a description of any actual historical process.

Rather the libertarian believes in a minimal state that is involved in little more than external security, keeping the peace at home, and providing a framework of law to ensure that the market can function efficiently. It is an institution for which Nozick memorably coined the description 'the nightwatchman state'.

4.3 Public policy in practice

The actual practice of policy is more eclectic in its approach than the previous discussions of idealised social ethical systems would suggest. The values implicit in policy discussions concern both process and distribution. With respect to process, the focus is on equality of respect. For example, the intended beneficiaries of a particular policy should be invited to participate in the formation of the policy. Equality of respect also raises some doubts about fairly standard policy procedures such as means-testing, which involves treating the poor differently from others in requiring them to report in detail on their circumstances. With respect to distribution of resources and rights, there are three possible criteria. One is sufficiency, informed by the discourse of basic needs. The criterion is access to a standard of life that is compatible not only with human flourishing as an individual, but also consistent with 'citizenship', membership of the community. In practice, this involves giving priority to the disadvantaged and marginalised in society. The second criterion is desert, which seeks to reward effort and performance in tasks that individuals undertake. The third criterion is equality, broadly construed to include for examples, economic equality, equality before the law, equality of esteem in the community, and equality in political processes: or maybe, the practical aim is just the absence of egregious inequality. Walzer, in his *Spheres of Justice* (1983), noted that different principles or criteria operate in different domains. In solidaristic communities, such as neighbourhoods, the most relevant principle will be need. In instrumental associations, such as a business or other commercial enterprise, the rewards will be determined by desert, to encourage (workers) to supply effort and to be productive in their work. In the sphere of citizenship, including political processes, the criterion should be equality: each citizen should have equal access to power, and equal voice.

In Western societies, the most significant areas for social policies involve distributive justice. The policies may relate to resources, opportunities, and subjective and objective outcomes. Thus policies may address the needs of members of a community to have access to a minimum level of resources to survive, and to opportunities for work, education and training. Outcomes may be measured subjectively (either 'happiness' or Benthamite utility or well-being): or they may be measured objectively by assessing the fulfilment of needs or level of functioning of the person. There remains the question of what are legitimate or acceptable sources of variation in outcomes. A meritocratic approach would allow inequalities that arise jointly from natural talents and effort. 'Luck egalitarianism' would only allow inequality due to effort, and not allow inequalities due to talents or inheritance.

5. Persons, human flourishing and basic goods

In this section we outline alternative approaches that focus on personhood, and its implications for human flourishing and basic goods. A particular feature of these approaches is that they give some prospect of bridging the secular/ theological divide, or at least enabling a fruitful conversation to take place.

5.1 Persons

In this section we focus on the work of Christian Smith, in his book, *What is a person?* (2010). Smith writes as an academic sociologist reflecting on the fundamental intellectual structures of his discipline. But it is evident that he owes a good deal of his framework to theological natural law approaches, but expressed in secular terms. The first component of his approach is *discerning the good*. He notes that humans are persons with individual characteristics, limitations, and purposes. Their good is achieving their essential nature, and morality concerns those things that are or are not conducive to achieving that good. The second component is a number of *linked themes* to do with human *telos*, virtues and community. The human *telos* concerns our human ends and purposes, captured by the common ideas of life as a pilgrimage or quest, or as simply a challenge. In this framework, the virtues are those societal dispositions and practices that are conducive to *telos*. (Note that it is the *shared human telos* which is in view here: to which may be added personal ends or purposes in life, and life plans which identify the individual). The significance of the community is the extent to which social arrangements promote and sustain the virtues. The third component is the realization of *the good of others as a personal good*. This is the point at which the social nature of human persons enters the discussion. Smith asserts: ‘... the promotion of the realization of other persons is always included in the natural telos of every person pursuing the realization of his or her personhood.’²⁵ This is expressed in gift giving and exchange, and facilitates the development of character: addressing the needs of others helps us to develop ourselves. We cannot of course meet the needs of every ‘other’, but we need prudence in choosing to whom we will reach out. As we do so, we learn more about them and their needs, and develop our respect for them as human persons. Unfortunately, as Smith notes, the brokenness of our world makes achieving the good an uphill struggle: but virtuous behaviour still occurs, and that strengthens both our virtuous character and sustains social relationships in the community.

5.2 Natural law, human flourishing and basic goods

Smith’s approach requires us to be more specific about what goods make for human flourishing. This task is brilliantly and comprehensively addressed by John Finnis, in his *Natural Law and Natural Rights* (1981). He notes that ‘... a study of the nature of a being is ... a study of the potentialities or capacities of that being.’ He then asserts that human beings flourish by participating in some combination of basic goods that we value or have reason to value. These basic goods are identified by practical reason: that is, discerning the intelligent and rational direction towards human fulfilment. He goes on to define human flourishing in seven dimensions:

²⁵ Smith (2010), page 406

- Life – survival, life, reproduction
- Knowledge – understanding, education, aesthetic experience
- Meaningful work and play
- Human relationships of all kinds
- Self-integration – inner peace
- Authentic self-direction – participation, self-determination, practical reason
- Transcendence – a source of meaning and value

The question is how people can achieve these basic dimensions of human flourishing or basic goods. Sen addressed precisely this question in his development of the capabilities approach²⁶. He agrees that human flourishing is multi-dimensional, including not just material goods (as mainstream economics claimed in the second half of the 20th century), but also health, relationships, education and life expectancy. Capabilities are the capacity to live a life conducive to attaining basic goods (as defined for example by Finnis), and consistent with the expectations of society (so culturally specific). The aim of public policy is to enable people to take responsibility for their own lives in attaining basic goods. To illustrate, we might distinguish between the ‘deserving’ and the ‘undeserving’ poor. The former are those that lack capabilities: the latter have capabilities but fail to exercise them.

The capabilities approach has been deployed by Alkire (2005) to address issues of poverty alleviation, where the definition of poverty goes beyond material deprivation to include the capacity to be in control of one’s life. Alkire and her team at the Oxford Poverty and Human Development Institute have developed indices to measure poverty in this wider sense and these have been adopted by a number of developing countries and international agencies including the World Bank.

A problem with a basic goods approach to human flourishing arises in cases where fulfilment of one dimension is in conflict with another dimension. An example would be a situation where to earn enough to survive physically requires a form of work which is far from ‘meaningful’. The natural law doctrine of the ‘incommensurability of goods’ will not permit trade-offs. In contrast, Aquinas acknowledges that there can be conflicts of basic goods, and appeals to virtues to decide how to proceed in such circumstances.

The approach outlined in this section has a number of attractive features. First, as a natural law approach it is consistent with Catholic Social Thought, and hence has strong theological foundations. Second, because it avoids direct appeal to biblical/ theological concepts, it enables a dialogue with secular thinkers like Amartya Sen who are exploring the same issues with similar analytic tools. Third, it is not inconsistent with a biblical understanding of the human person, rooted as it is in a ‘thick’ concept of humanity. Its theological weakness is that it ignores human fallenness: this is a weakness in its own right, but also because it closes off any discussion of the need for salvation in Christ and the work of the Spirit in transforming human nature.

²⁶ See Sen (1985)

6. Conclusions

It will be apparent that the biblical and theological approaches to social and economic ethics differ substantially from approaches commonly employed in the social sciences. The biblical approach takes the descriptions of the communities of the people of God in the OT and the NT as paradigms of how human communities should ideally be structured. The advantage of a paradigm is that it is concrete rather than theoretical. To make use of the paradigm one has to discern the principles that inform it, and then seek to apply them in very different cultural and social contexts. The process of discernment is inductive, requiring a careful understanding of the full diversity of biblical texts and of the societies in which the communities were living. The principles are always provisional: it is the paradigm that is normative, to which constant recourse should be made as the principles are developed.

Catholic Social Teaching has increasingly made use of biblical materials to provide a starting point for its thinking, but the underlying method continues to move from a few theological affirmations to develop a natural law social ethic. It is therefore consistent with Scripture, but reaches its conclusions about human life and flourishing by applying reason to identify the implication of those affirmations. The starting point is always the understanding of the human. Traditionally, the focus was on human nature and teleology: so ‘natural law was the result of human reason directing human beings to their ultimate end in accord with nature.’ More recent social Encyclicals have focussed on ‘persons as subjects’ rather than ‘human nature’, with a shift from teleology to relationality and responsibility – to God, to others, and to the created order. The four key themes that have been identified are human dignity, the common good, solidarity and subsidiarity.

These biblical and theological approaches can be used to critique the systems of social ethics that underlie the theory and practice of modern social sciences. Considering utilitarianism first, the obvious characteristic is that it works with an extremely thin understanding of human beings. The Benthamite project fails, among many other failings listed above in section 3, not only because utility cannot be measured and without measurement it is impossible to assess social welfare, but also because it focuses entirely on a single yardstick of human flourishing, ignoring for example the significance of relationships for human happiness. Cost benefit analysis may be satisfactory for the consumer’s decision to purchase goods and services, and for evaluating public investment projects: but when the utilitarian calculus begins to invade other spheres of human experience and action, it quickly destroys other human values such as love or compassion. The alternative frameworks developed by liberal and libertarian thinkers are less amenable to this kind of criticism, because they recognise a much ‘thicker’ understanding of human nature. So they pay attention to the desire for freedom as well as for goods, and liberal thinkers at least recognise that inequality can be destructive of relationships within the community. But the liberal approach epitomised by John Rawls, while intellectually remarkable and attractive, does not convincingly resolve the diversity of moral views present in modern societies. ‘Transcendental institutionalism’, as

Sen has called it, is too neatly comprehensive, and ignores the messiness of societies made up of fallen human beings. In the practice of policy a pragmatic eclectic approach has evolved from the experience of dealing with very complex issues, which require a diversity of approaches rather than single rules or principles. An approach starting with human personhood, and exploring the basic goods necessary for human flourishing, may be the way forward for developing principles for social and economic life. It has the definite advantage of being consonant with a Christian understanding of human nature, though perhaps not our fallenness. In contrast with utilitarian cost-benefit, the application of a broadly defined set of principles requires the policy maker to use practical wisdom to discern how particular decisions will impact on real people and situations.

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