



Economic Personalism: A Marcelian Approach

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Although the study of political economy emerged historically from Ancient and Medieval sources, it was captured by the Modern era, and, as such, it divorced itself from its ancestral heritage. Its genealogical origins in a metaphysically rooted anthropology and moral axiology were disowned in favor of adopting politicized ideologies and quantifiable certainties. For today's students of business and economics, in fact, philosophical reasoning and, even more so, metaphysical reasoning are vacuous unknowns. Moral axiology, moreover, is reduced to emotionally charged claims about what the state ought to legislate to ensure "social justice" and economic rights.

Without solid metaphysical foundations, academic studies in business and economics have become anarchic² social sciences wherein competing paradigms are accepted or rejected simply on the basis of political proclivities, prevailing mathematical constructs or conventions, and practical expediency. No "first principles" are acknowledged, much less philosophically assessed; no serious attention is paid to critiquing what the studies presuppose about human nature and moral values; and no effort is made to recover the missing "human person" in these depersonalized social sciences of political economy.

Economic personalism, or EP, is a relatively recent approach to political economy, which offers an alternative to the philosophical anarchy that has infected the studies of business and economics. This essay will concisely define EP by adapting it to the personalism of Gabriel Marcel (1889-1973) and proceed according to the following three rubrics: 1) The prevailing opposition in political economy between individualism and collectivism will be critiqued in regard to how their presumed anthropologies are correlated with their moral views on the common good. 2) The "first principles" of a Marcelian way of EP with a moral axiology of solidarity will be developed. And finally, 3) a Marcelian EP will suggest a sketch of an economics of abundance contrary to today's regnant, but depersonalizing, economics of scarcity.

Although Marcel never produced a treatise or even an essay specifically devoted to politics or political economy, his writings are laden with reflections on political principles, and economic theories and practices. For him, politics and economics were bound together, and his reflections on political economy were grounded in his metaphysics of the person.³

In an autobiographical essay Marcel offered a clear identification of his political stance: he confessed that in broad terms he considered himself "a liberal who has become more and more painfully aware of the limits of liberalism but who at the same time has remained

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² This use of "anarchic" recovers an etymological meaning of the term, "without principle."

³ For a detailed study of Marcel's political philosophy, Cf T. Michaud (2006). "Gabriel Marcel's Politics: Theory and Practice," In *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly*, 80:3 435-455.



convinced of the absolutely maleficent character of Totalitarian regimes of any sort.”⁴ Although Marcel affirmed and defended the reality of the individual person, he rejected the distortions of individualism, namely the painful limits of liberalism, which lead to a fragmented and hyper-competitive society of depersonalized atomic individuals.⁵ He condemned, moreover, all collectivisms because they engender a totalitarian mass society, an extreme egalitarianism wherein individuals believe that the depersonalized and equalized aggregate is more real and more morally valuable than any of its constituents taken individually.⁶ It was these deformations of individualism and collectivism that Marcel labeled as the “present universal crisis” of politics, a crisis that can be overcome only by getting people “out of the false dilemma between an imaginary individualism and a collectivism that denies the human personality.”⁷

Neither individualism nor collectivism properly appreciates the human person. They also do not recognize the philosophical tendencies inherent in the relationships between their anthropologies, their political economies, and their moral axiologies of the common good. Those philosophical tendencies can be exposed critically, which will facilitate definition of a Marcelian way of economic personalism that does respect the nature of the human person.

Modern individualisms and collectivisms generally presuppose one of two typical anthropologies: materialism or a Cartesian-like dualism, which can tend toward transcendentalism. Each of these anthropologies yields a certain view of political economy and the common good which denatures the person. Materialism, which denies or simply ignores a person’s spiritual soul, is correlated with both individualism and collectivism. Materialistic individualisms, like many libertarian views and the objectivism of Ayn Rand, assert the absolute priority of the individual. And though they negate or are just confused about the nature of a person’s free will, they propound that individual liberty is of supreme moral value. They, accordingly, define the common good as that which serves individual liberty, since for them, liberty is a good that all individuals should have in common. Of course, then, they endorse thoroughgoing *laissez faire* free-market capitalism. As Marcel would agree, however, such extreme individualism atomizes society and reduces persons to discrete window-less monads, competing with one another to realize their absolute autonomy and achieve superiority. Persons become soul-less economic “erg units” acquiring as much material capital as their “liberty” allows.

Materialistic collectivisms do not even bother with liberty or free will. They maintain an anthropological determinism, usually under the aspect of an evolutionary naturalism. Marxist political economies, for instance, reduce persons to instantiations of a collective “species being” and the common good is what serves the evolutionary progress of the species. Moreover, since the advance of the species as such is of paramount value, egalitarianism reigns because no individual can truly advance unless all members of the species advance. Such materialistic collectivism is widespread in the social sciences today as they generally have adopted a scientific naturalism as their foundation and propound a distributionist political economy to fortify their belief in egalitarian evolutionary progress.

⁴ G. Marcel (1984). “An Autobiographical Essay,” in *The Philosophy of Gabriel Marcel*, P. Schilpp and L. Hahn LaSalle: Open Court, 62-63.

⁵ Cf J. E. Smith, “The Individual, the Collective and the Community,” in *The Philosophy of Gabriel Marcel*, 337-51, at 337.

⁶ Cf G. Marcel (1962). *Man Against Mass Society*, Chicago: Regnery, 166.

⁷ G. Marcel (1967). *Searchings*. New York: Newman Press, 88.



The continued influence of B. F. Skinner's deterministic anthropology and his collectivist political economy, as posed in his utopian work *Walden Two*,⁸ evidences the prevailing ideology of most of the social sciences. For Skinner, and much of social and behavioral science, statist redistribution of wealth is a necessary condition for the evolutionary progress of the species.

Cartesian-like dualisms incline towards locating the essence of the person in an immaterial soul or mind, or a universalized transcendental ego. In all cases, the mind or transcendental ego is a collective entity into which all persons are absorbed and which establishes the ultimately real nature of persons. Such views, accordingly, subordinate individual personal identity to the collective soul, mind or universalized consciousness of a transcendental ego. They further maintain that since such a collective essence is shared by all persons equally, their ideal state and ideal political economy is an egalitarian collective in which wealth, capital, and even moral values are held in common by all. This view is manifest in varying degrees and varying renditions in the practical political economics of, for instance, the Kantian "realm of ends," the Hegelian State imbued with the Absolute Spirit, various other 19c German idealists such as Fichte, Schelling, and Bruno Bauer, and even American Transcendentalists, as with Emerson's "over soul" and Thoreau's "Walden" political economy.

The ideal of the common good in all of these types of dualisms is ironically similar to the materialisms discussed above because egalitarianism prevails and variations of distributionism are valued morally. The difference with the materialisms, however, is that the common good is grounded in a transcendental collectivism. All persons are one within the overarching transcendental mind, soul or ego. Their personal identities are ultimately dissolved into a faceless transcendental mass, and thusly, depersonalization results.

A Marcelian EP does avoid the depersonalization of individualisms and collectivisms because its metaphysical ground respects and preserves the person. Marcel held as a "first principle" that "Incarnation [is] the central 'given' of metaphysics."⁹ For him, the person is an incarnate spirit, a composite being: a body/soul unity, which has the spiritual faculties of intellect and free will, and whose personal identity is a metaphysical constant never erased by an all-consuming collective or reduced to an atomic individual.

Marcel would accept that the individual is a free knower, a volitional actor or agent.

Since human *esse* is *co-esse*, however, the individual has the innate teleology to become a person: indeed, the *entelechy* of the individual is personhood. Personhood is the perfection of the individual. A chief virtue of personhood is solidarity, which involves fulfillment of responsibilities to the "we," or the common good. Individuals reach the fullness of their being, their *co-esse*, when they choose and act in solidarity with and for others. This, however, is an ongoing process because as persons we are in continuous becoming; persons are always working to improve solidarity and actualize more and more of their individual identities as persons. Solidarity does not depersonalize. Individual identity is not dissolved into some equalized collective, and the individual is not absolutized as an atomic monad which manipulates, subordinates or collides with others. Solidarity is the axiological condition of the metaphysics of the acting person.

A Marcelian EP founded on the metaphysics of the acting person resists the depersonalizing excesses of naturalistic individualisms and egalitarian collectivisms. It

⁸ B. F. Skinner (1948). *Walden Two*. New York: The Macmillan Co.

⁹ G. Marcel, *Man Against Mass Society*, 37.



does not elide the essential spiritual aspect of the identity of the person, it does not subvert personal free will and volitional agency, and it does not yield an egalitarianism which calls for statist redistribution of wealth. Marcel was unambiguous in his denunciation of egalitarian collectivism. He, for instance, rejected the consecrated formula of the French Revolution because, for him, equality and fraternity, which was usually his term for “solidarity,” are oriented in opposite directions. Equality is basically egocentric. It fuels envious ego-driven claims which breed a resentment of those groups who supposedly “have” by those who believe they “have not.” Fraternity, in contrast, is heterocentric since it affirms that “you are my brother and because you are my brother, I am capable not only of recognizing your superiority but of rejoicing over it.”¹⁰

Marcel especially admonished philosophers who advanced egalitarianism. He charged that:

Never could a philosopher who deserves the name take seriously the thought of equality in its application to human beings . . . To say that human beings are equal is just as unreasonable as to desire their becoming so (which by the way makes no sense whatsoever) . . . Therefore, let us speak rather of a brotherly world, where everyone can enjoy finding qualities in his brothers he does not possess himself.¹¹

Marcel translated his opposition to egalitarian collectivism into concrete criticisms of socialistic political economies. Socialisms undermine persons’ freedom to conceive and seek an “idea of a better life.”¹² Their personal initiative to pursue a higher quality of life is stunted for two principal reasons: 1) “. . . whenever egalitarianism prevails, rooted as it is in envy and resentment, the sense of quality tends to vanish.”¹³ And, 2) socialism manages “to subordinate personal initiative in every field to state control.”¹⁴

Marcel also exposed socialism’s confused social justice ideology that is based on an egalitarian common good and advocates statist redistribution of wealth, so that all people have a right to have as much wealth as anyone else.¹⁵ He bluntly stated that, “Nothing could ever convince me that a cleaning woman should earn as much as a professor.”¹⁶

Egalitarian collectivism, whether rooted in anthropological materialisms or transcendental dualisms, are depersonalizing. Personal identity, freedom, dignity, and the common good of solidarity are eroded as thoroughly as with individualisms. These forms of political economies persist nonetheless and are entrenched within the social science studies of economics and business. One main reason for their persistence is due to the presumption that “scarcity” is axiomatic. A Marcelian EP, however, can challenge the presuppositions

¹⁰ G. Marcel (2002). *Awakenings*. Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 203. For more on Marcel’s explanation of the connection between egalitarianism and resentment, Cf: G. Marcel (1973). *Tragic Wisdom and Beyond*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 30.

¹¹ G. Marcel (1967). *Philosophical Fragments*, Lionel A. Blair (ed. and trans.). Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 8-9.

¹² G. Marcel (1955). *The Decline of Wisdom*. New York: Philosophical Library, 44.

¹³ *Ibidem*.

¹⁴ G. Marcel (1978). *Homo Viator*, Emma Crauford (trans.). Gloucester, Mass.: Harper and Row, 55.

¹⁵ G. Marcel, *Philosophical Fragments*, 10.

¹⁶ G. Marcel, *Awakenings*, 203.



upon which scarcity is based and lead to at least a sketch of some of the first principles of an economics of abundance.

In the USA, a widely used textbook in economics proclaims:

Economics is a social science. It examines the problems that societies face because individuals desire to consume more goods and services than are available, which creates a problem of relative scarcity. Wants are generally unlimited and apparently insatiable, whereas resources are limited.”¹⁷

The text then describes ways in which the problem of scarcity has been and can be addressed. It argues that “social mechanisms” are required for allocating limited resources. Prominent among those mechanisms are market forces managed or controlled by state central planning, which, of course, is tantamount to some brand of socialism.

Modern political economy typically holds such claims about scarcity and its underlying view of wants. A Marcelian EP, however, questions whether for persons, wants are truly unlimited and insatiable. As rational creatures and volitional actors, are persons not able to choose to exercise the temperance of self-governance over wants? The modern social science view that we are determined, insatiable consumers, whether individually or collectively, is an anthropological presumption which obviously contradicts a personalist understanding of who and what we truly are. Since this presumption, moreover, justifies some sort of socialism as a mechanism to manage human wants in the face of scarce resources, to reject the presumption weakens, if not denies, the social scientific justification of socialism.

A Marcelian EP suggests an economics of abundance and begins with the principle that as persons with free will, intellect and a fundamental dignity, human beings are, in an economic sense, assets not liabilities. Persons are creative and productive, and thusly, for example, centrally planned mass population control programs to reduce the numbers of insatiable resource-consumers, ultimately depress, if not destroy, an economy. Modern Malthusian tenets of economic social science need not be accepted as “givens” and population need not be viewed strictly as an economic factor which must be controlled by central planning to manage scarcity.

A second principle of a Marcelian EP of abundance asserts that scarcity is fundamentally a moral issue and not a physical one. Scarcity is, then, mainly a result of the mismanagement of resources by governments or market agents (including corporations and financial institutions), of the vice of greed, and of the failure of economic social science to maintain a morally normative axiology rooted in its anthropologies. Marcelian EP’s axiology of solidarity prescribes beneficence, charity, as a moral condition of personhood. Solidarity obligates persons to share resources and wealth as they are best able. This is an obligation which redounds upon persons themselves, their choices and actions for the sake of realizing their personhood. If charity is deemphasized in favor of centrally planned national or global redistribution schemes, high-tax statist economies too often result. These economies sadly engender the mentality that “Why should I be charitable? I pay my heavy taxes. It’s the government’s responsibility to deal with social problems, both domestically and abroad.” Charity, then, and persons’ efforts to realize solidarity are actually occluded by such redistribution schemes.

¹⁷ H. Landreth and D. Colander (1994). *History of Economic Thought*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1.



Finally, a third basic principle of an economics of abundance is that virtuous stewardship of technology-enhanced production and use of resources can and does yield abundance. The philosopher Alfred North Whitehead once cautioned that we should not let technological development outdistance our wisdom to manage it.¹⁸ He meant, among other ideas, that the rapid pace of technological development can lead us to overlook the negative affects technologies can have on persons, communities, nations and the environment. Some technologies can actually accelerate resource depletion or enable wealth-generating control of resources by some populations while marginalizing others. Virtuous stewardship of technology, however, would be carried out within the charity of solidarity so that, for instance, persons and organizations which have control of agricultural, energy, and information technologies would share their developments with populations that do not have such capabilities.

This sketch of an economics of abundance through a Marcelian EP is indeed merely a sketch. Practical application of the principles obviously calls for much more detail. What remains important, however, is that scarcity, in economic social science is not axiomatic if a Marcelian EP is adopted as foundational. In addition, the depersonalizing effects of modern economics with its anthropologies of individualism and collectivism can be circumvented, if in education and practice, political economy is reordered to appreciate and respect the real nature of persons and the moral axiology of the solidarity of personhood.

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¹⁸ Cited in T. Michaud (2009). *Third The Virtues of Business Ethics*. Acton, Mass.: Copley Custom Textbooks, 157.



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