How Does a Catholic Approach to Social Questions Teach Us to Approach Federal Policy, Attitudinally?

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Abstract: This essay approaches this panel’s question by asking what sort of attitude toward policy planning is encouraged by Catholic methods of social analysis. Specifically, it introduces the tradition of natural law ethics and the “See, Judge, Act” method at the heart of Catholic social thought, focusing on how these both teach us that our moral judgments rely on our fallible and finite interpretation of empirical reality, and are thus always provisional. This essay proposes that these methods demand both a flexibility and an attentiveness to marginalized communities that it is simply unrealistic to look for in federal policies. However, this essay does not conclude that this should be grounds for cynicism or Christian indifference with regard to taxation and public spending proposals. Rather, it suggests that we should advocate policies that we have reason to hope will promote justice with a posture of humility, holding our plans and economic theories lightly, and with a willingness to update our prudential judgments when necessary.

Introduction

For the sake of clarity and space, in this essay, I plan to take up a restricted version of this symposium’s central question: What does a Catholic vision require of us in terms of how we approach federal policy questions, attitudinally? The tradition of Catholic social thought is well known for a set of biblically based principles that have obvious relevance for taxation and public spending, such as solidarity, subsidiarity, and the common good. In what follows, however, I turn to the methods of social analysis that lie at the heart of this tradition, and ask about their implications. Specifically, I will introduce the tradition of natural law ethics and the “See, Judge, Act” method, and ask how these train us to bring our values into conversations about taxation and......
spending, in terms of our expectations, general attitude, and approach to problem solving.

I will begin by stating some of my conclusions up front: Honestly, a Catholic framework orients us toward a holistic vision of justice that far exceeds what governments can provide, and that therefore encourages us to always keep in mind the limits of public policy as a tool for achieving Christian goals. Moreover, this vision demands of us a kind of flexibility and attentiveness to marginalized communities that it is probably unrealistic to ask of a federal government—and that it is hard to ask even of academics! But I do not say this to suggest that we ought to give up or indulge in cynicism—far from it. Limited as they may be, taxation and public spending are still powerful tools for promoting and protecting the common good, and we ought to use them as best we can. However, this tradition suggests that when we do, we hold our pet theories and plans lightly, and that we cultivate a posture of humility, and model a game willingness to continually learn when and where we ought to update our prudential judgments.

Catholic Methods of Social Analysis

Let me explain, starting with natural law. As an approach to ethics, natural law is founded on the claim that a non-zero amount of moral insight is available to humans through rational reflection on reality, which includes our own nature, and our life together in society (for a more comprehensive introduction to this tradition, see Porter, 2005 and Salzman, 2003). Put differently, this assumes that we can use reason to discern what “ought” to be, by reflecting on what already “is”—at least, roughly speaking. Our rationality is in no way perfect, of course: due to both sin and our finitude we always need to interpret and reflect on reality in the light of scripture and tradition, and in communities of faithful practice. If we do this, however, natural law holds that we can have confidence in the moral judgments that we make.

At the same time, however, it also directs us to keep in mind the extent to which our judgments rely on our interpretation of the particulars of our experience—that is, on our reading of nature, and of what “is.” The closer our moral pronouncements are to the first and most abstract precept of natural law, which is to “Do good and avoid evil,” the more certain we may be about them. (An example of a judgment close to this might be something like, “Human governments should use their powers to protect the common good.”) However, as our judgments
descend from this level to prescribe concrete courses of action (such as, say, “Governments should drug test recipients of welfare benefits”), the more they rely on our grasp of particulars, and thus are contestable. This necessarily lends a kind of provisionality to our concrete judgments: at least in theory, we ought to be open to their revision, as new empirical information prompts us to specify our principles in new ways. To be clear, this provisionality has nothing to do with relativism or morality itself changing, and everything to do with the fact that humans simply ought to retain a sense of humility in our moral reasoning, given both our creaturely finitude and our fallen status (at times, this has been termed “epistemic humility”; e.g. see Porpora 2017 and Farley, 2002).

Before turning to how this provisionality impacts our political judgments, let me briefly explain how attention to our very human interpretation of reality is also woven into what’s called the “See, Judge, Act” method.¹ This offers an approach to social description and problem solving that moves from a critical interpretation of reality—or, in Catholic parlance, of the “signs of the times”—through a spiritual and moral assessment of that reality, and toward the goal of transformative social action (for a broader but still concise introduction to this methodology, see Brigham, 2013, pp. 21–31).

The first step—of “seeing”—directs us to become students of the social systems and problems we mean to address. Above all, this requires that we (whether the “we” in question is a priest, a parish social justice committee, or a federal government) begin by listening to the experiences of the poor, the socially marginalized, and those directly and negatively affected by the problem we are considering. This method assumes that this listening is not only owed to these groups as a way to empower their agency, but that it is also critical as a matter of strategy, given that the suffering have a privileged insight into the dynamics of their own oppression. This step also directs us to consult the insights available in the disciplines that study human social life, including economics. With these in hand, it urges us to discern the root causes of the problems and issues we seek to address.

Whereas the first step identifies causation, the second moves us to attribute moral responsibility. This process of “judging” is unabashedly theological in nature, and invites us to use the language of sin to describe where both individual action and social institutions are unjust. This step also challenges us to begin an ongoing process of conversion, and to locate ourselves vis-à-vis the systems we are addressing.
Following this, the final step of “action” invites us into a collaborative process of social transformation. While the practical actions we identify in this step may occur at any level, this method holds that they must always empower and be done *with*—and not solely for, or on behalf of—those whom we intend to serve.

**These Methods Applied to Policy**

Now, what does this all add up to, in terms of a specifically Catholic approach to federal taxation and welfare spending? Let us start with the bad news: this all suggests that we cannot look for “the” single approach to taxation and welfare spending that embodies the fullness of the larger Christian vision of justice; there is much here that simply cannot be translated into the limited terms of policy, or even social theory.

Judging, for example, is an essentially spiritual process that asks us to use the language of sin, social sin, and grace to orient ourselves to the social worlds we inhabit; it is not clear how we would bring the fullness of this language into our policies, even if we wanted to.

Even more obvious is the fact that the practical goals of Christian social analysis are always going to exceed what can be done by policies. The end goal of “See, Judge, Act,” for example, is to facilitate a social transformation that is rooted in, and in turn productive of, the kind of integral personal development that God wishes for each of us. Although policies can certainly make this easier or harder, government cannot itself fully deliver this development.

Nor can it ensure the kind of local agency-taking that is one of the priorities of Catholic social thought. By definition, federal taxation and welfare planning are a top-down affair, and it’s hard to imagine how national politics could be attentive and responsive to the changing needs of each community it impacts. Voting for even the best policy possible certainly does not satisfy our mandate to act with, rather than merely for, the marginalized.

Finally, and in my view most importantly, these methods suggest that we should not become too attached to, or defensive of, any given theory or policy, once we do decide on it. Rather, we must hold lightly whatever plans we champion, and be open to revising them as we learn more about how they do or do not work in specific times and places. A Catholic approach foregrounds the fact that our concrete moral judgments always rest on our very human interpretation of reality, and that
this interpretation needs to be ongoing. It thus cautions us against presuming in advance, or from a distance, that any one given proposal will perfectly or permanently enact our values—which, of course, is a temptation ever-present in discussions of national programs. It is pretty hard to imagine any one politician (or academic!) revisiting their proposed plans every few years, let alone an entire federal agency.

So far, this all sounds like pretty bad news. Let me conclude, however, by suggesting that this should also be welcome news for those of us hoping to bring our faith into public conversations. For one thing, it frees us of the burden of always being right. Christians do not need to be demoralized by the reminder that no policy is likely to be eternally effective. Rather, we can let this be an invitation to humbly accept our finitude as reasoning agents, and to balance our love of theory with attention to the lived experiences of the poor. Both of these could be useful in moderating the self-important and fractious tone of national politics today.

Likewise, being realistic about the limited ends that even the best policies can achieve should not be cause for disappointment (and even less for cynicism!) but, rather, can free us of the burden of seeking perfection. Christians should not try to make things like tax schedules or benefits programs bear the entire weight of the Gospel’s demands, because they simply cannot—and this is not a problem. Recognizing this frees us up to have less charged and more creative conversations about what policies can do—and the truth is, they can do quite a lot. I said earlier that policies can work against our integral development and flourishing, or they can support it, and I think this is true in a number of ways. This, then, is what I think we should be aiming for: not to permanently perfect our social institutions, but to transform them when and where we can, while we can, so that they better support individual and communal flourishing—remaining as we do principled yet flexible, and always open to hearing that we need to try something different.

Note

1. Originally articulated in this form by the Belgian Cardinal Joseph Cardinal in the early 20th century and most prominently developed in liberation theology, “See, Judge, Act” has now been adopted and almost entirely metabolized within the broader field of Catholic social thought (and is the organizing principle of Pope Francis’s encyclical *Laudato Si*; for example).
References


