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## *The Family Wage: Work, Gender, and Children in the Modern Economy*

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This slender volume consists of four conference papers by Allan C. Carlson, Maris A. Vinovskis, Jean Bethke Elshtain, and Richard K. Vedder followed by a summary of the free-wheeling discussion the authors and participants had at the conference.

What is there here for the Christian economist? The discussion is not grounded in scriptural interpretation, theology, or historical Christianity. The veneer of fact and impartial analysis is maintained by the paper-givers until the discussion at the end. One is reminded of Chesterton's aphorism, "We agree about the evil; it is about the good that we should tear each other's eyes out."

Although the discussants are certainly not agreed on a lot of things, they are not tearing each other's eyes out. Not included in the spectrum are those who attack the traditional family by redefining it. There is no effort in this volume to redefine the family to include homosexuals and lesbians. The word "family" can be taken to mean husband, wife, and children.

On the other hand no one really discusses forthrightly why the woman should not work in the market-place. If one wants to see provocative presentations of the rationale, I would suggest a careful reading of G.K. Chesterton's *What's Wrong With The World* and his brilliant essay, "The Yule Log and the Democrat" in *The Uses of Diversity*.

Still, the book raises provocative questions about the origins of the family wage, the appropriate methodology for discussing the family, and the substance of family policies (if there are to be any at all). Although there is overlap between these three concerns, let me organize my review around these questions.

First, what are the historical origins of the family wage? In the initial paper Carlson places the "family wage," which is roughly designed to make certain that a male wage earner's income is high enough so that a wife can take care of children without needing to enter the labor market herself, in the context of Catholic social teaching stretching back to the medieval Scholastics and their ideas about just price. Carlson sees an essential continuity of the concept into the social teaching of the Catholic Church in the nineteenth century.

As an historian of economic thought, I would be inclined to say that he overemphasizes the social harmony, objective justice side of the just price debate. No attention is given to De Roover, Baldwin, or other more market-oriented interpreters of the just price.

To place the just price in the context of guilds overlooks the fact that the Scholastics were deeply suspicious of guilds. There is a Tawneyized view of medieval harmony pervading Carlson's discussion which even goes on to baptize Adam Smith and David Ricardo as advocates of a natural family wage determined by market forces. This is Carlson's way of having his free-market cake served up to customers with strong-family icing on top.

Even if Carlson is wrong about the Scholastic origins of these concepts, it does not vitiate the importance that he puts upon Catholic teachings of the nineteenth century. There are three questions which need to be answered: Is there continuity between the Scholastics and the nineteenth century? Is there continuity between the nineteenth century encyclicals and the twentieth century encyclicals? Is Catholic economic teaching anti-capitalist, anti-market, anti-socialist, all of the above, or none of the above?

One line of origin not discussed by Carlson, but suggested by Vedder later in the discussion, is a more cynical rent-seeking interpretation of the "family wage" as a "rhetorical ploy by labor unions and other special interest groups." This is a thread which deserves to be developed. Recent interpretations of the Factory Acts as devices to prevent the competition of women and children and restrict entry in order to protect male wage rates are, of course, not inconsistent with humanitarian concerns to protect women and children. If you put women on a pedestal, you do get them out of the labor market. Life does get complicated.

The importance of anti-market feeling is also suggested by Vedder in his discussion of the transition of the American liberal and progressive tradition from the pro-family policies and rhetoric of 1910 to those of the 1988 liberal who pushes publicly provided child-care, comparable worth, public assistance payments for unmarried and divorced mothers, etc. The only

thing progressive liberals have in common is a hostility to unfettered market forces.

Elshtain complements Carlson by her discussion of feminist attitudes toward the family wage. Most feminists are critics of the family wage, but she finds some limited support among recent feminist scholars. She begins with the critics of the family wage during the 1920s and 1930s. For example, Eleanor Rathbone and Paul Douglas criticized the family wage or living wage for not conceiving of the family as "an aggregate of individual human beings . . ." To view members of the family as "dependents" is to conceive of them as "parasitic, accessory, non-essential." To achieve "permanent independence" family allowances out of state funds are required.

Allow me to muse a little on the concept of "permanent independence." If love and marriage go together like a horse and carriage, is it because the horse and carriage are metaphorically thought of as consenting adults? Or is it more likely that neither the horse nor the carriage were consulted? Once they have hitched up, can they go their separate ways? Can we best find efficiency in promoting an arrangement by which the horse and carriage can go their separate ways when they so desire? One sees the results in those crazy Western movies.

Permanent independence may be thought of as a correction to the permanent dependence of "till death do us part." Permanent dependence brings back the idea of sacred vows and medieval chivalry. The reactionary feudalization of the family is still perhaps deeply ingrained in Western culture. But the vows of feudalism are not the chains of slavery. As G.K. Chesterton has emphasized, the medieval vow was neither coercive nor a voluntary contract; it was the way to human liberty. How disappointed Marxists and libertarians must be with the labor movement which when given a chance is often consistently feudal and reactionary. The temporarily successful Ciompi Revolt (1378-1381) created several knights, adopted banners and coats of arms—all the trappings of feudalism instead of liberty and equal rights for all. The Peasant's Revolt of 1381 was perhaps more egalitarian, but not equal rights-oriented as they slaughtered the Flemish workers. Let's face it, "rent-seeking" is only a euphemistic way of discussing original sin and the ubiquitous desire of human beings to lord it over someone else.

The tough issue for the social scientist is whether or not any structure of authority has legitimacy. Do structures of authority come about through power politics (conquest and force), conspiracy of males

against females (crafty stealth), a natural division of labor (a Pareto optimal outcome of unhampered voluntary choice), or a revealed truth based on scripture and the Holy Family?

All of this leads us to the second question at issue in the book. What is the proper methodological framework for Christian economists? Are economic models applicable to family structures? Should the delicate, living tissue of the family be approached with the scalpel of economic analysis? Can it be observed without being affected? Does the language of exchange and markets always bring up the atmosphere of cash-nexus?

Neither the authors nor the discussants at the end are agreed on the appropriateness of the language of economic analysis as applied to the family. There are sharp distinctions between the economists and the social-minded theorists.

The use of precise economic analysis is most systematically presented in Vedder's essay and is seconded by James Gwartney's comments in the later discussion. But skepticism about economic explanations for the family crisis can be found in Vinovskis' fact-filled piece which emphasizes demographic and cultural questions in addition to economic changes.

Active hostility to the economic scalpel as applied to the body of the family can also be found in Jean Elshtain's "social feminism" (what might usefully be called "double-standard feminism") as opposed to the "natural rights feminism" ("single-standard feminism") based on the language of American individualism. She waxes indignant at Gwartney's statement that "It's crucial that we move away from thinking of government as an agency of justice . . . The right way of thinking about government is as an agency to permit us to engage in some complex exchanges that are mutually advantageous."

Thus we see that the political theorist faces the same choice as the economist in the use of language. Does America talk the language of voluntary private contract—one interpretation of the Lockean basis for American politics—or does it talk the language of not-so-voluntary compact—language grounded in Scripture and God's revelation to mankind? Do we talk civic virtue or public good(s)?

On this question of the appropriate language I am sympathetic with the economist's stubbornness. We all know what we mean by "utility maximization," but unfortunately no one else does. Therefore in the name of prudence, we should use our categories in

non-market areas of human behavior with caution.

On the matter of the substance of family policies there is an illuminating passage from G.K. Chesterton which captures the reality of eternity for the most important human things:

... all the noble necessities of man talk the language of eternity. When man is doing the three or four things that he was sent on this earth to do, then he speaks like one who shall live for ever. A man dying for his country does not talk as if local preferences could change. Leonidas does not say, 'In my present mood, I prefer Sparta to Persia.' William Tell does not remark, 'The Swiss civilization, so far as I can yet see, is superior to the Austrian.' When men are making commonwealths, they talk in terms of the absolute, and so they do when they are making (however unconsciously) those smaller commonwealths which are called families. (G.K. Chesterton, "Questions of Divorce" in *The Uses of Diversity* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1921) pp. 180-81.)

We know that justice involves rendering equals to equals and unequals to unequals, and commutative, distributive, and reciprocal justice. The family wage and women's liberation movements must unravel the mysteries of a Christian Church which rests on such complexities as the Holy Trinity, the Holy Family, Ave Marias and Pater Nosters: equal dignity, but not egalitarian.

Now that I have touched on the history and methodology, let me finish by examining the issues of public policy. What is the proper role of the state in promoting the family wage? Vedder and Gwartney will allow the state only to roll back certain policies which they interpret as "discriminatory" against the family and higher wage rates. But they will not allow the twig to be bent the other way in favor of the family.

Richard Vedder's piece is a particularly useful summary of the ravages done to the family by the consequences of government policies such as Social Security, welfare payments, inflation, tax policies, occupational regulation, and the Davis-Bacon Act. He makes it clear that in his opinion the failure of the family wage is not caused by free market forces but by government intervention. His solution is to roll back the last fifty years and preserve individual choice.

But at some point the new home economics, just like the new resource economics, will eventually exhaust its critique of state measures which are counterproductive by any measure, and will have to decide whether given individual tastes and preferences are all that matter.

Undoubtedly, the new home economics can point out unappreciated economic harmonies of the traditional sexual division of labor if people's preferences are so ordered. But what if they are not so ordered? Must we accept prostitution, pornography, and drugs because they are the result of private contract and purchase between consenting adults?

Allan Carlson wants to have his cake again and eat it too. This time I am inclined to let him. In the discussion, he offered a "two-level vision of America, with Lockean individualism defining the constitutional premises for Federal government, but with quite different traditions still at work on the state level. . . ." He is seconded in this by Thomas Fleming who supports Federalism as the structure appropriate to the American historical experience rather than the European look-alikes subsidiarity, mediating structures and pluralism.

In spite of this theoretical position which allows the legitimacy of governmental action at the local level, Carlson wishes to preserve a voluntaristic, market-produced form of the "family wage" and is uncomfortable with the use of state coercion. Carlson, in his warranted fears about the effect of state intervention on behalf of the family, goes back to Smith, Ricardo, and forward to sociobiology and the new home economics.

Elshtain's views on appropriate public policy are more concerned to alleviate the "real and growing poverty of women and children." The "family wage" for her would be one that would allow the husband or the wife to stay home. Skeptical of no-fault divorce laws, she would sanction many state policies to support women. Her concern for children is also seconded by Maris Vinovskis who argues that "our children may be suffering the most."

To conclude, there is much food for thought in this book for the Christian economist. One cannot agree with it all; one must agree with some of it. But if nothing else, it makes the economist aware that one must do metaphysics before one does economic analysis.