



Caritas, Social Friendship, and the End of Poverty

Science and Ethics of Happiness



There are two great paradoxes of modern economic life. First, the world is richer than ever, yet poverty persists in the midst of plenty. Second, the world has vast technical knowledge, yet technology has pushed humanity to the brink of self-destruction. With these vast storehouses of wealth and technology, our greatest need is neither more wealth nor more technology, but a global ethics for our time, and specifically the moral wisdom (phronesis) to use our wealth and technology for the common good.

The paradoxes of modern economic life result, in no small part, from a paradox in the history of ethics. In ancient time, the lawgivers, prophets, and philosophers commanded individuals and the communities to attend to the material needs of the poor. Though the community faced chronic scarcity, it was enjoined to share any meagre surplus with the poor. This is the Church's powerful idea of the Universal Destination of Goods: God's creation is for all of God's children, not only the rich and powerful.

Yet in our day of vast wealth, when it would be relatively straightforward to end poverty, modern economic ethics is most silent or even disparaging about the poor. The poor are mostly invisible and treated as disposable. When the poor are made visible, they are too often portrayed as an unworthy burden on the public dole. The late US President Ronald Reagan, for example, used to rail against "welfare queens," who he claimed had faked their poverty to live off of the public purse. Of course, such actual persons were never identified, but the charges stuck and U.S. welfare payments for the poor were sharply curtailed in the 1990s.

Today's Anglo-American economic ethics emerged in the service of the new world capitalist economy that took shape from the 16th century onward. As the world economy expanded, and as industrial Britain surged to the forefront of the new international economy, British intellectuals gave ethical support to the British quest for wealth and capital accumulation. Because Britain was economically and geopolitically ascendant, the new ethics had an enormous global influence.

By the end of the 18th century, British philosophers taught that the emerging British-led world market economy was of Providential design. The global marketplace was guided by an Invisible Hand (a term famously popularized but not invented by Adam Smith) that directed resources to their best use. John Locke recast private property as a natural right beyond the reach of the state. Indeed, for Locke and his British and American followers, the defining role of the state became the protection of private property, and the legitimacy of the state only extended to the protection of property.

American libertarianism has taken Locke's philosophy even further, placing the protection of private property above all other social values. In this libertarianism, the concept of justice is reconceived as the freedom to accumulate and dispose of wealth on a voluntary basis, without state intervention or any other legal responsibility to others. In Reaganesque discourse, the poor are widely regarded as unworthy and reprobate, in short, a threat to the community.

In one of her popular novels, the libertarian novelist, Ayn Rand, writes that to help a man "on the ground of his suffering as such, to accept his faults, his need, as a claim – is to accept the mortgage of a zero on your values ... Be it only a penny you will miss or a kindly smile he has not earned, a tribute to a zero is treason to life and to all those who struggle to maintain it. It is of such pennies and smiles that the desolation of your world was made." (*Atlas Shrugged*). This mean-spirited philosophy remains popular in America.

The Anglo-American ethics of wealth accumulation marks a radical and dangerous break with ancient philosophical and religious ethics. The ancients Greeks taught that the insatiable quest for wealth leads to personal unhappiness and to social and political strife. The exaggerated quest for wealth causes an individual to lose self-control, a condition Aristotle termed *akratia*. Self-control (*enkratia*), and the moral virtue of temperance (*sophrosyne*), are necessary virtues to achieve happiness (*eudaimonia*).

In *The Politics*, Aristotle distinguished between natural wealth – needed to meet basic needs such as food, drink, and shelter – and artificial wealth to accumulate possessions beyond basic needs. While the demand for natural wealth is limited, because desires are satiated when basic needs are fulfilled, the demand for artificial wealth can become insatiable, driven by a disordered concupiscence (*Polit.*, I, 3, n. 19, 1258 a 1).

For St. Thomas Aquinas, following Aristotle, the "immoderate desire for having anything whatever"

is called cupidity (S. Th., II-II, 118, 2), which he also defines as “inordinate desire for wealth” (In I Tim., 6, 10, Torino 1953, p. 259, n° 251). This leads to profit-making as an end in itself, which is the immoderate greed for gain “which knows no limit and tends to infinity (quae terminum nescit sed in infinitum tendit)” (S. Th., II-II, 77, 4). This infinite desire of the finite is what Hegel calls “the spurious infinite” (das Schlecht-Unendliche, see GW 21, 127).

The Greeks knew well that extreme inequalities of wealth also lead to social strife. When 6th century BC Athens was beset by dangerous class conflict, Solon redistributed land and wealth to restore social stability. In *The Laws*, Plato argued for a maximum ratio of the largest to the smallest landholdings of no more than four to one. In *The Politics*, Aristotle argued that political stability must be built on a large middle class. In Periclean Athens, the rich were expected to contribute to the public good through the institution of liturgy, wherein the richest citizens were designated by the magistrates to use their wealth to fund public investments.

Ancient Jewish law recognized the rights of the poor in several crucial ways. The Sabbath was for all persons, including slaves and bonded laborers. The edges and gleanings of the field were to be left for the poor (Leviticus 23:22). Debts were to be cancelled and slaves manumitted in Jubilee years. In the words of Isaiah, “Learn to do good; Seek justice, Reprove the ruthless, Defend the orphan, Plead for the widow.” (1:17).

In the Beatitudes, Jesus profoundly extends these social ethics by locating happiness itself in the poverty of the spirit: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” (Matthew 5:3). Those who are poor in spirit recognize that spiritual goods – especially God – are eternal while material goods are perishable. Jesus is not saying that material poverty is blessed as such; what is blessed is the poverty that, for instance, monks choose for the kingdom of God, according to Luke 6:20: “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God”. Jesus condemns destitution (misery) and repeatedly prioritizes the need to succor the poor with food, shelter, clothing and other basic needs. (“Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.” Matthew 25). What Jesus is saying is that the spirit of poverty is blessed. The spirit of poverty promotes the Greek virtues of justice (*dikaiosyne*), temperance (*sophrosyne*), and moral wisdom (*phronesis*), through the Christian virtue of charity (*caritas*), which is deemed by St. Thomas Aquinas to be “the most excellent of the virtues.” Aquinas teaches that “Charity is the form, mother, motor and root of all virtue” (*De virt.*, q. 2, a. 3 c.) so that “whoever has charity must also have all the other virtues” (*De virt.*, q. 5, a. 2 c.).

Caritas is “a certain friendship between man and God founded on the communication of eternal happiness”, which promotes a friendship, love (*agape*) for God’s children, that is, for each other (S. Th., II-II, q. 24, a. 2, c.). The “poor in spirit” subordinate all goods, both material and artificial (market and non-market), to the love of other persons, the common good and the planet’s good. Through *caritas* they find the personal resolve to help the poor and to love their neighbor as they love themselves, as well to safeguard nature. Jesus is teaching us that the fight to end poverty

starts with the love of God and the love of others, and from that Caritas arise and perfect the virtues of justice, temperance, moral wisdom and the care of the Planet.

Our challenge in the 21st century is to bolster the love of each other in order to build an ethics of peace, tolerance, social justice, and sustainable development, including the end of extreme poverty (SDG 1), ill- health and global warming. In the encyclical Fratelli Tutti, Pope Francis offers profound pastoral wisdom on how we can achieve a world of Caritas, how we can move from a world in which the poor are invisible and disposable to a world in which each person is accorded their birthright of dignity and rights. (“All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.” Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article I).

The Science and Ethics of Happiness (SEH) is striving towards a new global ethics for the 21st century that builds on ancient wisdom both East and West, on the Beatitudes, and on modern science and the world’s aspirations (including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Sustainable Development Goals, and the Paris Agreement for climate safety). The SEH meeting on October 3-4 at the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences will consider the ethical, institutional, and economic challenges of ending poverty in the service of universal eudaimonia (beatitudo). Key questions that will be considered include:

1. Who are the poor in spirit?
2. What are the causes of poverty?
3. What are the psychosocial consequences of poverty?
4. What are the economic rights of the poor (e.g., Universal Declaration of Human Rights)?
5. What are our ethical and/or religious obligations to the poor?
6. What are effective modes of civil society engagement in defense of the poor?
7. What are the possibilities for income redistribution and social protection?
8. What kind of happiness and consequent spiritual and temporal goods come to those who live in poverty of spirit according to the Beatitudes?