

Does the Dismal Science Need to be Redeemed?

The Relationship between Theology and Economics

November 22, 2016

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Executive Summary

Economics' reputation as the "dismal science" characterizes the field as somehow antithetical to the world we want to create, and thus in need of redemption. However, although many place science and religion on two ends of a mutually exclusive spectrum, in fact, they both strive for the same goal: to search for truth. Pope Benedict XVI argues that because both search for truth, not only are they in accordance with the essential Christian spirit, but they are necessary to act in accord with God's nature. However, by its very nature, science ignores the question of God, which means that it can never fully describe reality. In some way, science and religion are incompatible, because they ask vastly different questions. However, only when we combine the insights of both realms can we gain a complete understanding of our world and ourselves.

Thus, we are much better off when vastly different fields, such as economics and theology, come together, because both have something unique to offer. Both economics and theology have a similar description of the idea that different people have different skill sets, and we are better off as a society and community when individuals do what they are best at. However, in order to take advantage of this specialization, we need trade, which is precisely what the interaction between theology and economics lacks.

In his series of lectures known as *The Idea of a University*, John Henry Newman argues for precisely this sort of trade. Newman argues that different fields ask different questions and use different methodologies to answer their questions. Because of this, each individual field provides a particular perspective on the world, and we can only fully understand the world when we look at all of these fields together.

Thus, economics itself may not need redemption, but we do need to understand that economics itself does not provide a comprehensive worldview. The field describes many phenomena well, such as how wealth is distributed and goods move in a society, but it is left blind to other equally important realities, such as the question of God. This shortcoming does not damn the field, rather it means that we cannot gain a full understanding of our world through the lens of economics. The conversation between economics and theology is so difficult because the fields are so different; however, that is precisely what makes this conversation valuable. Theology answers questions that economics inherently cannot, and vice versa. Thus, when both fields trade, and share their insights with each other, both sides are better off because they have a more comprehensive understanding of the world.

Introduction

Economics gained its reputation as the “dismal science” from an 1849 essay by Thomas Carlyle entitled “Occasional Discourse on the Negro Question,” which discussed the issue of African slavery and emancipation. Carlyle coined the term dismal science, and wed it to the field we now call economics, because its proponents declared “that negro and white are unrelated, loose from one another, on a footing of perfect equality,” and as such, opposed the slave trade (Carlyle, 1849, 536). Given that the field’s notoriety began with the notion that all men are created equal, we ought to reconsider a certain characterization of field as needing redemption. Although economics and theology are commonly seen as antithetical, Carlyle’s portrayal of the science suggests that the two fields have more in common than we might think, beginning with the equality of all. Although the two fields appear incompatible because of their vastly different research questions and methodology, the division of labor combined with trade allows these different methodologies and questions to expand human knowledge in a way we would not be able to otherwise. John Henry Newman’s *Idea of a University* provides a framework for a relationship between these two vastly different fields, in the form of interdisciplinary dialogue.

PROBLEM: Economics can be used in quite moral ways, but it is commonly treated as amoral if not immoral

The Compatibility of Science and Religion

As a social science economics functions in a fundamentally different way than theology. Unfortunately, the relationship between religion and science has become so marred

that many deem the two incompatible. However, we must remember that the truly regrettable incident with Galileo took place over five hundred years ago, and while the United States court system was evaluating the Scopes Monkey Trial, the French Jesuit Teilhard de Chardin was working to synthesize evolution with Christian theology. Despite our preconceptions, the compatibility of religion and science is not only possible, but necessary.

In 2006, Pope Benedict XVI gave a lecture at the University of Regensburg on the relationship between science and religion. His thesis is clear: “not to act in accordance with reason is contrary to God’s nature” (Benedict XVI, 2006). Pope Benedict XVI claims that because scientific inquiry desires to conform itself to the truth, “it embodies an attitude which belongs to the essential decisions of the Christian spirit” (Benedict XVI, 2006). Thus, the scientific method of inquiry and its results are not only valid, but necessary in order to act in accordance with God.

However, while science is exceptionally important, it is not enough to form a comprehensive worldview. Pope Benedict XVI argues that science “excludes the question of God” (Benedict XVI 2006) by its very nature. Theology can never be science, precisely because God can never be made a variable in a regression. However, Pope Benedict XVI cautions against relegating theology to mere unscientific method of history. He further warns against limiting reason to scientific inquiry; science is essential to act with God’s nature, but not sufficient.

This last point can help us to understand why theology and economics seems so incompatible, because in a way they are. As Pope Benedict XVI remarks, the scientific (which includes the economic) inquiry

inherently “excludes the question of God.” Scientific and religious conversations so often talk past each other, precisely because they ask fundamentally different questions. Economics tries to describe the way goods and wealth moves in a society and attempts to learn how to do so most efficiently in order to maximize well-being, while theology is concerned with God’s revelation to humanity and how best to implement it in this life. Both conversations are important, but they are different enough that a new field, theonomics, is not possible.

Pope Benedict’s words also show us why theology is so important, because science cannot answer all of our questions. The pontiff also cautions that while science brings new possibilities to humanity, it also causes some dangers, which will only be overcome “if reason and faith come together” (Benedict XVI 2006). In his encyclical *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis similarly affirms that “the Church has no wish to hold back the marvelous progress of science,” and writes that properly done, faith does not contradict scientific discoveries (Francis 2013, §246). However, the pontiff cautions against operating from an ideology, or a “scientific opinion” which does not hold the same validity. Pope Francis explains, “the problem is not with reason itself,

but with the promotion of a particular ideology which blocks the path to authentic, serene, and productive dialogue” (§246). This critique provides another reason different fields ought to communicate. When we operate solely within ourselves, we risk moving into a fantasy world where we perpetuate our ideologies instead of describing reality. Interactions between different fields help to keep each other in check, and remind all of us that our particular slant on reality is not comprehensive.

The Division of Labor and the Body of Christ

Although economics and theology appear to be incompatible, both fields articulate the idea that we benefit from our differences. Economics and theology describe a similar concept using the division of labor and Body of Christ respectively that allows us to take advantage of their ways of thinking. Economics advocates for a division of labor in order to benefit from specialization. The basic theory holds that when we specialize and trade, we produce more as a collective than if we were to each produce individually what we were to consume. Adam Smith, the father of economics, proposes three benefits of specialization. The first is the time saved switching from tasks, like putting down a hammer to pick up the screwdriver. The second is an increase in dexterity, which is essentially an increase in skill as one continually uses said hammer. The third is innovation, so as one works on their specialized task, they come up with new ideas on how to do so differently and more efficiently. For our purposes, the last two benefits are particularly relevant. The skills required for a high level of academic inquiry make it impossible to not specialize. That is, the math and language skills economics and

CLAIM 1: Science and religion (economics and theology) are often seen as incompatible, but they are both essential to the human and Christian spirit

- ***Scientific inquiry is essential to act in accordance with God’s nature***
- ***Science cannot describe everything***
- ***Both theology and economics are needed for a complete understanding***

theology require respectively prohibit engagement in both at any advanced level. Secondly, immersing oneself in a given field makes it much more likely that we will innovate and thus advance the understanding of a particular subject.

St. Paul in his first letter to the Corinthians describes the same concept in his famous analogy comparing the community of Jesus followers (the Body of Christ) to a physical body. He writes, "Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many... And if the ear would say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be?" (1 Cor 12:14-21). This metaphor gives us another way to think about the relationship between theology and economics. For Paul, different people have different gifts to give the community, such as wisdom, healing, or knowledge. Also some have different roles, such as teachers and prophets. His language emphasizes that different people have different skills, and are thus suited to different tasks (the economic term is a comparative advantage). The division of labor and the body of Christ use different language to describe the same reality: different people are better suited to different tasks, and we tend to be better off when we specialize in what we are good at. In this way, theology and economics are not so much incompatible, but instead one is a hand and another an ear. Both are essential to a fully functioning community, but they are not interchangeable.

Thus, both fields are useful precisely because they are different, not in spite of it. Both methods of inquiry capture something the other misses. For example, from its inception Christianity has had an emphasis on caring for the least well of in a society. Recently, the goal has shifted from charity to systematic

change; that is, from feeding the hungry within our city to ensuring that the poor in Latin America can feed themselves. However, efforts towards systematic change cannot be judged by their intentions. It is not enough that a particular law, program, or regulation intends to help the poor and marginalized, but it actually has to do so. With its data sets and regressions, economics has the tools to analyze the effects of such efforts. However, scientific fields only have the tools to address the quantifiable, and as Jordan Ballor (Ballor 2014, 123) says, "Man does not live by GDP per capita alone." While economic growth is incredibly useful and certainly improves human well-being, it is not valuable for its own sake. Religious thought helps us to ground our thought on economic development in the human person, so the principle goal is human flourishing and not the efficiency of a non-human process.

CLAIM 2: The concept of division of labor in economics helps define the proper sphere of the discipline, but it is not unlike the Body of Christ in the new testament

- ***Division of Labor***
- ***Body of Christ***
- ***Both care about poverty; each brings practical logistics and a focus on the person***

Trade and *The Idea of the University*

Although the division of labor and body of Christ articulate the benefits of specialization, without any interaction, these differences can only be a detriment. So then how exactly are a scientific discipline like economics and a non-empirical field like theology to interact? Using Blessed Cardinal John Henry Newman's proposal in his lectures entitled *The Idea of a University*, the most efficient and

accurate method consists of trade in the form of interdisciplinary dialogue which takes advantage of the differences in methodology and overcomes some of the limits inherent to each field (Newman 1996).

CLAIM 3: We need trade in order to benefit from the differences in theology and economics

- *Without trade, the division of labor is useless*
- *Trade as interdisciplinary dialogue*

Fortunately, the university system has already established a division of labor between academic fields. This way, we are taking advantage of specialization, so the economists do not have to learn Greek and theologians can avoid game theory. However, without trade, the division of labor becomes useless, because an economy will produce engines, brakes, and wheels, but no cars. Currently, economists and theologians seem perfectly content not to talk to each other, and the lack of trade renders the division of labor useless. Furthermore, without interdisciplinary dialogue, we risk individual fields becoming incompatible with each other. In the worst case scenario, each field writes in its own language and is incomprehensible anyone outside their department. We would be much better off limiting the jargon, at least in the less technical literature, to different dialects, so that intelligent Ph.Ds can understand each other.

Instead of trading with each other in order to more completely understand the world, fields expand their boundaries into what traditionally belongs to other fields. But just as only eating one food is not enough to support the human body, consuming one way of thinking is not enough to provide an adequate worldview. As is consistent with Benedict XVI's thought, Blessed Cardinal John Henry Newman explains that each field produces a portion of

the truth. Thus, the true human understanding of a subject can only be seen when all fields are seen together. Newman give the example of a man, who we can view in a variety of ways, in relation to his physical nature, or psyche, or in his relation to his family or community, or in relation to God. Each of these relationships is the subject of a particular science (43). Newman writes, "When we think of him in all these relations together, or as the subject at once of all the sciences I have named, then we may be said to reach unto and rest in the idea of man as an object or eternal fact" (43). In this way psychology, anthropology, biology, economics, and physics all have a particular perspective through which they understand a particular man, and we can only fully understand this person if we see him through all of these perspectives.

If we need trade to create a full understanding of the world and people around us, then what should this trade look like? The terms of trade must respect the integrity of each field, as both are essential to accurately describe the human condition. Thus, fields cannot co-opt or colonize each other, because such an effort would negate the benefits of each others' differences. For example, some have used Pope Francis' recent comments on economics as an excuse for theology to co-opt economics. However, in his discussion of the environmental crisis in the encyclical, *Laudato Si*, Pope Francis (Francis 2014) writes, "We urgently need a humanism capable of bringing together the different fields of knowledge, including economics, in the service of a more integral and integrating vision." The pope instead seems to argue for precisely this type of trade, in his case in order to address the ecological crisis. For fields to co-opt each other would defeat the whole purpose of trade and leave us with an inferior set of knowledge.

The main goal of this trade is to begin a conversation between economists and theologians, which is certainly a difficult task because both fields think so differently. Not everyone will always agree, but that is hardly a reason to ignore each other as we have been. However, our disagreement is no reason to avoid such a conversation as we have done, especially because there is so much we do have in common.

Newman gives the example of a group of men from various religious denominations who can join together to distribute a religious tract or a protestant bible (27-28). This specific example may sound a touch 19th century to our ears, but its overall message still stands. In order to distribute the bible, each man has to lay aside his individual, ultimately small but still important, differences in order to band together. If someone were to slip in a pamphlet about the primacy of good works into the bible, a topic which has been known to wreak chaos, the others would rightfully complain. Newman explains that he gives this example to show that when a group of people come together to support knowledge, they must necessarily keep many of their opinions to themselves. However, they cannot compromise of the knowledge itself (27-28). The point here is that we are never going to agree on everything, but some things are more important than others. If groups of people, say economists and theologians, come together, they will almost certainly disagree on various,

important points. But some conversations are more important than our disagreements, and as Newman notes, we can put them aside for a greater purpose.

Conclusion

Thus, it is not so much that economics needs to be redeemed or its soul saved by religion, rather, that each field, needs to understand its own limits. Both methods of inquiry are valid, and both offer a particular insight the other lacks. We can only gain a full and balanced understanding of human knowledge by combining the two fields, through interdisciplinary dialogue. Although this argument is particularly tailored to the relationship between theology and economics, it holds true for other fields as well. Newman intended his argument for interdisciplinary dialogue to apply to the whole academy. The conversation between economics and religion is particularly difficult because they operate in fundamentally different ways, but both have something to offer the other. Allowing ourselves to be influenced by the other allows for a more integral, balanced, and realistic vision.

CONCLUSION: How should this trade look? Interdisciplinary dialogue; allowing both fields to be truly themselves but informed by the other

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