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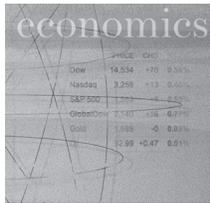
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LYNN HUNNICUTT

Calling Economists



In his pamphlet entitled, *Whether Soldiers, Too, Can Be Saved*, Luther addresses the question of calling and whether some callings are false. The cover letter to the honorable Assa von Kram notes that “...you and several

others asked me to put my opinion into writing and publish it because many soldiers are offended by their occupation itself” (Luther 93). This and a related question—what sort of work can be properly classified as a vocation?—deserve reflection to reach a deeper understanding.

Like Luther, I have reached the conclusion that economists, too, can be saved and that my vocation as a professor of economics and my students’ careers as learners (and eventual practitioners) of the discipline can be proper vocational callings from God. This essay will give a brief description of how these questions have arisen in my life and work and consider where vocation does (and where it could) intersect with the discipline of economics. I will touch on the question of defining a “proper” vocation as it relates to how one characterizes preferences in economics. However, a full comparison of vocation and preferences will have to be the subject of another essay.

In Fall 2002, I was in my fifth year as an assistant professor of economics at Utah State University. My research was proceeding at a reasonable pace and I was meeting my teaching and service obligations, so tenure (while not guaranteed) seemed likely. Yet I had the distinct and nagging sense that Utah State was not the place for me to make a career. Part of

this was for personal reasons—but the sense of mis-fit was deeper than that, and had to do with the separation I felt of faith from work. Professors at public universities must take care to separate religious faith from what is taught in the classroom, and I believe that this separation is important at any university. But in Utah, where it is impossible to live without bumping up against religious faith and its effects on everyday life, this seemingly artificial separation bothered me. If Luther was right, and every person has a vocation (a calling from God to a particular kind of work in the world) then it ought to be possible to live out this calling as part of a life of faith, instead of separate from it. I longed for a workplace where I could more overtly talk about and live my life of faith.

Not surprisingly, an opening at Pacific Lutheran University that Fall struck me as a calling. The background sense of searching I had been experiencing made the listing (in my field and at a university owned by my church) seem to be exactly what I’d been waiting for. God was calling me—what else could I do but apply?

As it turns out, I was right in ways I could not have imagined. Since arriving at Pacific Lutheran, I have been drawn into the University’s Wild Hope Center for Vocation. This work has given direction to my own sense of calling, and more importantly to my work with students, both inside and out of the classroom. It has also afforded me the opportunity to think deeply about vocation and its relationship to my role as a faculty member.

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Whether Economists, Too, Can be Saved

Luther begins his essay by noting that there is a distinction between the occupation of soldier, and the soldier (man) himself. He then notes that ultimate salvation depends not on the occupation one holds, but on the grace that comes through faith in Christ. Since acts do not save, no war (no matter how justified) will earn salvation. The remainder of Luther's essay is divided into three parts. In the first part, he argues that the occupation of soldier can be godly, for a number of reasons. He then goes on to conclude that some wars are justified and therefore godly. Finally, Luther argues that the person who holds the occupation of soldier can be godly, and that soldiers may work for pay. Interestingly, Luther sketches out a simple model of the feudal economy, in which soldiers provide protection for farmers, who (in turn) feed soldiers. He writes,

The farmers feed us and the soldiers defend us. Those who have the responsibility of defending are to receive their income and their food from those who have the responsibility of feeding, so that they will be able to defend. Those who have the responsibility of feeding are to be defended by those who have the responsibility of defending, so that they will be able to provide food. (128)

This is a rudimentary version of the circular flow diagram taught in economics courses today, with the soldiers purchasing inputs (food) from farmers, and providing an output (protection services) to those same farmers.

“Is the call to economics as a field a proper vocation?”

Now an economist is not a soldier. We are not called to take up arms against others. And yet, our policy prescriptions affect human lives and can, on occasion, lead to human suffering and even death.¹ We are seen, by some, as promoters of greed—as facilitators of acquisitiveness. Of course, self-interest, which is assumed in the standard modeling framework (Walsh 401-405), and greed are not the same, but the confusion of the two is common. And so the question arises: Can an economist, too, be saved? Is the call to economics as a field a proper vocation?

As with soldiers, one may distinguish between the person and the occupation. As Luther notes, a man sometimes “takes a work that is good in itself and makes it bad for himself by not being very concerned about serving out of obedience and duty” (129). What matters is the reason the role is undertaken. Thus, one who “seek[s] only his own profit” is not right or good, even when the work is justifiable (129). Motivation matters. Yet the question remains whether

a person may be saved even as they serve in an “unjustified” occupation (if such a thing exists).

Luther himself was a professor, and remained so even after he began the reform movement within the Catholic church. Thus, it seems clear that Luther would agree the role of professor is a proper vocational calling, as long as one does not use it to seek money or favors. But what about economics as a calling? Can one legitimately profess economics? Perhaps a distinction can be made between the field and the occupation. As a professor of economics, I am called, first and foremost, to *profess*. Economics is the discipline I am trained in, and the topic I profess most regularly, but it is through this *profession* that I serve both my students and colleagues. This is my vocation.

Self-Interest and Being-Called

Is the profession of economics, then, an unethical thing? After all, doesn't economics promote self-interest above all and help devise ways for firms and individuals to obtain more at the expense of other people (including unborn future generations), non-human creatures, and the earth? Am I not training little self-interested (greedy) creatures to build empires and exploit the world around them? You will not be surprised to learn that my answer to this question is “no”—with some qualification. For one thing, “study of” is not the same as “advocacy for.” While it is true that rational self-interest is a foundational assumption in almost all economic modeling, this is a statement of the human condition, not *necessarily* an assessment of its desirability.

Adam Smith, the founder of modern economic theory, defends the distinction between self-interest and mere greed. In both of his two major works, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759) and *The Wealth of Nations* (1776),² Smith assumes that self-interest is not in-and-of-itself morally objectionable. He writes:

We are not ready to suspect any person of being defective in selfishness. This is by no means the weak side of human nature, or the failing of which we are apt to be suspicious... Carelessness and want of economy are universally disapproved of, not...as proceeding from a want of benevolence, but from a want of the proper attention to the objects of self-interest. (*Moral Sentiments* XII.II.87)

And yet, what Smith here describes as mere human nature and neutral motivation for economic action was for Luther the root of sin. Indeed, closely related to self-interest is Luther's view that people are “curved in on themselves.” Yet notice that, for Luther, the condition of being curved in

on oneself is morally objectionable; it closes us off from God and the needy neighbor. It is the duty of the Christian to live life in service to the common good. What is this life lived in service to the common good? Luther's answer: Vocation.

Unlike Luther, then, economists take self-interest as a starting point and use the assumption to better understand human action, not its motivation. *This* is the point of departure, and also where economics ceases to consider vocation as it is understood in other disciplines. Thus, to ask a mainstream economist to consider vocation is tantamount to asking her to move into some distant and slightly uncomfortable vacation rental home, with its coffee maker that doesn't work in the way she's used to and the neighbors who speak a dialect that she has trouble understanding. It might be possible, even pleasurable, but it is not quite like home where she knows which drawer holds the apple slicer.

In short, the economist takes no position on this fundamental aspect of the human condition. Instead, she considers the world as it exists, through the lens of self-interest. Indeed, most economists would say this is not properly a part of our discipline. It is a foundational assumption that is rarely noticed, and even less commonly questioned.

In other words, if being self-interested is morally neutral, then no claims regarding who should be served can be made. The economic agent is left alone, to serve who he wills in his self-interested way. This is not to say that each person has the capacity to fulfill all of his needs, but rather that by invoking the self-interest of others, his own needs are also satisfied. Self-interest, not direct attention to the neighbor's need, becomes the root of true benevolence. As Smith writes in his later work:

But man has almost constant occasion for the help of his brethren, and it is in vain for him to expect it from their benevolence only. . . . It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker, that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest. We address ourselves, not to their humanity but to their self-love, and never talk to them of our own necessities but of their advantages. (*Wealth of Nations* 13)

Smith further notes that as long as markets are free and information is easily available, self-interested is guided, as if by an invisible hand, to improve society's general level of welfare and therefore the welfare of others. It is possible to go even further and explain altruistic behavior while remaining within the realm of self-interest, so that people are concerned with the welfare of others and the common good *due* to their self-interested nature (Andreoni; Becker). But this concern

for the welfare of others is not the same thing as vocation. Economics has no sense of responding to a call to serve the common good in the way that Luther describes vocation. Instead, because the discipline assumes self-interest, serving the common good is a result which must be shown to come from a reinterpretation of self-interest.

“This concern for the welfare of others is not the same thing as vocation. Economics has no sense of responding to a call to serve the common good in the way that Luther describes vocation.”

Now, this setting aside of moral questions regarding human nature has enabled economics to make great strides in describing the world around us. Metaphors like Smith's invisible hand or Marshall's scissors of supply and demand (Marshall V.III.7) help us understand the nature and advantages of markets as a way to organize economic activity. Advances like David Ricardo's description of gains from trade (ch. 7)—the idea that engaging in trade can make both trading partners better off—suggest that individuals and countries are better off with open economies than with closed. Cournot's use of mathematical models to describe competition between firms has enabled new discoveries and relatively accurate accounts of outcomes in many industries (ch. 4-8). In all of these cases, self-interested behavior was assumed, never questioned. Vocation simply doesn't arise in this work. Furthermore, many of these ideas would be difficult, if not impossible, to describe if the writer had to justify the use of self-interested behavior before presenting his theory. What McCloskey calls “prudence only”—at the exclusion of the other virtues—has gotten us a long way (“Bourgeois Virtue” 297-317).

Accounting for Vocation

Since the question of who should be served does not arise in mainstream economics, the discipline is left without obvious tools to address questions of vocation. This is not seen as a problem, as mainstream economics does not often see a need to consider vocation. That said, the work of two economists (among many others whose deserving work is not mentioned here) questions both the assumptions of the mainstream economic model and the desirability of the discipline's so-called neutrality on ethical issues. This work might provide a way to consider vocation while remaining within the discipline of economics, at least as broadly construed.

First, Deirdre McCloskey has written a number of works in which she questions the assumptions economists make. Starting with *The Rhetoric of Economics*, and through *The Bourgeois Virtues*, McCloskey points out that mainstream economic analysis relies on only one of the seven classical virtues, that of prudence. She notes that this limited view leaves us unable to address many questions of interest (which, I would say, includes questions of vocation), and causes some of our claims to be silly, at best, and harmful, at worst. This idea that the discipline might properly address other virtues, while still remaining recognizably economics, could provide a way to incorporate questions of vocation and the common good into economics. It could also lead us to more sensible conclusions and away from what McCloskey calls the “the unexamined rhetoric of economic quantification” and “the rhetoric of significance tests” (*Rhetoric of Economics*, ch. 7-8).

“This idea that the discipline might properly address other virtues, while still remaining recognizably economics, could provide a way to incorporate questions of vocation and the common good into economics.”

Second, George DeMartino has called for the discipline of economics to address questions of ethics in a more rigorous way. The consideration of who is harmed by the actions of economists is an ethical question that DeMartino suggests needs to be addressed. *Who should be served* is a closely related topic that will naturally arise as DeMartino’s challenge is addressed. And this question leads directly to what I define here as vocation. Economic ethics does not necessarily (or only) imply an economic understanding of vocation. It might also provide an avenue into the question of what *should* occur. “Should” is not a word that mainstream economics is well-equipped to address, although it is a necessary word for thinking about vocation.

As it stands, mainstream economics does not, and for many cannot, address vocation. Because we take self-interest as given, questions of calling and serving the common good cannot be completely or perhaps even adequately addressed. This, I believe, is a loss for the discipline. While it seems safe to conclude that economists, too, can be saved—even those who have no interest in virtues other than prudence or in questions of ethics—our discipline would be enriched by the addition of those who work outside the standard paradigm. So, then, I issue this call to action: Let us go forth and find ways to talk about vocation, even as we remain economists.

End Notes

1. An example of the way the decisions of economists affect human lives can be found in the causes of the Great Depression of the 1930s. Many economists conclude that government actions taken at the behest of economic policymakers either caused or contributed to the duration and severity of the depression. See “Symposia: The Great Depression” in *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 7:2 (Spring 1993). Among the causes considered are government monetary and fiscal policies as well as nations’ adherence to the gold standard.

2. While self-interest is generally assumed in *The Wealth of Nations*, it is one of many human characteristics addressed in Smith’s other major work, the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*. This work, then, is necessary background reading for *The Wealth of Nations*, and it is unfortunate that some consider only Smith’s second book without the context given in the first.

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