

The Logic of Religion and the Concept of Economic Order

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This paper is my homage to my dear colleague and friend Dr. Gerrit Meijer. Over the years his invariably ironic but serious comments have reinforced my conviction that no understanding of science is complete without an appreciation of its roots in religion

Abstract

We can discern several concepts of order in the human world, each of them with a venerable pedigree in the history of thought. Within the analytical framework adopted here, it is possible to identify four major types of order and to group them two by two in categories of political order and economic order. Special consideration is given to the concepts of economic order, one of which focuses on property, the other on abundance. Their differences and methodological implications for the science of economics are related to a logical analysis of moral ontology in the religious doctrines of Christianity and Gnosticism.

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Introduction

Because complete disorder yields no information, only order can be studied scientifically. Science aims to identify patterns of order, which it then formulates as 'laws'. Therefore, economic science must presuppose the existence of economic order in the human world. How are we to understand that notion of order? The first section, 'Order and disorder', is an attempt to answer that question. We shall see that we can discern two radically different conceptions of economic order. That finding suggests that underneath the various conceptualisations of what economics is about there are at least two different views on man's relation

to the world. The second section, 'The logic of religion', follows up on that suggestion by looking into ways in which major religious philosophies in the West, Christianity and Gnosticism, have accounted for that relation.

1 Order and Disorder

1.1 The Causes of Interpersonal Conflict

Order is the absence of disorder. Order in the human world is the absence of disorder in interpersonal relations. Disorder in the human world appears primarily in the form of conflict, in the breakdown of the pattern of peaceful, friendly conviviality. How is such disorder or conflict possible? There appear to be four necessary causes.¹

First, the human world is characterised by plurality: there are many physically separate human beings, each one of them capable of independent thought and action. If there were not, the human world would be free of interpersonal conflict.

Second, the human world is characterised by diversity: people have different views of the world. Quite apart from genetic differences, they have experiences, many of which are personal, private or shared only with a few others. Hence, with respect to many things, different people tend to have different needs, desires, opinions, preferences, valuations, ambitions, fears, expectations, prejudices, and understandings. They tend to pursue different goals. If humans were 'of one mind' in all respects on all things, then interpersonal conflict would not be possible, no matter how many people there are.

Third, there is the all-pervasive condition of scarcity. There is not only the scarcity of material resources—'stingy nature' does not provide immediately for the satisfaction of all needs and desires. There also is scarcity in the human world itself. No one is capable of immediately satisfying all needs and desires. There are obvious limits not only to a person's productive capacities but also to his capacities for consumption.

Scarcity implies the need to make choices. Take any particular want or desire. Several questions arise. Should the desire be satisfied at all? Should it be satisfied first? What does one give up when one tries to satisfy it here and now? The need to make choices implies recognition of opportunity costs. It implies the need for an assessment and evaluation of the effects of various possible courses of action. Scarcity, here, is intrapersonal scarcity, inextricably linked to personal existence. It does not depend on the presence of other persons. It affects even the isolated Robinson Crusoe.

No matter how much plurality and diversity there are, without intrapersonal scarcity, there can be no conflict in the human world. Without scarcity, no

choice has any costs. A world without scarcity is a world without frustration. Plurality and diversity do not matter when nothing that one might do in any way affects the condition or the possibilities of anyone.

Fourth, there also is interpersonal scarcity. It is not only the case that by doing one thing one makes it impossible or at least more difficult and costly to do other things. It is also the case that what one person does affect others. The apple that a person eats is not available for any other. The person who lives his own life is not available as a 'tool of action or life' for any other person. Yet, in a sense, apples and indeed many things, including people, are 'up for grabs'. The human world is one of more or less free common access to scarce material and human resources. Otherwise there would be no possibility of conflict, because no one would be able to touch another or to access resources that were reserved for others.

1.2 Types of Order

The four causes of conflict or disorder in the human world are individually necessary and jointly sufficient. That is the crux of the argument here. The elimination of any one of them eliminates the possibility of disorder. Consequently, there are four 'pure strategies' for establishing order, each of which has been defended by numerous thinkers. There are many more 'mixed strategies' but it obviously would take us too far to discuss them.

The elimination of plurality establishes an order of unity. How plurality might be eliminated is not our concern here. Killing all other persons is a possibility, but it is not one any sane thinker has ever proposed. Another possibility is to transform all others into unconditionally loyal servants of, or to reduce them to a condition of total dependency on, the one remaining master, ruler or sovereign. That is the preferred solution of Plato, Hobbes and many other political and social thinkers. Plato sought to establish unity primarily by means of eugenics, education and social engineering of the human condition in a relatively small polis, a military citadel. Hobbes relied on fear of direct punishment at the hand of an all-powerful sovereign.

We should not underestimate the allure of unity as an ideal of political order. Whether others still have different opinions and valuations or not, only the opinions and valuations of the ruler get translated into action. The unified order acts as a single person. It eliminates the possibility of various persons acting at cross-purposes.

The elimination of diversity establishes an order of consensus. That too is an alluring idea. It implies the existence of a deep consensus of opinion and valuation to which people can appeal whenever action needs to be taken. Consequently, when the consensus really is effective, no one does anything with any

scarce resources that another would not have done. Following Aristotle, conservatives characteristically are ardent believers in this type of solution. Order can exist only in societies and communities that have a long tradition of deep-rooted consensus because its members grew up together, lived together, intermarried, educated their children in the traditional ways, and learned to derive their personal identity from the common culture. However, not only conservatives but also constructivists advocate consensus. Thus, Rousseau argued that the formal condition of legitimacy of political society, the Social Contract, needed to be complemented with a sustained effort to transform human beings, who are animated by their particular individual wills, into citizens animated by a general communal will. That transformation must be achieved by all means of education, indoctrination, habituation and even coercion.

Because every action supposedly is an expression of the same values and opinions shared by all, consensus minimises the possibility of various persons acting at cross-purposes. The source of every action is the consensus of the community that determines its purpose.

The elimination of scarcity establishes an order of abundance. Until fairly recently, abundance was linked almost exclusively to asceticism. The central idea was that by reducing their 'demands' on scarce resources and on human cooperation, human beings could go through life effortlessly satisfying their 'true' needs from the bounty of nature. In modern times, the emphasis shifted to a belief in the infinite potential for increasing productivity to the point where all human needs and desires could be satisfied. This notion was present in Marxist philosophy and informed much of recent 'progressive' thought. In either interpretation, abundance leaves everybody free to act according to his own judgements, opinions and values, in the pursuit of his own purposes. There is no unification of the source or purpose of all actions.

The elimination of free access, finally, establishes an order of private property. From the ancient Sophists and the medieval theologians to the classical liberal tradition of Locke, Hume and Smith, this solution to the problem of order has always been a favourite of 'realist' and 'common-sense' philosophy. Realistically speaking, one cannot hope to eliminate interpersonal conflict and disorder in human affairs by a purposeful massive effort of 'socialisation' such as Plato and Rousseau envisaged. Equally unrealistic is reliance on the resilience of tradition and established social authority and solidarity, as advocated by Aristotle. As for hopes of eliminating intrapersonal scarcity, those are deemed to be absolutely vain. Only mutual respect, fortified by an adequate defence of person and property, can be the mainstay of order in the human world.

A property-based order leaves everybody free to act according to his own judgements, opinions and values in the pursuit of his own purposes, but only when the action uses no other means than those of the agent or agents that commit it, and does not invade the person or the property of anyone else.

Which of the solutions - unity, consensus, abundance, property - one pre-

fers, depends on numerous considerations. One may have doubts about the feasibility of eliminating one or another of the causes of conflict. One also may have doubts about the desirability or the wisdom of doing so. Those considerations are not our concern.

It is worth mentioning, however, that the solutions are on different planes of feasibility. Abundance obviously is the most radical and indeed the most thoroughgoing solution. Unity is somewhat less radical in that it does not tamper with scarcity. However, it must imply the suppression of diversity and free access to give the ruler full control. Consensus leaves plurality and scarcity as they are, but it must do something about free access to make sure that no one accesses scarce resources before the consensus on their use has been found. Finally, property appears to be the least demanding solution in that it does not require that anything be done about the conditions of intrapersonal scarcity, plurality and diversity.

1.3 Political and Economic Types of Order

Looking closer at the four pure types of solution, we see that unity and consensus require control, if not of human nature then of people's character, to make sure that they act on the proper set of opinions and values for the proper goal. Unity must eliminate every person with the exception of the ruler as an independent source of action. Consensus must prepare people to act independently but always on the basis of the same values and opinion. Unity and consensus, then, primarily affect the relations among human beings. Changes in the way people use scarce resources are entirely dependent upon the structure of control over human beings that is put in place.

Unity and consensus are the paradigmatic *political solutions*. In fact, they presuppose a closed society unified by a single rule or culture, within which the members can be conditioned properly. The members must be made to act according to the rules, norms, and standards that define their social position, role or function. They must be made to trade in their natural personal or 'particular' identity for a 'social' identity, if not in their hearts and souls then at least in their outward appearance and active life. In politics there are no universal norms of conduct. Every society has its peculiar set of purposes, structures of governance and environmental constraints, which supplies the rationale of its social rules. One of the most important environmental constraints, of course, is human nature. Every society must deal with 'the human factor', manage its human resources.

Note, however, that the structure of control that is required to maintain unity or consensus is and must remain a human operation, subject to all the weaknesses of human nature. Humans are always born as natural human beings, never as fully socialised members of this or that society. Therefore, while the

orders of unity and consensus seek to determine and control human character, they are always determined and controlled by human beings. That means that they are subject to change and wear and tear as there is no guarantee that the socialisation of the next generation will be adequate to safeguard the order within which previous generations were socialised.

Because of their enclosure within the boundaries of a particular society, unity and consensus at best define particular *local* orders of human affairs. Consequently, unless one envisages an effective 'world government' or 'global culture', the problem of disorder is solved only within a specific socially organised group. It persists in the relations of that group with outsiders and other societies.

Abundance and property primarily affect the relations between human persons and 'nature'. Abundance deprives nature of its stinginess. Property implies obstacles between a person and various, indeed most, scarce resources in his environment. Because of their primary attention to questions of scarcity, abundance and property appear as the paradigmatic *economic solutions* to the problem of disorder.

The ascetic order of abundance per se is not essentially dependent on social structure or socially organised action in the way that unity and consensus are. Ascetic abundance is not a political solution. Ascetics typically insist that each person learn to control his own desires and needs, not to conform to some imposed or culturally ingrained social convention or belief. Rather, he must learn to be conscious of his essential self, radically separating true from false needs, rendering obsolete the need to make choices. At the limit, when one focuses only on what is absolutely necessary, no action has any opportunity costs. While perhaps not comfortable in any material sense, such a *necessary* life is free from frustration and moral dilemmas. It is the best of all possible lives, if only because it is then the only possible one.

Widespread asceticism reduces the demands that people make on one another; it reduces the need for social organisation. Human interaction appears as pure conviviality unencumbered by material considerations or economic constraints. Occupying positions or performing roles and functions in a complex scheme of social production and co-operation is not a part of the ascetic order of abundance. The problem, of course, is that unless all or almost all people achieve the required level of self-control, the problem of disorder in the human world persists even for those who do achieve it.

Pure conviviality is also the great charm of the modern version of abundance, which implies that *every* desire can be satisfied at no cost. In this case, abundance allegedly liberates people, not from their desires but from the false illusion that anything is off limits to them. Again, the key to abundance is being conscious of one's essential self. There is scarcity because and for as long as people believe there is no escape from scarcity. The liberated self is no longer constrained by nature or social conventions. However, for this liberation to be more than a mental attitude or wishful thinking, scarcity really must disappear.

That means that disorder will remain endemic in the human world until all people have somehow liberated themselves from the illusion of scarcity. One cannot be liberated unless all are.

As a concept of order, abundance in both its forms implies a ‘transformation of human nature’. This transformation does not reflect the efficacy of social control; it reflects *true* self-consciousness. However, while abundance as a logical type of order dissolves all social and natural bonds, proponents of abundance almost invariably conclude that strict social organisation, especially of human reproduction or education, is necessary to teach or force people to become truly conscious of the illusory nature of scarcity. In short, the road to abundance typically leads through the political territory of an ascetic or a liberationist utopia that destroys the ‘old man’ and becomes the cradle of a ‘new man’.² However, utopian social engineering supposedly becomes redundant once it has achieved its purpose. It is not a part of the order of abundance.

Unlike unity and consensus, the order of property does not require an extensive or pervasive social organisation except possibly for purposes of defence against organised invasions of property. It is not a political solution. It does not need to produce a socialised man that should fit as well as possible into the slots of any particular social machine. Rather it takes humans as they are, leaving it to them to form such societies as they believe to be useful. Thus, within the order of property, social constraints are real and binding, but only on those who agree to live by them. A fortiori, and unlike the order of abundance, property does not imply a ‘transformation of human nature’. It needs no wholesale utopian engineering to be put in place. Yet it is an order of conviviality—not a social order—, albeit one that is constrained by scarcity.³ That is why only the rules of conviviality, or mutual respect for persons and their property, are universally binding not only for individuals but also for their social organisations.

1.4 From the Order of Persons to the Order of Satisfaction

From the great philosophers of Antiquity, Plato and Aristotle in particular, Western thought inherited the notion that, as far as the human world is concerned, politics is the ‘master science’.⁴ In this view, economics—that is, *catalactics*—is not particularly important because within the political order exchange is subordinated to distribution and economics proper is simply the management of a household. The rulers—whether they rule autocratically as monarchs or aristocratically as eminent citizens giving expression to the consensus of the community—are empowered to maintain order, including economic order.

Within the Christian world the pre-eminence of the political was challenged, primarily because Christian doctrines no longer saw political communities as ends in themselves, to be judged only in the light of their own ruling opinions and values. What happened to a society (be it political or not) was less

important than what happened to the individuals who constituted it. Christianity made the human person—not some abstract ‘Man’ but every real individual—the measure of all secular affairs. The Christian theologians did not focus on the relations between social positions—ruler and ruled, king and subject, representative and citizen—, but on what people do to one another. For them, the human world was one of causal agents causally interacting with one another. In their own way, they rediscovered the ideas of the Greek Sophists of the fifth century BC. The Sophists had been among the first to point out that political and social structures were not embodiments of some metaphysical absolute but transient phenomena, to be understood in the relative terms of historical experience and shifting balances of opinion and value. The theologians added the notion that absolutes come into view only when human life is contemplated as having an other-worldly destination, the Kingdom of God, which is of the world but not in it.

For the Christian, the human world is characterised by scarcity, plurality and diversity. Nevertheless, it is a world that has an order of its own, irrespective of any particular social or political organisation. Within that order, human beings must find their way. Choices have to be made, trade-offs must be considered. The order of the world is to be respected, but it is not a straightjacket. The Decalogue, which commands respect for the world’s order, lists a mere handful of proscriptions. Even those do not rule out particular goals but only ways to achieve them.

The theologians laid the groundwork for a science of human action. Economics (catallactics) emerged as a genuine science, first in the writings of the later Scholastics⁵ and then in the Classical Liberal tradition. By the nineteenth century, classical liberals were defending the view that economics, not politics, is ‘the master science’ of human affairs.

A science of economics must be developed before a science of politics can be logically formulated. Essentially, economics is the science of determining under which conditions the interests of human beings are harmonious or antagonistic. This must be known before a science of politics can be formulated to determine the proper functions of government.⁶

The classical liberals were convinced that economics could identify the objective or natural order of human affairs and therefore also patterns of action that were and patterns that were not consistent with that order. That order was the order of property - not legal property, which is determined primarily by legalisation or recognition of human acts by the ruling opinion (or the opinion of the rulers), but natural property or property as determined by natural law. It was canonised within the liberal tradition of economics by the likes of John Locke, Cantillon, Condillac,⁷ and Adam Smith, who wrote that

All systems of preference or restraint... being... completely taken away, the obvious

and simple system of natural liberty would establish itself of its own accord. Every man, as long as he does not violate the laws of justice, is left perfectly free to pursue his own interest his own way, and to bring both his industry and capital into competition with those of any other man, or order of men.⁸

The laws of justice to which Smith referred were the rules that reason - not legal or political authority - indicates for respecting the natural rights of all men, especially 'the property which every man has in his own labour, as it is the original foundation of all other property'.⁹ Locke had called reason the natural law,¹⁰ repeating Saint Thomas' definition of natural law as 'the rational creature's participation in the eternal law' or 'natural reason'.¹¹ Reason allows us to gain knowledge of the order of the world and to apprehend it as a respectable order, one that we ought to respect. That order is one of natural, physical persons, capable of thinking their own thoughts and initiating their own actions, and surviving by their skills in dealing with the scarcities of natural and human resources. It is not an order of unity, nor an order of consensus. On the contrary, plurality and diversity are among its greatest assets as they give full scope to the division of labour, specialisation and the development of complementary activities, trade and social organisation. Disorder appears in the form of the disrespect for persons or their work, in freely - that is, without their consent - accessing their bodily or active existence. It appears in attempts to destroy or incapacitate them, and in attempts to sow confusion as to who said, did or produced what, so as to misdirect praise and blame, reward and punishment, gains and losses, responsibility and liability. In short, the natural order of the human world is the order of property; being a respectable order it is its natural law (in the normative sense of the word 'law').

Thus, economics as a pure science of order in the human world was concerned with human activity only to the extent that it conformed to the laws of justice. Every other type of activity, be it criminal or political, disturbs the order or system of the world. The laws of justice apply also within a political society or nation, which is an organisation of a particular group or of people living on a particular territory with its own government. A government cannot depart from the natural law on grounds of justice unless the departure is sanctioned by the agreement of all members of society. Even so, their agreement cannot provide an excuse for disregarding the laws of justice in dealings that involve other persons.

However, economics soon began to jettison its heritage of natural law. Already J.B. Say, one of the great economists of the classical liberal tradition, turned property into a mere incentive:

Political economy recognises the right of property solely as the most powerful of all encouragements to the multiplication of wealth, and is satisfied with its actual stability, without inquiring about its origin or its safeguards.¹²

The economist's concept of property was to be cut loose from the laws of justice. Thus, it hardly mattered what sorts of things were considered legally to be property, or how property was established legally, as long the legal regime of property was stable. True, slavery, a 'detestable' form of property, should be interfered with by the government - but not because of its injustice. On the contrary, the government should interfere because it is 'expedient to limit the master's power over his slave', that interference being 'beneficial to production itself'.¹³

Not all classical liberal economists were prepared to take that road. Frédéric Bastiat, to name but one, certainly was not. Nevertheless, the notion that there was no natural order for the economists to study, only the desire to increase wealth - or, more abstractly, utility - within a 'given' set of constraints of whatever nature or origin, gradually took root in the economists' mind. The natural order became just another possible set of constraints that was no more respectable per se than any other.

Eventually, human persons became irrelevant except as metaphorical representations of whatever set of utility functions marked the cutting edge of formal economic science. The natural person - existentially an individual - was analytically divided into a Sovereign Consumer and a factor of production. Except as consumers, people were resources that, like any other type of resource, should be managed in the interest of whatever goal the economic system was supposed to achieve. Thus, the economy became a want-satisfying system to be judged by the degree in which it succeeded in satisfying wants. Those wants could be of any kind as long as they met whatever criterion of legitimacy was stipulated for the system. Instead of the classical 'harmony of interests', by the end of the nineteenth century a purely formal 'equilibrium' of want-satisfaction had come to define economic order.

No longer a natural science of the human world, economics re-invented itself as a technology of wealth- or utility-maximisation and a social science. It did not bother to lift the social veil to study the relations of real people, but instead contented itself with modelling the operational programs ('utility functions') for a whole set of social positions and roles.¹⁴ When observation and statistics proved the models wrong, that was seen as a demonstration of the need for more, or more complex, functions or else for devising policies (systems of incentives, of preference and restraint) to make people conform to the roles scripted for them. Like Ptolemy with his epicycles, economists were prepared to go to any length to keep abstract utility at the centre of the universe. Instead of laws of justice, schemes of social expediency were to guide economic action. Which schemes? In the end, that question had to be resolved politically, by leadership or consensus. Utility-mongering economists helped to restore politics as the 'master science', offering their services as indispensable *conseillers du Prince*.¹⁵

Neither natural persons nor the natural order of their co-existence and in-

teraction were theoretically significant. Only their wants or desires and the distribution of their satisfaction were relevant 'from the economic point of view'. In an absolute sense, therefore, the best economic system would be one that did not have to contend with scarcity—one that could satisfy every legitimate want. Most economists continued to deny that such a system was practically possible. Nevertheless, J.M. Keynes opined that '[t]he economic problem may be solved within one hundred years. ... [It] is not the permanent problem of the human race.'¹⁶ Indeed, if economic order is defined in terms of wants rather than persons, its fulfilment *must* be a condition of abundance.

By that process of abstraction from the real world of human action, economics arrived at the conclusion that Marx had enunciated already by the middle of the nineteenth century. Behind the tissue of fallacies and sophistries that Marx presented as his analysis of capitalism, there is only his conviction that the world of scarcity must disappear. That was what his analysis was all about, to prove that capitalism will break down because of its 'inner contradictions' and will take with it all the institutions on which it depends - institutions that so far had kept man in a state of alienation from his true nature as a universal being of infinite potential. The crisis of capitalism will reveal those institutions - especially property and marriage - as no more than illusory chains that bind men to the illusory world of scarcity. Man must not respect the so-called natural order, but free himself from it - which he can do only if every man is taught to do the same. As Marx told the tale,¹⁷ the immediate consequence of the breakdown of the so-called natural order would be 'raw communism' - his version of the Hobbesian 'natural condition of mankind' in which everybody has a right to everything. However, for Marx, that state of universal war and degradation is merely a cathartic episode. It sets the stage for a civilised communism that comes about when man learns to live with his absolute right to everything without falling into the old trap of a political or a property-based order. Beyond it looms the prospect of an as yet unimaginable 'realm of freedom', literal abundance.

The demise of 'the natural order of human persons' and the rise of 'the order of abundance' was not solely the work of economists. Indeed, their contribution was but a belated echo of a theme that had begun to be heard centuries before Hobbes had redefined individual man as an insatiable bundle of desires endowed with a natural right to everything. Hobbes, it is true, had argued that people should lay down that right at the earliest opportunity when it was safe to do so, but where had he got the notion that the satisfaction of wants and desires is the basic natural right? It was part of the modern worldview that had appeared on the scene in the Renaissance.

In his *On the Dignity of Man*, Pico della Mirandola had written the motto for the new age: 'To Man it is given to be and have whatever he wants.'¹⁸ However, who was that Man, how could all human beings be and have all they wanted? If abundance is the essence of the dignity of Man, human persons should sacrifice their 'dignity' (Hobbes' argument) or become something very

different from what they are (Marx' argument). In either case, the philosophy of natural law (the order of natural persons as they are) and justice (respect for that order) should be abandoned.¹⁹

2 The Logic of Religion

Underneath the switch in economics from a natural law of human co-existence to a utilitarian equilibration of want-satisfaction we can detect a shift in the basic religious convictions of European intellectuals from a traditional Christian to a Gnostic perspective - from the religion of God to the religion of Man. One might be inclined to think that such a shift merely gets rid of the supernatural and mysterious aspects of theism and therefore makes room for a more rational, secular approach to human life. However, there is no warrant for that conclusion.

Conceptually, the relations between an individual person and God, who essentially is another person, can provide a model for relations among human beings. Consequently, it makes no difference whether we say 'Man' or 'all individual human beings', because in relation to God every natural person fundamentally is in the same position. The Decalogue retains its significance if we substitute 'Man shall not' for 'Thou shall not'. What goes for Man goes for every human person.

However, the relations between an individual and Man, supposedly the essence or true self of that individual, cannot provide such a model. It does not provide a universal ethic that applies equally to all human persons. I cannot deal with others as I would deal with myself without denying their otherness. If my true self relates to me as it does to others then I am not truly myself. Here, 'Man' and 'all individual human beings' are not interchangeable terms. If Pico had said 'To Man but not to God it is given to be and have whatever he wants', he would have been an obvious heretic. If he had said, 'To every man it is given to be and have whatever he wants', he would have been an obvious fool. Instead, he used a formula that made the heresy seem mere foolishness and the foolishness a heretical, superstition-shattering profundity.

Starting in the Renaissance, the religion of Man became the usually unspoken premise of many such superstition-shattering profundities for an increasing number of European intellectuals.²⁰ Substituting a monism of Man for the pluralistic worldview of Christian orthodoxy, it promoted the idea that there are no real distinctions, no insuperable boundaries in the nature of things. Thus, the order of abundance, which presupposes that all boundaries have been overcome, came to represent in a literal sense 'the fullness of the world'. Inevitably, the order of property with its ubiquitous boundaries was seen as no more than an order of appearances. Its normative significance, that boundaries are to be respected, was renounced in favour of the absolute injunction that 'boundaries are there to be overcome'. Even the boundaries between the sexes were declared to be illu-

sions - mankind was promised an androgynous future.²¹

Let us now take a closer look at the logic of the religions of God and Man to determine precisely how they come to imply such radically different concepts of economic order as property and abundance.²²

2.1 God and Man

We can discern several root-meanings of the word 'god' depending on the path we choose to track its etymological provenance. Thus, we find that the root-meaning of the word 'god' is either the one invoked, the one sacrificed to²³ or else the shining one, the one who gives light.²⁴ The common name most widely used in Semitic is 'el in Hebrew, 'ilah in Arabic. Although scholarly opinions differ, the root-meaning most probably is 'the strong or mighty one'. Conceptually, then, there are two roots, one stressing human action - invoking, praying, sacrificing - and another one stressing a god's proper action - shining, giving light, leading or ruling.

According to the first concept, the existence of the god that is being invoked or sacrificed to, is merely a presupposition of human action. In a manner of speaking, the god exists only in the invocation, say, as a symbol of wisdom and moral strength and rectitude. We may call this concept 'suppositional theism'.²⁵ According to the second concept, which we may call 'existential theism', the god in question *must* exist in his own right. Here we shall consider only the latter notion, and only its monotheistic version.²⁶ The major historical theistic religions all postulate the existence of one god who is a person capable of acting on his own initiative.

Existential Monotheism

Existential monotheism implies that, from the point of view of any human being, God is quintessentially another person, whose personal life one never can know 'from the inside'. For that reason, religion is not based on knowledge of God but on belief and faith (or trust). Relations among human persons, being relations of one person to another, are analogous to the relations between Man and God. However, no human being is God.

Compared to human beings, God has superior - not necessarily infinitely superior - powers of action. He is in an inaccessible realm but has more or less free access to the human world. Consequently, whatever humans do always carries the risk of being thwarted by divine intervention. Such an intervention, if it occurs, expresses a divine judgement - it is of a moral nature, a token of divine pleasure or displeasure. Thus, a human person is always accountable to God, even when none of his fellow human beings demands his accounts.

Existential monotheism places God in a realm without plurality and diversity, where interpersonal conflict is impossible. However, it must have its own version of intrapersonal scarcity.²⁷ God is a moral agent to whom choices, having opportunity costs, make a difference. He must evaluate alternative actions, and distinguish between better and worse, good and bad alternatives. In that sense, he is like any human person. However, since he always is on his own, he cannot escape responsibility for his decisions, there being no one to whom he could shift the blame or for whose decisions he could take credit. To him, no excuses are available. He is not beyond good and bad, but he is beyond politics and exchange. He cannot be intimidated, coerced, bribed, or otherwise manipulated to serve human purposes.

Covenant or Command

Existential monotheism can take two forms. In one version the relation between Man (every human being) and God is one of relevant likeness ('equality') among otherwise independent persons. Some kind of contract or covenant between Man and God must regulate their interaction. The biblical account is firmly committed to this view.

In another version, human beings are merely distinct and separable and indeed separated parts of God. Their existence is meaningless except in so far as it is a part of his. While they are mere particular beings, God alone is whole. As parts of God, they therefore - in Aristotle's words—wholly belong to him. They have no purpose but to serve him. He is their lord and master, their commander. In this view, separation from God deprives humans of any sense of direction. They are lost.

The covenant-type of theism insists on respect for God and his works, the command-type on service to God, on doing God's work. Thus, in the former, virtue centres on justice. Sin accordingly is defined as being disrespectful of God - for example, pretending to be God, substituting a god of one's own making for the true God, taking credit for his works, or blaming him for one's own failures. For the command-type, virtue centres on submission and obedience. Disobeying God is the paradigmatic sin.

The covenant also restricts God's interventions to actions that are permissible under the agreement. Justice is not only Man's but also God's virtue. Law also binds God's actions at least in so far as they are related to human life. He may be free to give but he is not free to take. While not necessarily predictable, God's interventions are in any case according to principle. Thus, he may guard his rights under the covenant. In all other matters, he is bound to respect human choices, whether he agrees with them or not. It follows that the decision to follow or serve God, to seek and accept his advice, is a matter of free choice as well. The covenant disallows the appeal to God's authority for any act of injus-

tice by one person against another.

The command view does not have that kind of restriction on God's actions, whether committed by God himself or in his name or behalf. No human appeal against the commands of God is valid, whatever its merits in human terms might be.

Atheistic Religions

In Western civilisation, atheistic religions are predominantly variations on the Gnostic theme. Gnosticism does not define itself as a system of belief and faith but as a system of knowledge. Whereas theistic religions imply that Man is not everything, and therefore cannot know everything, Gnosticism affirms that Man is everything and that, consequently, to know oneself - or, rather, to know oneself as Man - is to know all. Another consequence is that the appearance of otherness necessarily is illusory. Only the human self, Man, is truly real. Thus, the belief in the existence of other persons or other minds is the mark of a false or undeveloped consciousness.

For the Gnostic, any 'conventional' god - for example, the biblical 'God of Moses', supposedly the maker of the material world - is merely a manifestation of an unenlightened human consciousness. Strictly speaking, sin is not a condition of Man, because Man, being 'in truth' everything, is beyond good and evil. However, particular humans can err by believing and trusting the false pretences of conventional religion. For example, the belief that 'the material world, Nature, is God's creation and therefore ought to be respected' limits and constrains human potential. So does the belief that Man is a part of material nature and therefore subject to 'laws of necessity'. Sin, therefore, is not a 'wrong' moral condition but a lack of self-understanding.

Theism, which according to Gnosticism establishes an alliance between a false god and Nature against Man, is merely a temporary expression of some particular men's false consciousness. In contrast, the Gnostic knows that Man is the true god and that only their fear of powers beyond their control prevents men from understanding that. Men, therefore, must learn to understand that neither Nature nor God has an independent existence; both are human constructs. Humans must learn to transcend their particular individual existence and identify themselves as manifestations of Man's universal self. Virtue consists precisely in seeing that all seemingly objective limitations on one's potential are self-imposed and therefore removable by a self-conscious act of will. That is not a *moral* virtue. It is daring to be one's true self, regardless of moral considerations. The true self is beyond good and evil as much as it is beyond any physical limiting condition.

2.2 Religion and Time

The dynamic aspect of religious thought is governed by the idea of separation or alienation. One logical difference of the first importance among religions hinges on their answer to the question whether that separation is final or merely a temporary condition. Thereon depends the valuation of the 'worldly affairs' of human life. Should human effort seek to make the best of this world or should it go beyond it?

Biblical Patterns

According to the biblical account, in the beginning God and Man were together in the same household where God was personally in charge of leading or ruling Man's life. In that condition, Man (Adam) could live in innocence, without the need to make choices - God took care of all his vital needs. That aspect of the original condition is captured in the symbols of the freely accessible Tree of Life and the forbidden Tree of Knowledge of Good and Bad. Indeed, a single household cannot be maintained if the authority of its ruler is questioned and subordinate members act on their own opinions and valuations. Thus, Man originally lived under a 'positive law', God's commands, without having to worry about any laws of necessity.

Eventually, however, the human children of the original household acquired knowledge of the distinction between good and evil and therefore became in that respect 'like God' - that is to say, moral subjects, capable of making their own choices, of acting and living according to their own judgements and valuations. Because the rule of like over like is necessarily unjust, the separation of Man and God - in fact, Man's eviction from the original household - became an imperative of justice.

Thus, God and Man were separated in an act of 'cosmic justice', and so were the provinces of divine and human affairs. Consequently, the absence of secure divine guidance or rule came to characterise the human condition in the face of all the obstacles of Nature, including the existence of other humans.

Orthodoxy and Linear Time

That the separation of God and Man is at the origin of human history is accepted by all biblical religions. However, its end is open to interpretation. The major Christian churches accept that 'until the end of time' the separation of God and Man will remain. Having eaten from the Tree of Knowledge, Man finds that his nature is irreversibly transformed. Contrary to the Gnostic belief, Man's material

existence is part of his essential being. Man is finite and limited. However, being like God in having a moral capacity is also a part of Man's essential being. Justice, therefore, mandates maintaining the separation of Man and God 'until the end of time'. It also mandates that their relationship continue to be ordered on the basis of mutual understanding (the covenant) rather than the original structure of rule (command) and obedience.

However, the covenant is not between two personal entities, God on the one hand and Man on the other. The separation, indeed, reveals that there is no single person corresponding to the word 'Man'. With the separation, the term 'Man' comes to stand for every individual human being. It still can be used in its generic sense but only to refer to what separates men and women as members of the human species from God or, say, animals or plants. However, as juxtaposed to any individual human being, 'Man' ceases to have any existential meaning. Released from the custody of God, every individual human being must face the slings and arrows of his own life. Thus, the same circumstances under which justice mandates that the relations between Man and God be shaped by covenant also compel human beings to accept the covenant as the only lawful form of co-existence among themselves.

Each man and woman, therefore, should assume the responsibility for life in this world - and that implies respect for other persons and the institutions of family and property, which are the essential markers of the life and work of existentially different persons. That is the message of the Ten Commandments. Just as every human person should respect the otherness and uniqueness of God, so individual men and women should respect each other's otherness and uniqueness.

Thus, the mainstream belief is that the separation is an act of individual emancipation, which necessarily implies a burden of individual responsibility. Man can still invoke or pray to God, but he can no longer count on God to make his decisions for him. God's enemies, on this view, are those who refuse to carry that burden themselves, or those who, by attempting to substitute their own rule for that of God, deny to others the emancipation to which their nature in justice entitles them.

Note, however, that this emancipation from personal rule in no way implies liberation from the constraints of particular material existence. On the contrary, the 'laws of necessity' are just that: laws of *necessity*. But they are primarily *laws*, patterns of order. While there is no hope of liberation from them, there is nothing fearsome per se about them either. Men can discover those laws and study them. They can benefit themselves by adapting their actions and behaviour to those patterns of order, thereby cutting the link between freedom and arbitrariness or randomness, and binding it to truth. Science, knowledge of the order or law of the world, is a vital asset. It informs action and helps to avoid and to correct mistakes. That goes for knowledge of the 'laws of economics' as well.

That process of learning gives rise to the development of technologies and

institutions that facilitate a more or less comfortable and orderly co-existence, which therefore are to be cherished. The mainstream or orthodox interpretation is neither revolutionary nor evolutionary. There is no need for a wholesale destruction of the 'existing order', which would amount to complete obliteration of all the received wisdom and experience. There is no grand design that relentlessly unfolds itself in historical events. Time is linear, not a loop to be closed.

Millenarianism and Circular Time

In their interpretation of the biblical religion, millenarian movements, on the other hand, refuse to believe that the separation of God and man will endure 'until the end of time'. They believe that the last millennium of historical time will see a restoration of God's Kingdom on Earth. The Millenarian belief is that the separation of Man and God - Man's banishment from paradise - and the consequent division of Mankind into a mass of separate particular individuals are a punishment for revolt against God's rule. It is not an emancipation owed to those who have reached the age of discernment, but a lesson to be taught to those that presume to be able to live a life of their own. On this interpretation, then, there is no other purpose to human life than to wait or to work for deliverance from this vale of tears. In short, the Millenarian belief implies the hope of 'a return to paradise'.

That belief obviously provides no motive for support or respect for the basic institutions of earthly life. On the contrary, it provides at best a motive for passively enduring its rigours, and possibly a motive for seeking to undermine especially those institutions that support it. God's enemies are those who have become addicted to Man's historical condition and the values on which it depends - property, wealth, money, science, social organisation, even the family.

However, the expected return to paradise and the re-unification of the human community under God's rule are basically contingent on God's action. Consequently, Millenarianism has little interest in a science of this world. It is also not interested in a law of evolution that explains why this world cannot endure or why it will transform itself into paradise regained.

The Gnostic Pattern of History

According to the original myths of Gnosticism, human existence somehow became separated from the essence of Man. Thus, historical humanity emerged in the shape of a mass of 'particular' individuals hemmed in on all sides by the constraints of material nature, including their own physical existence. Because history is the period during which the Man-God suffers the pain of alienated existence, the meaning of history can only lie in Man's eventual escape from the

sufferings of alienation and in his becoming whole again. Time, here, is circular. History terminates where it began, although on 'a higher level of self-consciousness' - indeed, a level of perfect self-knowledge.

Material existence and all the 'laws of necessity' that govern it are therefore fundamentally incompatible with the essence of Humanity, which is to be free from any necessity or constraint. That is particularly true for the 'laws of economics'. They depend on nothing else than the false consciousness of humanity as a mass of independent particular individuals, agitated by many and diverse particular interests. Once they realise that their true interests are those and only those of Man, of the species rather than the specimens, human beings will be liberated from economic law. Indeed, Gnosticism typically asserts that Man is bound to reunite existence and essence and throw off the shackles of history and nature. Then, the 'laws of necessity' will be exposed as having been no more than self-imposed illusions.

Obviously, Gnosticism does not have a positive view of historical human institutions, such as marriage and the family, property and money, and of course the established churches and other social organisations of vested interests. They are seen as institutionalised ideological constructs, the products of men's false consciousness. In that way, they are at once the pillars of the existing order of alienation and the main roadblocks on the way to liberation. To the extent that Gnosticism translates into programs of action, it works to undermine, abolish or overturn those institutions.

Antinomian Beliefs

Gnosticism and Millenarianism share a number of important characteristics. They share a negative attitude to the idea of objective 'laws of necessity' and to the basic institutions of historical life that arguably are more or less successful adaptations to those laws.

Another common theme is that of the lost community of Mankind and the hope of restoring it. Both believe in a restoration of the original condition, although their views of it are very different. The differences are of the first importance. Nevertheless, they should not mask the fundamental agreement on the irrelevance of the particular individual as a focus or source of value.

For the Gnostics, the community of Mankind is to be achieved by the absorption of the particular, historical individuals into a single species being, Man. In other words, particular individuals are to become no more than manifestations of Man's infinite being and potential. However, as far and as long as they remain particular, they too must be brought under Man's conscious control. In their physical aspects they are indeed particles of nature, which is one of the limiting conditions that make the historical individual persons into mere particulars. They are also particles of 'society', which is another alien constraint as

long as it is not made serviceable to Man. Thus, Man's liberation requires that he take control of 'society' and in doing that reduces particular human beings to cogs in the social machinery. To borrow a line from Marx, Man then can be, do and have what he wants while society takes care of production.²⁸ He will be the sovereign consumer. Society, no longer a power outside him but the organisation of all human material forces, will be his loyal servant. The 'laws of necessity', to the extent that they derive from human interaction, will cease to thwart Man's ambition. 'Economic laws', in particular, will lose their grip when Man exercises full self-control, that is, control over everything.

Millenarianism hopes to restore the community of Man under the direct rule of God—at least for those who are elected to participate in it. Then humans can again live without the need to make choices and therefore without costs and responsibilities in that 'ideal state' of blissful innocence in which somebody else, God, takes care of all their needs. Here, too, their particular individuality, which manifests itself only in choice and action, becomes irrelevant. So, of course, will the laws of economics or any laws of necessity of human interaction. They have no place inside the restored household of the New Jerusalem, where only the word of God is 'law'.

Millenarianism and Gnosticism imply that the world as we know it will not and cannot last. Therefore, its natural laws, especially the patterns of order that mark its economic or material conditions of existence have no fundamental significance. Their view of the true order of human affairs is not the order of property. It is an order of abundance that delivers human beings from the burdens of choice and its uncertainties and costs. For the Millenarians, it results from the loss of self-consciousness (the return to a state of perfect innocence), for the Gnostics, from the attainment of perfect self-consciousness.

Conclusion

'Economic order' is an ambiguous expression. It can stand for the concept of an order of property or for the concept of an order of abundance. The former concept is related to an objective, physical world of causal agents and relations, and the latter to a world of subjective want-satisfaction. The ambiguity is rooted in Western religious experience, which reflects variations of the traditional Christian religion of God and variations of the Gnostic religion of Man. In modern times, the latter have been influential particularly among Western intellectuals. From the analysis it appears that, at least in its 'orthodox' interpretations, the Christian religion of God implies the concept of economic order as an order of property. Gnosticism, on the other hand, implies the concept of an order of abundance.

Notes

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- ¹ A more detailed version of this section is being considered for publication.
- ² See H. Crombag & F. van Dun, *De Utopische verleiding* (Contact, Amsterdam, 1997).
- ³ I use ‘order of conviviality’ in the sense of the Dutch ‘samenleving’ and ‘social order’ in the sense of the Dutch ‘maatschappij’. Also see F. van Dun, ‘The lawful and the Legal’ (*Journal des Economistes et des Etudes Humaines*, 1995, VI, 4), 555-759, where the same distinction is made in terms of inclusive versus exclusive society.
- ⁴ For a stimulating discussion of the concept, see H.J. Spiro, *Politics as the Master Science* (Harper & Row, New York, 1970).
- ⁵ R. de Roover, *Business, Banking, and Economic Thought in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe: Selected Studies* (Julius Kirshner, editor; University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1974), Marjorie Grice-Hutchinson, *Early Economic Thought in Spain, 1177-1740* (George Allen & Unwin, London, 1978); Murray N. Rothbard, *An Austrian Perspective on the History of Economic Thought, vol. 1, Economics Before Adam Smith* (Edward Elgar, Hants, 1995), p.99-133.
- ⁶ F. Bastiat, *The Law* (tr. Dean Russell, Foundation for Economic Education, Irvington-on-Hudson, N.Y., 1977), p.67
- ⁷ Cantillon, *Essay on the Nature of Commerce in General* (1755; Transaction Publishers, 2001), Condillac, *Commerce and Government* (1776; Edward Elgar, Cheltenham, 1997)
- ⁸ *Wealth of Nations* (Cannan edition, Modern Library, Random House, New York, 1937), p.651
- ⁹ *Wealth of Nations*, p.121
- ¹⁰ *Second Treatise of Civil Government*, Chapter II, par.6.
- ¹¹ *Summa Theologiae*, IaIIae, Q.92, art.2
- ¹² J.B. Say, *Treatise on Political Economy* (Clement C Biddle’s 1880 American edition, 1971 reprint by Augustus M. Kelley, Publishers, based on the 4th French edition of 1820), p.127.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁴ In the early twentieth century, while the main defenders of the realist approach in economics got involved in a struggle concerning the primacy of ‘theory’ or ‘history’ in economic science (the *Methodenstreit*), formalism took over the discipline, possibly because in the rapidly expanding schools and universities knowledge of fully specified models is easier to mass-produce than an understanding of the real world.
- ¹⁵ As Yale University President A.T. Hadley remarked in his 1899 presidential address: “I believe that [the economists’] largest opportunity in the immediate future lies... with statesmen, ... in the leadership of an organized body politic.” Quoted in E.T. Silva & S.A. Slaughter, *Serving Power: The Making of the Academic Social Science Expert* (Greenwood Press, Westport, Conn., 1984), p.103.
- ¹⁶ J.M. Keynes, *Essays in Persuasion* (1931; W.W.Norton, New York, 1963), p.366. Keynes developed these views in the mid- twenties, especially in ‘The End of Laissez Faire’ (1924, published in 1926) and ‘Am I a Liberal’ (1926). See Joseph T. Salerno, *The Development of Keynes’ Economics: From Marshall to Millennialism* (Review of Austrian Economics, 1992, VI, 2), 3-64
- ¹⁷ See ‘Private Property and Communism’ in *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* (1844).
- ¹⁸ E. Garin, ed., *Giovanni Pico della Mirandola: De hominis dignitate* (and other works, Florence, 1942), p.106. B.P. Copenhaver & C.B. Schmitt, *Renaissance Philosophy* (Oxford U.P.1992), 163-184.
- ¹⁹ For an elaboration, see F. van Dun, ‘Human Dignity: Reason or Desire? Natural Rights versus Human Rights’ (*Journal of Libertarian Studies*, 2001, XV,4), 1-29.

²⁰ Already in 1699 (in Gottfried Arnold, *Unparteiische Kirchen- und Ketzerhistorie*) the claim was made that heresy (that is, Gnosticism) was the true orthodoxy and Christianity no more than an irrational superstition.

²¹ Karl Marx & Friedrich Engels, *German Ideology, part I, Feuerbach* (written in 1845-46, published 1926 in Moscow by D. Rjazanov at the Marx-Engels Archives), places sexual differences at the root of the division of labour. The theme was later picked up by the Gnostic psychoanalyst Carl Jung and others and elaborated in many Gnostic and feminist writings, e.g. June Singer, *Androgyny: The Opposites Within* (1989)

²² See Frank van Dun, 'Natural Law, Liberalism, and Christianity' (*Journal of Libertarian Studies*, 2001, XV, 3, 1-36, for references that are pertinent to the argument of this section.

²³ 'God', from Gothic root *gheu*; Sanskrit *hub* or *emu*. The Greek *theos*, if interpreted as *thes* in *thessasthai* ('to implore', 'to pray') yields the same etymological explication.

²⁴ For example, the Irish and Gaelic *dia* or the Latin *deus*, from *div*, 'to shine' or 'to give light'. See also Indo-Iranian *deva*, Sanskrit *dyaus* (gen. *divas*).

²⁵ Suppositional monotheism involves the idea of God as a fully responsible and therefore trustworthy moral person. He supposedly knows or understands the passions of men, but is not swayed by them. He is the quintessential impartial judge, advisor and friend.

²⁶ Existential polytheism projects the conditions that make conflict among human beings virtually inevitable—plurality, diversity, scarcity—into the realm of the gods. Despite their greater command of the forces of nature, the gods face the problems of politics and exchange just as much as humans do.

²⁷ Without scarcity, God would be spared the trouble of confronting the alternatives of good and bad, right or wrong, because no choice would make any difference whatsoever. No choice would have opportunity costs. God never could have a reason for doing one thing rather than another. To think of him as an acting person is to get lost in an imbroglio of paradox. On this, see for example, Ludwig Mises, *Human Action* (Scholar's Edition, Ludwig von Mises Institute, Auburn, Alabama, 1998), p.69. Thus, such a god cannot be described because he essentially is beyond all descriptive categories—which is precisely how Gnosticism defines its true god, that is, true Man. (See below in the text.)

²⁸ Karl Marx & Friedrich Engels, *German Ideology, part I, Feuerbach, op.cit.*.