

Pluralism, Stewardship, and the Church

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The editor has forbidden extensive summarization of Claar and Forster’s book in favor of substantively engaging with “some primary arguments in the text.” This is a wise command that I shall obey, but I do need first to offer a brief disclosive note. *The Keynesian Revolution and Our Empty Economy* is a significant text that deserves engagement rather than summary. The principal arguments are persuasively developed and elegantly written, and I have little, if any, quarrel with them. But to expend somewhere between 2,000 and 3,000 laudatory words would prove, I fear, tedious for both the reader and reviewer. Rather, I push the authors a bit on some important themes they raise in Part 3 of their book. By “pushing” I do not mean taking them to task for a lack of details of what lies beyond the eschatological horizon, or the lack of a blueprint for building an economy better suited for promoting human flourishing. Instead, I suggest some areas for possible clarification, expansion, and reconsideration.

In Part 3 of their book the authors use the word “pluralism” fairly often and the currently fashionable “diversity” hardly at all. I hope this is more than a rhetorical device, for from a theological perspective it connotes an important difference. As a Christian I’m not convinced I can, or should, believe in diversity. I live in a singular creation and not in a confluence of multiple creations. As St Augustine recognized, a significant moral insight is derived from this theological conviction: out of the one, many. A literal reading of Genesis means that we all share a common set of original parents. All humans are thereby kin, however remotely, rather than unrelated strangers. Why is this important? For the task of building a social order, and how that order is assisted through economic exchange, there is the prospect of shared universal goods instead of multiple and incompatible goods. There are pluriform expressions of the good, however distorted by disordered desires these expressions might be, rather than multiple assertions of particular and irreconcilable preferences. Consequently, pluriformity makes the prospect of moral consensus a bit easier to attain. One can appeal to presumably shared or common interests to form a moral consensus through persuasion and

conversion, rather than somehow inducing or coercing the diverse many to cobble together a provisional one.

Clair and Forster contend that we need a strong sense of transcendence in order to restore economics to its rightful place as a means and not an end. When economic well-being becomes an end in its own right human flourishing is effectively diminished, for the immediate and material cannot on their own ultimately fulfill spiritual longings. Hence the hollow consumers populating our empty economy. A strong sense of the transcendent reorients us toward our proper teleological end that economic exchange serves by addressing our material needs. The result is an economy better equipped to satisfy a more expansive range of human needs.

Again, I have no quarrel with this basic contention. Without transcendence, life is rendered rather pointless, so why not engage in mindless consumption if it makes one happy. But as a Christian, I worry that transcendence alone is inadequate. After all, Christians are not theists worshipping or pondering a transcendent deity. Rather, they worship and serve a triune God who becomes incarnate in his creation. Through Jesus Christ, God becomes a human creature, an act that not only redeems creation but affirms the status of its creatures, including human creatures, *as creatures*. And to be a creature means that material well-being is not unimportant, because creatures are embodied and therefore finite. To fulfill the command to love God and neighbor requires being attentive to both the transcendent and the immediate. To be clear, transcendence is an absolute necessity in living a life that is good. But we also catch glimpses of this good by attending to the commonplace and ordinary needs of our neighbors, those mundane, boring, mind-numbing chores and activities related to shelter, sustenance, aid, and caring. And economics is well suited to enabling these everyday affairs. As Simone Weil and Iris Murdoch contend, it is through the attentiveness of the just and loving gaze that we learn the good of a neighbor. Perhaps such attentiveness can help fill in some of the hollowness of our economy.

The authors expend considerable ink developing their moral account of stewardship. It is a profitable expenditure. To oversimplify, stewardship entails leaving creation in better shape than when you entered it. This provides an antidote to the Keynesian bromide that we are all dead anyway, for it reminds us that there is always someone who comes after the dead. Economics should be future-oriented despite the

accompanying imprecision, otherwise we become fixated on immediate gratification, in turn producing an empty economy filled with vacuous consumers, both of which collapse in upon themselves because there is nothing of substance to prevent the implosion.

It is impossible to challenge the wisdom behind the aphoristic injunction to leave creation in better shape than you found it. Does anyone really want to go on record as advocating leaving things worse off for our descendants? But as appealing as this account of stewardship might be, I need some help thinking through the practical implications, for it raises the question: Better than what? Here is where I wish Claar and Forster had expended a bit more ink exploring the practical, economic practices and outcomes of such stewardship, especially in regard to unintended consequences. How do we know when something is better? How do we know that doing this is superior to doing that? For example, let us imagine that I own a farm. Should I convert my acreage to solar collectors? Will that leave my little part of creation better off than when I procured it? Presumably producing electricity with a smaller carbon footprint is good. But at the cost of higher prices for, say, corn? Is that good? And which is better: green power or cheaper food? Simply appealing to an eschatological vision will not necessarily prove very helpful in sorting through these dilemmas, for we cannot anticipate the unintended “bad” consequences or our “good” acts of stewardship. In the early 20th century, for example, the automobile (and the fossil fuel powering it) was hailed as the “green” technology of its day. Cities would now be saved from their environmental nightmare of tons of horse manure and urine. Can we know in advance if the current “green” technologies now being championed will be problem-free solutions? Are we certain that their introduction is a good act of stewardship?

Claar and Forster might reply that my worry is unfounded because no one, except God, knows the future with absolute certainty. Stewardship, like almost all other human acts, always entails uncertainty, making it more a practice of faith than one of certitude. Fair enough, but surely stewardship is more than a wild or uninformed wager. Are there not some clues that provide, at a minimum, probabilities regarding whether certain acts or policies are in line with what constitutes leaving creation in relatively better or worse shape. The ability to perceive these clues and act upon them presupposes a normative account of the teleological

and eschatological ends that stewardship is intended to serve, and the authors hint at this necessity but do not develop it in any detail.

To be clear, I am *not* taking Claar and Forster to task for what they did not write. Rather, I take their foray into stewardship as an invitation to a wider conversation on the ends and means of good stewardship. If I am correct, then I hope a number of theologians, economists, business leaders, policy wonks and the like will accept this invitation. A conversation focused on the future of human flourishing in God's good creation would be much more interesting and far more preferable to the prevalent Keynesian fixation on how the current generation can become their own gravediggers. Moreover, this is a crucial conversation to undertake, for when death instead of life becomes the dominant eschatological horizon the ensuing culture becomes little more than a collection of self-indulgent individuals desperately trying to evade the inevitable for as long as possible, all the time despising any voice challenging their nihilism masquerading as sophisticated bravado.

The most sobering criticism of the Keynesian revolution is its insatiable appetite for centralized control. Once it is established that the state should be responsible for manipulating the economy in line with objectives it has chosen, then the state effectively controls the behavior of its citizen-consumers, for manipulating the economy through a variety of policies and market regulations and interventions effectively determines what people should and should not desire. And as Augustine recognized, we are in large part the sum of our desires. In the Keynesian economy these desires, and therefore the people they shape, are not self-selected or self-accepted but imposed, most often subtly. And the resulting artifact of the state is a diminished human being, one who is less able to accept the freedom and responsibility that has been given to the world in and through Christ. Without this freedom and responsibility, the kind of alternative economy, an economy promoting human flourishing (rather than diminishment) that I think Claar and Forster envision, will elude us because many will not know what they should desire and will assume that the emptiness of contemporary life is normal.

What kind of economy might a rebirth of evangelical freedom promote? There are numerous, revealing hints that can be gleaned from Scripture and the Christian theological tradition. Christians, for instance, affirm and participate in economies of exchange – what is mine becomes

yours, and what is yours becomes mine. But they privilege economies of communication – what is yours and what is mine becomes ours. To be clear, we need economies of exchange to survive. As embodied creatures, tending to material well-being is not a trivial endeavor but a necessary task. Market-based production and consumption *per se* are not inherently evil so long as they are kept in their proper roles as means serving the end of human flourishing.

Human flourishing occurs primarily in economies of communication. These economies are not established under the auspices of the state. Rather, these economies exist predominantly in the private associations comprising civil society, in contrast to political and commercial associations. Government and commerce can and should support a robust civil society. The communicative associations of civil society also draw upon the resources of government and commerce while (ideally) not importing the coercive basis of the former or the exchange basis of the latter. Family is an example of a communicative association. A family is not governed as a republic or monarchy, nor is it run as if it were a business firm in which family gatherings are reduced to stockholder meetings (parents presumably holding the largest block of shares, albeit shrinking ones over time). Family members flourish because they communicate with one another the goods of creaturely life, especially their life together. A family predicated upon coercive politics or commercial exchange would simply be a dreadful place, not one where its individual members could flourish.

The church is another example of a communicative association. In this respect it is important to note that the Greek word, *koinonia*, which played a central role in early Christianity, can be variously translated as “communicate,” “communication,” or “community.” The church embodies a new and unique form of human association, one drawn from every race, nation, and social class; a community embodying an ontological equality in Christ while retaining a functional hierarchy to support its mission in the world. Moreover, this community adopts an economy of forgiveness and grace that does not negate or supplant an economy of exchange, but which nonetheless creates an alternative economy for its life of faith. The worship, sacraments, and discipleship of the church are meant to bind a people together in bonds of love and mutual care, and not to be misused as weapons to enforce rigid conformity (as opposed to pluriformity of belief) or as goods and services to be bought and sold.

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The purpose of this excursus into ecclesiology is to note that the authors could have lifted up the church as an example of an alternative economy, one that would challenge the insipid consumerism they decry. But they didn't. Why? I suppose a number of possible answers are on offer. It was an oversight. Or the church carries too much baggage to be of much illustrative use in a secular age. Or maybe the contemporary church is in such bad shape that it can't be used as an example. Rather than modeling an alternative economy, the body of Christ on earth simply encapsulates one more instance of an empty economy. If true, then we need first to tend to properly forming the desires of Christ's followers before the church bearing his name has much to offer to the world.

A final note to the reader: Claar and Forster have written an excellent book. I have committed the sin of envy for which I repent. If you have not already read it, do so. It will be good for both your mind and soul. ■