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I entered into PhD studies in economics because I was convinced that economic analysis offered unique insights into the operations of markets and society that were generally overlooked or ignored, and was consequently a powerful framework for thinking about public policy. At the same time, the U.S. Roman Catholic bishops and a long line of papal teaching insisted that the economic approach to human beings, their motivations, and their communities was a radically incomplete basis for policy and reform. At the very beginning of my studies as an economist, I felt the imperative to reconcile these competing accounts.

I am highly skeptical that Christian ethics and economic analysis can be combined into “Christian economics” without doing damage both to economics and to Christian ethics. “Christian economics” is not a combined discipline, but a conversation between economics and Christian ethics about the constitution of the social order, the place of economic activity in that order, and the direction of social reform.

Anyone who has participated in formal or informal exchanges between economists and theologians is aware of the mutual incomprehension and frustration inherent in these conversations. Too often the exchange takes place within the single mind of the economist as he or she tries to reconcile what he or she knows as an economist and as a Christian. The exchange between economics and theology needs translators on both sides, each able to learn the language and inhabit the intellectual worldview of the other. The four works I recommend, three by non-economists and only one written from an explicitly Christian perspective, are clear accounts of concepts and categories which do not fit cleanly into the economic framework. In these accounts, the curious economist will discover the foreign-ness but reasonableness of a non-economic worldview, to bring into focus the advantages and the shortcomings of the economic approach. Armed with even a limited fluency in a non-economic language, the willing economist can engage more fruitfully in the exchange with theology and ethics.

Aristotle (1941), *Nicomachean Ethics*: Too many economists, when they read Aristotle, focus on his somewhat obscure analysis of money and value in the *Politics*, but *The Ethics* provides the more important challenge

to economists. *The Ethics* begins with an account of human motivation: “Every art and every inquiry, and similarly every action and pursuit, is thought to aim at some good” (1.1). At the same time it issues a challenge to economists: “precision is not to be sought for alike in all discussion” (1.2). After this beginning, Aristotle continues on to a discussion of the nature of human happiness, of human action, the place of the virtues in a good life, and the nature of friendship. I first read this book four years out of graduate school, and found myself repeatedly trying to place Aristotle’s analysis alongside the economic analysis of human behavior. The conversation with Aristotle has continued throughout my academic career.

John Finnis (1980), *Natural Law and Natural Rights*: This classic of legal philosophy is not uncontroversial. It has been faulted by other natural-law theorists for its acceptance of the fact-value distinction, and its deductive, analytical style of argument. Ironically, these perceived shortcomings make this book a very accessible guide to natural law theories for economists. Its clear explanation of the relationship between instrumental and basic goods, and of the incomparability among the basic goods, present economists with a rigorously described alternative to utility theory. Moreover, even though the basic goods (beauty, truth, life, justice, play, religion, friendship) are not fully comparable, Finnis insists that human choice can still be governed by reasoned deliberation, and develops principles of practical reason.

James C. Scott (1998), *Seeing Like a State*: Scott offers an explanation for the failures of technocratic social plans (what he calls “authoritarian high modernism”) which emphasizes the importance of what planning must leave out. States and other large institutions operate at a distance from the societies they govern; to manage social reality, they must abstract from it (“see” it through a model). Scott describes what is left out of technocratic models, including economic models of every ideological stripe: local knowledge and skills, which he calls *metis*. Technocratic models do not just happen to leave out *metis*; since *metis* is by definition the set of skills and knowledge needed to grapple with the shortcomings of an abstracted view of the world, it *cannot* be included in an abstracted view of the world (in a model), even though it is crucial to the flourishing of society. Scott’s book explores the shortcomings of analytical models without advocating their abandonment; the best social plans give space

for *metis*, even though *metis* cannot be formally modelled. Any economist who takes this book seriously will take a different view of the uses and limitations of economic models.

Daniel K. Finn (2006), *The Moral Ecology of Markets*: Finn has done significant graduate-level coursework in economics, and combines this training with a PhD in religious social ethics. Consequently, he is well placed to talk across the disciplinary boundaries between theological ethics and economics. He offers an ethical evaluation of markets, taking seriously and treating fairly arguments from the right and left for and against markets. Any economist looking for a treatment of the topic which takes economics and its contributions seriously will find this book enlightening. To the traditional concerns of production (allocation) and distribution in the evaluation of economic outcomes, Finn adds considerations of scale and social relations. This allows him to broaden the normative discussion of markets, respecting and putting into perspective traditional economic concerns.

### **References**

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