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PREVIEW RESPONSE

We Need Intellectual Frameworks that Connect Economics with Empirical Work on Flourishing



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As an economist what strikes me about Tyler VanderWeele's brief is the distance between how philosophers and theologians in the Aristotelian-Thomist tradition and economists think about human flourishing.

In the early nineteenth century economists, influenced by Jeremy Bentham's view of natural rights and natural law as "nonsense on stilts" have banished teleological thinking from their discipline. Instead of goods of human flourishing towards which human action is oriented, economists since the nineteenth century have thought about how commodities generate utility. Economists took the terminology of "goods" for "commodities" from the Aristotelian language of "goods of human flourishing as part of this banishment of teleology from economics. It cut off discussion of the ends of economic activity beyond the production and distribution of commodities.

This move has made the empirical work that Tyler VanderWeele and his colleagues are doing on flourishing unintelligible to economists. The intellectual framework that contemporary economists have inherited means they struggle to translate the findings of the global flourishing project about what promotes human flourishing into the findings about what commodities generate utility, or in the language of choice theory, what commodities are generally preferred by individuals. Of course, any such findings can have no normative force for economists because of their deep disciplinary commitment to respecting the preferences of individuals no matter how bizarre. One thinks of the story of Nobel prize-winning economist George Stigler being told of an individual drinking the dirty engine oil that had just been drained from the sump of a car then dying a painful death in front of him, only to conclude that it showed the individual had a strong preference for consuming the commodity engine oil, and asking what moral basis we have to challenge that preference. Of course, within the intellectual framework of contemporary economists there is no basis for challenging such a preference or for suggesting that alternative courses of action might be better for the individual. If we accept Stigler's account of human action and welfare, then the findings of the global flourishing project are at best irrelevant, and at worst a resource for paternalistic governments or other illegiti-

mate authorities to impose their view of what is good, against individual preferences.

How then might economists make sense of the findings of the global flourishing project? To do this we need to move beyond the intellectual universe of utilitarianism. Or even its updated and supposedly more philosophically respectable successor welfarism (where individual welfare depends on satisfying their subjective preferences for commodities and community welfare is some aggregate of individual welfare). The most influential non-welfarist proposal in recent years has been the Nobel prize-winning economist and philosopher Amartya Sen's capability approach, where flourishing consists in capabilities and functioningsThis, as Sen's colleague Martha Nussbaum has noted, has something of an Aristotelian flavor. Yet why not go back further to the Aristotelian intellectual framework which would allow economists to take advantage of the findings of the global flourishing project?

The problem is that welfare economics, like much of the rest of contemporary mainstream economics, is highly mathematical and that for such a proposal to be taken seriously by economists it would have to be translated into the language of mathematical welfare economics. Aristotelian philosophers might object that their teleological ethics, their understanding human nature, and their associated account of practical reason, cannot be reduced to mathematics. But are we better off with the mathematically tidy yet fundamentally misleading account of human welfare offered by contemporary economists like George Stigler, or an imperfect mathematical version of the Aristotelian account that is able to make some sense of the findings of the global flourishing project?

There is an urgent need to develop mathematical versions of the Aristotelian account of human well-being that better connect with the findings of the global flourishing project and other data on human flourishing. This would enable a better conversation between economists and theologians, especially theologians operating in the Aristotelian-Thomist natural law tradition, and other streams of natural law, who seem to me best equipped for such a conversation.

Economists have a part to play in "advancing our understanding and pursuit of flourishing" as Tyler VanderWeele puts it.

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