

## Evaluating the Good: A Reply to Richardson

James K.A. Smith  
Calvin College

I worry that my initial contribution, when compared to David Richardson's analysis, will confirm a lot of stereotypical assumptions about philosophers and theologians—that we are abstract gurus accustomed to the rarefied air of mountain hermitages, well removed from the nitty-gritty messiness of the proverbial “real world.” While Richardson documents the effects of policies on GDP and other measurable factors, my article offers nary a graph or pie chart and instead remains at 10,000 feet, musing about “big questions.” So it might seem that my opening worry has come to fruition: once again, the economist and theologian are talking past one another.

However, it strikes me that we should perhaps distinguish between productive and non-productive versions of “talking past one another.” In non-productive versions of the phenomenon, the interlocutors are simply shouting their self-assured pronouncements in what turns out to be an echo chamber, with neither the ability nor the interest to hear the other. But that does not seem to be the case here, which makes me wonder whether there might not be something like a *productive* instance of talking past one another, where interlocutors have come to the table with the goal of listening and understanding one another, only to find that they are answering different questions—which then becomes incredibly illuminating precisely because it highlights the deep differences between their starting assumptions. So the interlocutors still talk past one another somewhat, but *how* they talk past one another turns out to be very instructive: where they *miss* one another can now become points of focus.

I think this is the case in our exchange so far: because we each came to this conversation convinced that we had something to learn from the other, and from the other's discipline, our stance was receptive. But one might suggest that Richardson and I have answered two different questions: Richardson seems to have asked, “How should we evaluate economic globalization?” and his answer is offered as a kind of empirical corrective to theological rants about the same. In contrast, my essay asked the question, “What do theologians wish economists understood about the theological critique of globalization?” with the hopes of helping economists appreciate how *deep* theologians' reservations are with respect to economic globalization. While it might look like we have talked past each other, I have found the exchange illuminating precisely because it has helped me to see *where* we missed each other, in a sense. We have not quite got to the point of disagreement yet because we have not quite got

to the same question. So in this response, I would like to look back on our first round of the exchange in order to home in on two themes highlighted in our “talking past one another.”

1. Richardson’s essay illustrates and confirms one of the worries I expressed in my initial essay: the tendency to take what is contingent as if it were natural. Thus Richardson’s evaluation takes economic globalization as a given and then debates the particulars, whereas theologians will tend—perhaps too quickly—to call into question the very configuration of such systems and structures. This difference also becomes loaded, however, when economists overlay their analysis of these contingent structures with the label “real life”—as if economists are the “realists” in the conversation, having the courage, honesty, and fortitude to face up to the purported economic “realities” whereas theologians seem to be concerned with something other than “real life” (ideal life? artificial life? extraterrestrial life?).<sup>1</sup> But of course the theologian is going to protest that this is loading the dice: while our “real life” might be currently configured by these systems and structures (e.g., globalization), the theologian is both aware that “real life” used to be otherwise, and could be otherwise in the future. So it will be precisely the theologian’s interest in “real life” *otherwise* that motivates her critique of the current system.

Having said that, theologians probably still underappreciate the weight that such contingent configurations have accrued. In other words, though theologians and philosophers refuse to just take current economic orderings as natural “givens,” we might need to take more seriously how ingrained and solidified such systems and configurations have become. While we might point out that this concrete building in front of us is contingent and emerged from human construction, that does not mean we can now walk through its solid walls. Theology needs economics precisely to train our attention on empirical realities—to push us to attend to the “book of nature,” as it were—which in this case is the book of human culture which is intertwined with resources of creation. Any “reading” of natural and social realities is going to be informed by presuppositions and biases, but they still must be confronted by the given realities which push back on our claims about the world. Insofar as theologians make claims that bear on the empirical shape of lived communities, we need to be accountable to empirical realities. This is precisely why theologians cannot neglect engaging economists, even if our engagement might be difficult and frustrating. In some ways, what is at stake here is a matter of *imagination*: I think the theologian tends to have a more supple, elastic imagination about how things *could* be. But the economist reminds us that our sometimes unfettered imaginings need to be disciplined by social

scientific attention to empirical realities. Such attention and accountability, however, cannot simply look like conceding “the real world” to the world *as made* by globalization.

2. In reading Richardson’s essay, I am reminded that our analysis and evaluation of economic globalization does not have to be all or nothing. In other words, a Christian approach to globalization does not have to be either a scorched earth campaign or a simplistic baptism of the status quo;<sup>2</sup> our evaluation of economic globalization does not have to be an up or down vote on “the package,” as it were. In order to evaluate social and economic configurations we need to measure them against a criterion of flourishing (an “ideal”), but then evaluate the *degrees* to which such configurations track with, or depart from, the ideal. This is often conceived teleologically—that is, with the ideal or standard of measurement understood as a *telos* or goal for which we are aiming. Such teleological frames of evaluation are natural for Christian evaluation precisely because of Christian eschatology: our ideal or standard is the shape of the coming kingdom, the *shalom* sketched in scripture which outlines the shape of social and environmental flourishing for creation.<sup>3</sup>

Such a model of cultural analysis and critique is as old as Augustine’s *City of God* (Augustine, 1984). In considering the social arrangements of the Roman empire, Augustine works with a stringent criterion: the very shape of the heavenly city, the coming new Jerusalem, which is taken as a template for just social arrangements. So, on the one hand, against that standard, almost any social arrangement is just bound to fall short—drastically short. So in evaluating the “peace of Rome” (the *pax Romana*), Augustine will suggest that it does not even really deserve the label “peace” for the peace of Rome is really just a repression of conflict purchased with overwhelming violence and military power—a far cry from the wolf lying down with the lamb. However, on the other hand, Augustine’s more nuanced analysis can recognize that even this *faux* peace of Rome is certainly preferable to the unmitigated chaos of the barbarian horde. So while the peace of Rome falls short of the eschatological ideal, there are other configurations of social life which depart even further from this ideal. Augustine’s measuring instrument, here, is not so much a yard stick as a protractor: it is a matter of discerning which social (and economic) arrangements are less misdirected from the *telos* of *shalom*.

I see Richardson’s attention to “the data” as an invitation for theologians to engage in a more nuanced, Augustinian evaluation of the effects of economic globalization. Thus what he persistently points to are instances of what he sees as economic outcomes of globalization that have contributed

to “the common good.” Economic globalization is judged to be beneficial on a number of counts because it yields the “goods” of increased standards of living, reduction of poverty, etc.<sup>4</sup> Can we not recognize some “goods” that result from this global configuration of commerce?

Well, answering that question brings us to my final concern and probably the point of deepest continued disagreement—or at least the most serious aspect of our “talking past one another.” We can only consider the “good” effects of economic globalization if we also come to consensus on the relevant criteria; that is, we can only answer this question about whether economic globalization is “good” if we can articulate a shared sense of what constitutes “the good” or “the common good.” This is just another way of saying that we can only engage in a nuanced, Augustinian evaluation of economic globalization if we agree on the criteria for flourishing, for *shalom*. But Richardson seems to accept standards of what is “good” that have already assumed that “the good” should be measured according to standards that the theologian might question. At the very least, the theologian would press Richardson to articulate just what criteria inform his evaluation of what is “good”—for “the good” is relative to some narration about human flourishing and some contextual account of what we are made for.

But I suspect it is precisely on this point that we disagree, so that what is really at issue in the differences between Richardson and me—and perhaps common in disagreements between economists and theologians more generally—is that we have very different understandings of just what constitutes the “ideal” of human flourishing. Or, if we might agree on *ultimate* goals for human flourishing, our eschatologies might differ such that we have very different expectations about what is possible or expected in our “current” social order. For example, it might be the case that many Christian economists (I have no inkling about this, just floating a hypothesis) implicitly posit a radical *dis*-continuity between the current social order (“this world”) and “kingdom come.” So they might posit a similar *ultimate* ideal for economic flourishing but have no hope or expectation that even glimmers of that order could be or should be instantiated in the present order because of a dispensational eschatology which posits that the current order will “burn up,” issuing in a radically discontinuous new heavens and earth.<sup>5</sup> In contrast, many theologians will be working with a strong sense of possible continuities between even “this (disordered) world” and the coming kingdom.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, on this alternative eschatology, part of the church’s mission is to be engaged in redemptive culture-making that transforms cultural systems to more and more reflect

the kingdom ideal of *shalom*. So “good” economic ordering, on this account, is not just about systems of charity or a kind of ministry of mercy that alleviates poverty; it will constructively be imagined as the task of ordering economic systems to reflect the ideals of biblical *shalom*.

In addition, the theologian—or at least the theologians I surveyed in my first article—will also be attentive to *other* goods that may come into tension with the material goods of quality of life. In other words, material flourishing is not an unquestioned good: it, too, is a relative good. So systems of economic exchange which also yield prosperity at the price of idolatry might not constitute “goods.” Or configurations of economic life that contribute to the flourishing of some at the expense of others will be rejected as a failure to love our neighbor, even our enemies. Or still further, if economic systems purchase human prosperity at the expense of natural, creational flourishing, our obligations of stewardship will evaluate such an economic system as not “good,” all things considered.<sup>7</sup> In short, what counts as “good” is not simply self-evident. This means that Christian evaluations of economic globalization need to clearly articulate a Christian understanding of that ideal of social and economic flourishing as rooted in the vision of *shalom* in the scriptures, and then need to be attentive to the multiple, competing sorts of good to which that calls us. “Thy kingdom come” should be the prayer of all who would be equipped to evaluate these matters.

### **Endnotes**

1. This is why I do not find much help in the work of figures such as Novak and Stackhouse. Their model of a dialogue between theology and economics is too deferent to the supposedly neutral, “realistic,” scientific disclosures of economics. In other words, they buy into the myth of scientific neutrality and objectivity and thus take economics to be disclosing “the way things are.” The theology/economics dialogue then becomes very asymmetrical: the “science” of economics discloses “the way things are” and theology then looks for gaps and spaces that leave room for making chastened theological claims. I am trying to level the playing field by pointing out the myth of such scientific neutrality. That is *not* the same as discouraging attention to empirical realities.
2. If some more left-leaning theological critics tend to the former, more sympathetic theologians like Max Stackhouse tend to the latter.
3. For a classic statement of this model, whereby eschatological *shalom*

is the criterion by which we evaluate and consider the relative justice or injustice of current systems, see Wolterstorff (1983). It might be the case that Richardson and I diverge in our evaluation precisely because of *eschatological* differences.

4. Richardson also recognizes that such goods are also attended by “bads.”
5. Such eschatologies are based, in part, on a faulty translation and understanding of 2 Pet. 3:6-7: “By these waters also the world of that time was deluged and destroyed. By the same word the present heavens and earth are reserved for fire, being kept for the day of judgment and destruction of the ungodly.” For a critique of such a reading, see Wolters (1987).
6. For a helpful elucidation, see Mouw (2002).
7. See, for example, the geographical and theological concerns about sustainability articulated in Wallace (2008).

### **References**

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