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Engaging Capitalism with Wesleyan Theology

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“Engaging Capitalism with Wesleyan Theology”

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A Wesleyan Voice in the Capitalist Jungle

As the world continues to rapidly press toward the further integration of the global economy, the stakes get higher and higher, as evidenced by recent events in the United States and elsewhere. As a result, it is becoming increasingly prudent to focus on responsible economic policy and practice. Interestingly, although a variety of theological traditions have historically engaged with the theoretical foundations of capitalism, the Wesleyan tradition has been predominantly absent from these discussions.¹ Granted, a number of Wesleyans have addressed John Wesley’s views on money (e.g., stewardship, materialism, helping the poor, etc.), but there are scarcely any attempts to engage Wesleyan thought with the theoretical underpinnings of capitalism.²

One of the reasons for this absence could be the practical orientation of Protestant evangelical thought, both historically and in our present age. Diarmaid MacCulloch has concluded that for Christians who were engaged in social activism during Wesley’s time,

¹ In the early 1990’s, the Association of Christian Economists (ACE) in the United States published in its bi-annual journal, *Faith and Economics*, a series of survey articles on the implication of various theological traditions, both Protestant and Catholic, for economic thought. None of these articles was written from a Wesleyan standpoint. An examination of the table of contents for the just-published *Oxford Handbook of Christianity and Economics* reveals that Part B of this volume, entitled “Contemporary Theological Economics,” contains chapters on just about every Christian theological tradition except for the Wesleyan perspective.

² An example of the former is the recent volume, *How God Makes the World a Better Place: A Wesleyan Primer on Faith, Work, and Economic Transformation*, by David Wright, with contributions by Rebecca Whitesel, Christin Taylor, Patrick Eby, and Keith Reeves, with a foreword by Jo Anne Lyon (Grand Rapids: Christian’s Library Press, 2012).

“it was politically safer to concentrate on voluntary organizations with specific practical focuses on obvious needs.”³ More recently, John G. Stackhouse, Jr., has observed “that North American evangelicals have generally tended to treat economic systems as if they were part of the climate or topography: realities simply to be dealt with as given, not as human constructs thus amenable to human revision.”⁴ Within the context of the Wesleyan tradition, this trend might very well have been reinforced by the practical inclination of John Wesley’s own ideas on economic matters. Manfred Marquardt has noted that Wesley had a “slight technical knowledge of economics” and that his “insight into the laws of economics and commerce” was limited in nature.⁵ This point has been supported by J. Wesley Bready, who stated that “Wesley never was a theorist; his economic principles were forged by the action of his religious faith, on the anvil of social experience.”⁶

What about those theological traditions that have been historically associated with some relatively well-defined perspectives on economic life? Bruce Webb has advanced the proposition that some of the alternative theological perspectives which can be found

³ Diarmuid MacCulloch, *Christianity: The First Three Thousand Years* (New York: Viking, 2009), 748.

⁴ John G. Stackhouse, Jr., *Evangelical Landscapes: Facing Critical Issues of the Day* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 78.

⁵ Manfred Marquardt, *John Wesley’s Social Ethics: Praxis and Principles* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992), 47–8.

⁶ J. Wesley Bready, *England: Before and After Wesley; The Evangelical Revival and Social Reform* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, Ltd., 1938), 250. Robert Kingdon agreed with these arguments, writing that “Wesley’s economic thought combined traditional Christian moralism with a rather limited awareness of the economic problems of his day and of some of the possible ways the British government could deal with them.” At the same time, Kingdon also asserted that Wesley’s economic outlook was significantly influenced by the work of Josiah Tucker, a clergyman and economist whose views preceded those of Adam Smith. “In copying Tucker, Wesley adopted an approach to economics that was much more analytical, much more secular, and in the long run, much more fruitful than the one he had held heretofore.” Robert Kingdon, “Laissez-Faire or Government Control: A Problem for John Wesley.” *Church History*, 26:4 (December 1957), 350–1.

among Christian economists “affect their views on how Christianity and economics ought to relate to each other.”⁷ He supported this contention by citing the following examples from the Protestant wing of the “Christianity and economics” literature:

- 1) The Anabaptist approach. Jim Halteman has written that “the key factor that separates Anabaptist thinking from mainstream protestant thought” is “a two-kingdom view of the Christian life.”⁸ In this approach, the community of faith is viewed as the primary venue for modeling Biblical values to the world, including the economic dimensions of life, as a way of providing a partial glimpse, at the present time, of the Kingdom of God that will be fully revealed in the fullness of time. By contrast, considerably less emphasis is placed on effects to influence and reform existing economic institutions and policies, in part because the “two-kingdom” paradigm stresses that all temporal structures outside the church are inherently flawed. Halteman went on to stress that Anabaptists do find both positive and negative elements in market capitalism. On the positive side, market-oriented societies tend to be “more tolerant of Christian practice than most alternative systems.” They also out-perform alternative models with respect to productivity and efficiency. On the negative side, Halteman identified problems such as the exaltation of individual freedom and interests at the expense of communal obligations and social

⁷ Bruce G. Webb, “Whose Theology? Which Economics?” *Faith and Economics*, 23 (Spring, 1994), 46.

⁸ Jim Halteman, “An Anabaptist Approach to Economic Systems.” *Faith and Economics*, 16 (Fall, 1990), 8.

needs, as well as “the way in which high productivity can foster excess and self-sufficiency.”⁹

- 2) The Reformed approach, both in its “Kuyperian” (referring to Abraham Kuyper, the Dutch theologian, statesman, and public intellectual of the late 19th century and early 20th century) and “Christian Reconstructionist” manifestations.¹⁰ Both of these orientations share an emphasis, as Webb describes it, on “bringing all economic institutions, practices, relationships, and indeed theories under the lordship of Jesus Christ.”¹¹ This perspective stands in sharp contrast to the Anabaptist focus on modeling “kingdom values” within the church. However, Kuyperians and Christian Reconstructionists arrive at evaluations of market capitalism that are quite different from one another, despite their common theological starting point. Roland Hoksbergen has concluded that Kuyperian analysis of the existing institutions of market capitalism, as well as the neoclassical framework of

⁹ Ibid., 10. Professor Halteman also authored the chapter on “Anabaptist Approaches to Economics” in the aforementioned, and recently released, *Oxford Handbook on Christianity and Economics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

¹⁰ Some readers might question the inclusion of Christian Reconstructionist ideas in this review, agreeing with the conclusion of Michelle Goldberg that this theological perspective “is controversial even among Christian conservatives.” However, the authors have taken the position, similar to Goldberg’s, that some of the political thinking which stems from Reconstructionist theology “has been hugely influential in the broader evangelical movement.” *Kingdom Coming: The Rise of Christian Nationalism* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2006), 13. There is also a distinct chapter, authored by Edd Noell entitled, “Theonomy and Economic Institutions,” in the *Oxford Handbook of Christianity and Economics*. A more moderate expression of an economically “conservative” interpretation of Reformed theology has been provided by David W. Hall and Matthew D. Burton in their “Five Points of Economic Calvinism”: 1) The inequality of wealth is an enduring dynamic and must be accepted; 2) God made us to be creators, developers, and entrepreneurs; 3) Because of sin, accountability and incentives will always be needed; 4) Personal freedom (or non-interference from outside hierarchies) is necessary for business to thrive; and 5) Profit is commended in order to provide more for others. *Calvin and Commerce: The Transforming Power of Calvinism in Market Economies* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2009), 214–5.

¹¹ Webb, 48.

economic theory, has found them both to be seriously wanting, ironically for many of the same reasons that are emphasized by Anabaptist commentators.¹² In fact, the Kuyparian critique of market forces, in some respects, seems to be deeper and more intense than the Anabaptist criticisms, perhaps, in part, due to the higher level of expectations that Reformed Christians might have for the existing institutions of contemporary society. By contrast, Reconstructionist thinkers are much more supportive of market capitalism in theory, provided that it is governed by a legal and regulatory framework that is consistent with Biblical “blueprints,” particularly those which can be derived from Old Testament law. Edd Noell has observed that Reconstructionists find that applications of Biblical law, in diverse areas such as monetary affairs, private property, pollution, debt, labor, economic growth, taxes, and charity, “not only are compatible with capitalism but provide the necessary structural foundations of a capitalist system.”¹³ Both Hoksbergen and Noell insist that while both these strains of Reformed theology are critical of the assumptions and methodologies that underlie “secular” economic thinking, they find some theoretical perspectives more acceptable than others. While Kuyparians lean in the direction of institutionalist and post-Keynesian theories which place considerably less confidence in the efficiency and stability of market processes, Reconstructionists prefer the Austrian approach, which largely

¹² Roland Hoksbergen, “A Reformed Approach to Economics: The Kuyparian Tradition.” *Faith and Economics*, 20 (Fall, 1992), 14. An expanded treatment of this perspective can be found in the chapter entitled, “Reformed Christian Economics,” written by Bob Goudzwaard and Roel Jongeneel, in the *Oxford Handbook on Christianity and Economics*.

¹³ Edd S. Noell, “A Reformed Approach to Economics: Christian Reconstructionism.” *Faith and Economics*, 21 (Spring, 1993), 13.

eschews the mathematical and statistical methodologies that are associated with neoclassical analysis.

The Compatibility of Capitalism and Wesleyan Thought

Apart from the separate question of whether or not Adam Smith, the oft-described founder of modern economics, was the possessor of a personal Christian faith, his thought was certainly influenced by the Reformed theology of 18th-century Scotland, particularly the Moderate faction within the Presbyterian church which was well-represented during the Scottish Enlightenment, in which Smith was a major participant.¹⁴ Richard B. Sher has separated what he describes as “Moderate moral teaching and preaching” into two distinct categories: Christian Stoicism, or “private virtue,” and Whig-Presbyterian conservatism, or “public virtue.”¹⁵ With respect to the former, Paul Oslington has observed that Christianity and Stoicism were “historically intertwined” during the period of the Scottish Enlightenment, and that many scholars rush to a premature judgment in concluding that unleavened Stoicism was the overarching influence on Smith’s ethical system.¹⁶ Oslington also calls attention to a passage in *The*

¹⁴ Paul Oslington, “God and the Market: Adam Smith’s Invisible Hand.” *Journal of Business Ethics*, 108:4 (July 2012), 431. Oslington has also contended that “there must be a presumption of an important theological background to any work of moral philosophy or political economy produced in eighteenth-century Scotland,” since the culture of the country, at that time in history, “was dominated by the Presbyterian Kirk in a way that those of us living in contemporary secular societies find difficult to appreciate.” Paul Oslington, “The Future Hope in Adam Smith’s System.” *Studies in Christian Ethics*, 24:3 (August 2011), 330–1. As an aside, Professor Oslington is the editor of the aforementioned *Oxford Handbook of Christianity and Economics*.

¹⁵ Richard B. Sher, *Church and University in the Scottish Enlightenment: The Moderate Literati of Edinburgh* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 187–212.

¹⁶ As an example of this perspective, Oslington cites an article by Harold B. Jones, “Marcus Aurelius, the Stoic Ethic, and Adam Smith.” *Journal of Business Ethics*, 95:1 (August 2010), 89–96. David Raphael and Alec Macfie also state, on page 5 of their Introduction to the 1976 edition of Smith’s *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, that “Stoic philosophy is the primary influence on Smith’s ethical thought.”

Theory of Moral Sentiments where Smith himself drew a distinction between the principles of the Stoic world-view and the values associated with what he referred to as “Nature.” In this section, Smith maintains that some of the “consolations” which Nature provides, in the face of “the most unfortunate and disastrous” events of life, emanate “from a firm reliance upon, and a reverential submission to, that benevolent wisdom which directs all the events of human life,” and not just from the internal deliberations of what Smith refers to as “the impartial spectator” or “the man within the breast.”¹⁷ Smith goes on to assert that while “Nature has not prescribed to us this sublime contemplation (the considerations of the man within the breast) as the great business and occupation of our lives,” this is precisely the goal at which Stoic philosophy is directed.¹⁸ The end result of this world-view, according to Smith, is a “perfect apathy” which “endeavours to render us altogether indifferent and unconcerned in the success or miscarriage of everything which Nature has prescribed to us as the proper business and occupation of our lives.”¹⁹

Smith not only rejected Stoic apathy, he was closely allied with his friend, David Hume, in asserting that morality and conscience are rooted in sympathy. According to Hume, moral judgment requires reason to assess the “tendency of qualities and actions, and point out their beneficial consequences to society and to their possessor.” This reasoning must be supported by an underlying sentiment to promote the happiness of

¹⁷ Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1982), 292.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid., 292–3.

humanity and reduce its misery.²⁰ Consequently, “sympathy is the chief source of moral distinctions.” Indeed, it is the sole means by which we are affected by the happiness of others. It is the source of moral approbation.²¹ Nevertheless, for Hume our affections play a much greater role in sympathy than does our reason. This is reflected in his famous dictum that reason is always a slave to the passions. In effect, “morality . . . is more properly felt than judged of.”²² Morality is based on sentiment, because human psychology in general is based on sentiment. The ultimate ends of human action are ultimately determined by sentiment, not the intellectual faculties.²³

Smith likewise based conscience on sympathy, but his construal recognizes a more active role for reason. Agreeing with Hume, he believed that moral approbation and disapprobation stem from sympathy. We approve or disapprove the behavior of others inasmuch as we can or cannot sympathize with the “sentiments and motives which directed it.” In the same way, we approve or disapprove our own conduct to the extent that we can or cannot view ourselves from the perspective of others and still sympathize with our own sentiments and motives.²⁴ Smith believed that we want to be praiseworthy from an impartial perspective, for we naturally desire the praise of individuals.²⁵ Essentially, conscience is only as strong as the feeling of sympathy which supports it. If we are to properly judge between our interests and the interests of those with whom we have no particular connection, we must be able to assess the situation from the

²⁰ David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. Tom L. Beauchamp, Appendix 1 (Oxford: Oxford, 1998), 157–8.

²¹ David Hume, *Treatise of Human Nature*, §3.3.6 (Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 1992), 618–9.

²² *Ibid.*, §3.1.2, 470.

²³ Hume, *Enquiry*, Appendix 1, 162.

²⁴ Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, §3.1 (Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 2000), 161.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, §3.2, 166–7.

perspective of an impartial third party.²⁶ Granted, our passions can often deceive us, but this can be overcome if we will observe the behavior of others when forming our general rules of conduct.²⁷ Smith concluded,

The man of the most perfect virtue, the man whom we naturally love and revere the most, is he who joins, to the most perfect command of his own original and selfish feelings, the most exquisite sensibility both to the original and sympathetic feelings of others.²⁸

The question that still lingers regarding Smith's theories is whether sympathy is strong enough to counter the selfish excesses engendered by an economic system that is driven by self-interest. In order to engage capitalism with Wesleyan thought, it will first be necessary to examine how self-interest and sympathy are understood within a Wesleyan framework.

Suggesting a Wesleyan interpretation of self-love is somewhat sticky, since Wesley himself equivocated when he discussed self-love. Initially, Wesley viewed self-love rather negatively, seeing it as something to be conquered. He believed that Christian perfection frees us of self-will such that the perfect do not even desire relief from their pain. Consequently, Thomas Church accused Wesley of espousing "a stoical insensibility" carried to "the very height of extravagance and presumption."²⁹ Wesley even went so far as to omit self-interest as a part of the happiness that believers have in God.³⁰

²⁶ Ibid., §3.2, 192.

²⁷ Ibid., §3.4, 221–4.

²⁸ Ibid., §3.3, 214.

²⁹ O. S. Walters, "John Wesley's Footnotes to Christian Perfection," *Methodist History* 12, no. 1 (1973), 22.

³⁰ Wesley, Sermon 26, "Upon Our Lord's Sermon on the Mount, Discourse VI," §2.2, *The Works of John Wesley* [Begun as *The Oxford Edition of the Works of John Wesley*, Oxford: Clarendon, 1975–83.

Nevertheless, Wesley later revised his position to one that reflects a more positive view of self-love. For instance, he claimed that when love is present, happiness and virtue are in harmony with one another.³¹ Assertions like this led Albert Outler to eventually view Wesley's ethics as eudemonistic. He suggested that Wesley's "emphases on duty and discipline are auxiliary to his main concern for human happiness."³²

It seems that the key for Wesley is the need for love to be free of self-will. This does not mean that love must transcend self-love. Rather, narrow self-interest cannot be the chief motivating factor in love. Wesley seems to follow the Aristotelian notion that virtue aims at the chief good, except for Wesley the chief good is God himself, not happiness. The morality of self-love can be judged by the extent to which it either draws us closer to God or pushes us farther away.

It can certainly be argued that Wesley never gave the topic of self-love the attention it should have received, given the importance that love holds in his thought.³³ Therefore, evaluating self-love and self-interest from a Wesleyan perspective will require us to place it in its broader theological context. Mildred Bangs Wynkoop argues that self-interest has a legitimate place in Wesleyan ethics, for both self-interest and other-interest are "absolutely essential to mental health." As such, self-love is only sinful when it crowds out "other selves."³⁴ Outler agrees, asserting that both self-loathing and

Continued as *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley*"], (Nashville: Abingdon, 1984-.), 1:576 [Jackson ed., 5:331].

³¹ Wesley, "An Earnest Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion," §3, *WW*, 11:45 [J 8:3].

³² Albert C. Outler, *Theology in the Wesleyan Spirit* (Nashville: Tidings, 1975), 81.

³³ John B. Cobb, *Grace and Responsibility: A Wesleyan Theology for Today* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 67–8.

³⁴ Mildred Bangs Wynkoop, *A Theology of Love: The Dynamic of Wesleyanism* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill, 1972), 203.

narcissism should be avoided, since they corrupt the relationships that we have with others.³⁵

Indeed, Wesley recognized the need to limit self-love and place it in proper perspective, for he believed that arrogance is pervasive and morally destructive. As a matter of fact, he condemned both the skeptics and the enthusiasts for their pride.³⁶ However, rather than view self-love as something that should be eliminated, Wesley believed that love for God and love for others is ultimately what prevents “pride, vanity, and self-will” from tainting our words and actions.³⁷ Love and humility are what keep self-interest in check. Consequently, a Wesleyan schema can allow the pursuit of self-interest so long as love for God, love for others, and humility are cultivated.

Let us recall that according to Smith’s conception of capitalism, sympathy is integral to keeping self-interest in check. From a twenty-first century perspective, it is also necessary to counterbalance the disparities created by large scale capitalistic economies. In a Wesleyan schema, since sympathy is connected with love for God, love for others, and humility, sympathy is best understood within the intersection of these three elements of Wesleyan virtue ethics. Sympathy relates to love for God in the sense that loving God entails loving as God loves, reflecting the divine image in the way that we love. God loves all of his creation, and because it is important to him, it is important to us. Love for God certainly includes sympathy and compassion for the hurting and downtrodden.

³⁵ Outler, 83.

³⁶ Wallace G. Gray, “The Place of Reason in the Theology of John Wesley” (Ph.D. dissertation, Vanderbilt University, 1953), 216.

³⁷ Wesley, “An Earnest Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion,” §51, *WW*, 11:64 [J 8:20].

Sympathy obviously is related to love for others, for it is an essential part of loving others. Of course, it is possible to love others in a way that cares about their well-being while remaining relatively indifferent to their pain and suffering. In fact, Wesley felt that the rich tend to be unsympathetic toward the poor, even though they may actually care about the poor more generally. He attributed this to voluntary ignorance. In other words, we will be indifferent and unsympathetic to the plight of others if we are unaware of their pain.³⁸ The upshot of this is that cultivating love for others in general will not necessarily foster sympathy. We must cultivate sympathy separately.

Humility is also related to sympathy, for humility requires a certain degree of respect for the other. It is difficult (if not impossible) to feel sorry for others while we sit in judgment over them. Sympathy requires a type of reciprocity in which we regard others as important as us. We must be able to see ourselves in the circumstances of others before we can sympathize with them, and this hypothetical substitution requires a certain degree of parity and reciprocity. Consequently, humility is an essential part of sympathy.

To summarize, Wesleyan thought does not portray self-interest or self-love as inherently good or evil. Its morality lies in the way it is pursued and in its relationship to love for God and love for others. Love for God must always be supreme, and even though we may otherwise love people and things for their own sake, everything must ultimately be loved for God's sake. In other words, we can pursue our self-interest in a capitalist economy as long as: 1) our ultimate interest is to glorify God in all we think and do and 2) our interest is to promote the happiness and well-being of others equally with our own happiness and well-being.

³⁸ Wesley, Sermon 98, "On Visiting the Sick," §1.3, *WW*, 3:387–8 [J 7:119].

Nevertheless, a Wesleyan understanding of self-interest also demands that we tread cautiously, because even though self-interest is legitimate in its own right, it contains the seeds of selfishness and sin. Wesley even felt that Christianity contains the seeds of its own possible destruction, because it stresses industriousness, and this produces wealth, which ultimately threatens vital Christian faith. This is why he insisted that after we gain all we can and save all we can, we must give all we can.³⁹

Elements of Wesleyan Theology Most Relevant to Capitalism

In order to justify this interpretation of a Wesleyan view of self-interest, it will be necessary to situate it within the broader context of Wesleyan theology. There are two areas of rapprochement that seem most relevant to this task. First, our view of self-interest must cohere with a Wesleyan understanding of divine grace and providence. At first blush this may appear to be problematic, since there has always been a division between those that emphasize God's work through supernatural intervention and those that emphasize God's work through natural processes. Although Wesley's writings are open to interpretation with regard to the transformation of the individual, they are much clearer otherwise. Although some people in the Wesleyan tradition seem to view God as the micromanager of the universe, Wesley himself did not hold such a view. This is reflected in his sermon, "The Nature of Enthusiasm", which includes a stern warning against looking for "extraordinary" help from God and trusting in sudden feelings and impulses.⁴⁰

³⁹ Wesley, Sermon 122, "Causes of the Inefficacy of Christianity", §§17–18, *WW*, 4:95–6 [J 7:290].

⁴⁰ Wesley, Sermon 37, "The Nature of Enthusiasm", *WW*, 2:46–60 [J 5:467–78].

Consequently, in judging the aptness of participating in capitalist economics, it is safe to say that a Wesleyan view of divine providence stresses our responsibility in economic matters. It does not accept the view that economic outcomes are preordained of God and thus cannot really be altered by our actions. Instead, the responsibility of acting ethically and wisely falls upon our shoulders. We should turn to God for help but not expect God to necessarily alter the course of events to the extent of obviating our responsibility. Seeking financial prosperity is morally acceptable as long as we accept the responsibility that comes with wealth.

The second area of Wesleyan theology relevant to justifying this view of self-interest is its understanding of and emphasis on love as the core of Christian spirituality and ethics. To be specific, does centering one's theology on the Love Commandments preclude or qualify the pursuit of self-interest in any way? We have already noted how Wesleyan theology recognizes the naturalness and legitimacy of self-interest yet demands that self-interest be kept in check and in proper perspective. This view is characterized by Gene Outka as "self-love as normal, reasonable, prudent". It is the belief that self-love can serve as the template for loving others. We treat others as we want to be treated by them.⁴¹

However, Christian love is not limited to mere reciprocity, for it also requires us to love God and others sacrificially. Because Wesleyan theology places the Love Commandments at the center of Christian spirituality and ethics, it teaches that self-giving, sacrificial love is to be normative in the Christian life. Sacrifice is not viewed as a work of supererogation. Nevertheless, sacrifice is not normative to the extent of

⁴¹ Outka, Gene. *Agape: An Ethical Analysis* (New Haven: Yale University, 1972), 63–7.

eliminating or always overriding self-interest, for self-interest is necessary for our own preservation, health, and happiness. It also serves as a template to guide us in loving others, as was mentioned earlier. Moreover, it helps keep the self-interest of others in check, and to the extent that a balance between everyone's individual self-interest is maintained, selfishness will be held at bay. Self-giving should never be stressed to the point of enabling selfish or abusive behavior.

The real issue is not self-interest per se, but whether self-interest is excessive, and this is determined by comparing our self-interest with our concern for others. As Joseph Butler observed in his writings, it is not that we love ourselves too much but that we love others too little. Consequently, rather than try to quell self-interest, it should be our goal to take a greater interest in the happiness and well-being of others. The pursuit of self-interest in the free market can be good if we are also pursuing and promoting the interests of others, especially those with the greatest need.

Toward a Wesleyan Approach to Free Market Economics

Adam Smith believed that the ethical practice of capitalism is dependent upon the sympathy that citizens and market participants have for one another. It is apparent sympathy is likewise crucial to a Wesleyan approach to free market economics, for it is through sympathy that our self-interest becomes attached to the interests and well-being of others. Sympathy is the key to allowing self-love serve as a template for our love of others. Their pleasure and pain become our own.

The challenge is to cultivate sympathy, most particularly within the body of Christ. The question is whether there is anything distinctive about viewing sympathy

through a Wesleyan theological lens. Hume suggested that sympathy comes to us naturally (in a healthy brain, that is), and there is a growing body of scientific evidence to confirm this not only in human behavior, but also in animals with more highly developed brains, especially higher primates.⁴² Fortunately, Wesley had the wisdom to embrace our natural abilities through his doctrine of prevenient grace. He understood that although we are basically selfish, there is still great potential within each person for the development and cultivation of natural virtues, including sympathy. This more balanced view of human nature is being increasingly confirmed through social science and expressed through fields of study like sociobiology.

For Hume, the attempt to cultivate sympathy through reasoning is somewhat futile, since he claimed that reason is always a slave to the passions. In contrast, Wesley did not regard reason so subserviently. The Wesleyan understanding of sympathy is more cognitive, based on value judgments. Even though sympathy itself may be instinctive, it is ultimately shaped by reason and can be scrutinized by reason. We have already noted two factors in cultivating sympathy that Wesley himself acknowledged. First, we can promote sympathy through exposure. Sympathy is driven by our personal experiences and by our witnessing the need and suffering of others. Simply stated, we can only sympathize with that of which we are aware. Second, sympathy can be fostered by nurturing humility, and this should be done in a way consistent with our understanding of the relationship between self-love and love for others. Once again, the goal is not to love ourselves less but to love others more. Along those same lines, humility should not be

⁴² For example, see Barbara J. King, *Evolving God: A Provocative View of the Origins of Religion* (New York: Doubleday, 2007).

understood as self-abasement. Instead, humility entails recognizing the importance of others, seeing them at least as important as we see ourselves.

We can also promote sympathy through moral exemplars. It is both humbling and inspiring to see great people give of themselves to others through humility, not in a condescending way, but in a way that recognizes the dignity of the other, expressing both love and respect. In effect, this suggests that sympathy can be cultivated like a moral virtue, learned and honed through example and practice. One might even argue that this is the best (if not the only) way to cultivate sympathy. Sympathy requires us to connect our experiences with the experiences of others. We assume that to the extent our experiences are similar, our feelings will likewise be similar. Since feelings are somewhat subjective, sympathy is also a bit subjective. This makes it difficult to describe and learn through abstract principles, at least for the non-philosopher. Learning by example seems to be the simplest and most effective way to cultivate sympathy among the populace. In the end, perhaps sympathy should be regarded as a moral virtue, one that is central to Wesleyan virtue ethics.

The final question to raise is whether Wesleyan thought offers any practical insights on the practice of free market capitalism. Joseph Schumpeter famously observed that “this process of Creative Destruction (capitalization in the original) is the essential fact about capitalism.”⁴³ Schumpeter used this phrase in order to illustrate the dynamic characteristics of a market economy: new products and processes are always being developed, which render older goods and procedures less useful or even obsolete. One of the reasons why it has been historically difficult to categorize the implications of

⁴³ Joseph Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008), 83.

Wesleyan theology for economic life is that Wesley himself affirmed at least some aspects of the creative dimension of market forces, such as work and saving, while retaining a strong concern for those who were most affected by the destructive side of these changes.

A good example of what J. Wesley Bready described as Wesley's "economic realism" is his perspective on food prices during the Industrial Revolution, which was of immediate concern to the poor.⁴⁴ In some cases, Wesley opposed higher taxes on imported food, because that would raise food prices for the poor.⁴⁵ In other cases, he supported government interventions that he thought would contribute to lower food prices.⁴⁶ For Wesley, his emphasis on practical approaches to economic problems appears to have led him to affirm the results of market processes of voluntary exchange in cases where the results appeared to advance his moral objectives, and to argue for limitations on market forces in situations where this did not appear to be the case, at least in the short run.⁴⁷ By doing so, Wesley might very well constitute an example of what David Henderson, the former chief economist for the Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) has characterized in more recent times as "do-it-yourself

⁴⁴ Bready, 248.

⁴⁵ In particular, Robert Kingdon cited Wesley's opposition to taxes on food from Ireland as evidence that he "shows a tendency to approve of laissez-faire policy," perhaps as a result of the intellectual influence of Josiah Tucker. Kingdon also claimed that Wesley thought that imports of rice and bread-corn should be encouraged in order to help lower the price of wheat and barley. Kingdon, 344-5, 351.

⁴⁶ Robert Kingdon asserted that Wesley, in the name of reducing the price of oats, supported measures that were designed to reduce the number of horses in Great Britain, including a tax on the exportation of horses to France, as well as a tax on "gentleman's carriages." Kingdon also stated that Wesley advocated a limit on the size of farms in the name of reducing the price of pork and poultry. Kingdon, 345.

⁴⁷ J. Wesley Bready concluded "that to Wesley all economic problems were primarily ethical, and therefore religious," and that "he believed spiritual values (to be) the only ultimate 'reality.'" This observation would seem to reinforce an approach to economic issues where the ends are fixed, but the means are subject to flexibility.

economics,” comprised of judgments, especially with respect to processes and not outcomes, that are “largely intuitive” in nature.⁴⁸

Perhaps the takeaway from this analysis is that the distinctiveness that Wesleyan thought brings to capitalism is more a matter of emphasis than it is a matter of form or detail. In any event, as Wesleyan thought continues to engage with the social sciences, a number of opportunities become available to us. Psychology, sociology, economics, political science, etc. could all use more Wesleyan voices, and Wesleyan thought will be enriched by engaging with these disciplines.

⁴⁸ David Henderson, *Anti-Liberalism 2000: The Rise of New Millennium Collectivism* (London: Institute of Economic Affairs, 2001), 14.