

Limits to economics, religion and (maybe) everything else: Reply to Rati Mekvabishvili's 'On the Importance of Altruism, Prosocial Behavior and Christian Love in Behavioral Economics research'

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Mekvabishvili (2023) provides a unique perspective on the relationship between economics, especially behavioural and evolutionary economics, and Christian thought and theology. The literature on Christianity and economics is overrepresented by American authors, so I'm glad that Mekvabishvili offers another perspective, of an Eastern Orthodox background. The theology of love is usually considered one of the least controversial topics among different Christian denominations. And this is relevant not only to Christians, but to humanity in general, because it is also part of the sum of human knowledge, therefore it can be studied, criticized and appreciated. In spite of disagreements, I believe Mekvabishvili raises important questions.

That being said, the relationship between Christianity and evolutionary and behavioural economics is underexplored. In *Faith & Economics*, the peer-reviewed journal of the Association of Christian Economists, there is only two reviews on this issue, one from Bloem (2015) and another from Yungert (2018). Tan (2014) wrote a literature review of these issues.

The relationship between economics and Christianity, however, is a topic with a larger literature. Nelson (2001) showed that many of founders of economics as we understand today were children and grandchildren of Protestant ministers. Economics, Nelson argued, took the niche that once belonged to theology in the Anglo-Saxon 19th century academy. It was now up to economists to 'save the world'. Easterly (2014) observed the religious connotations in using the word 'mission' to describe to the World Bank and International Monetary Fund's initiatives to help underdeveloped countries. Dow (1994) cites this religious origin as a reason why economics is not as value-free as it claims, a point that Mekvabishvili mentions. There is a vestigial theology in economic doctrines, that is masked by secularization.

So, when Mekvabishvili writes 'First of all, in my opinion, true science and true Christian teaching cannot contradict each other, since truth is one,' this is not just a religious squabble. It does invoke the idea of 'natural theology' – the idea that God can be revealed through Nature –, but there is more than that. The idea of 'truth' has obviously been discussed since the dawn of mankind. In economics, one of the most important discussions on the 'truth' of the economic method was the Keynes-Tinbergen debate (Almeida, 2014; Boumans, 2019). Jan Tinbergen was one of the founders of econometrics and hoped to find a definitive cause behind the business cycle, but Keynes wondered if that is possible, if we can ever find the *verae causae* of economic phenomena. He cited the miracle of the Septuagint, when 70 scribes returned with the same

Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible; is such a thing possible with econometric methods? While Tinbergen was enthused by the possibility of finding the truth behind economics through econometrics, Keynes was more cautious about it, because of fundamental uncertainties in the economy.

Tinbergen's model had many issues, that were corrected with better models and better data sets, but the question about uncertainty remains. Overcoming uncertainty has been one of the objectives of scientific research. Stephen Hawking (1988, p. 169) famously ended his *A brief history of time* writing that if we knew 'why we' and 'the universe exists...we would know the mind of God'. He regarded the unification of physics – between quantum mechanics and general relativity – as a step in this direction. Can economists ever *aspire* to say something similar to that as well?

Although an imaginative rhetorical question, I consider this kind of statement somewhat imprudent, especially coming from a public intellectual. In context, Hawking was talking about how philosophers and physicists disagree and how their fields do not advance in the same pace. As a consequence, knowledge and wisdom do not grow in the same rate. There is this idea that should exist a 'perfect model', but physicists are coming to an agreement that a 'theory of everything' is the catchiest misnomer ever (Teller, 2001; English, 2017).

That brings us the question: what science are we referring to? Because this raises another question: who defines what is science? One relevant example is James Clerk Maxwell. His work helped to revolutionize 19th century physics. He was also a devout Presbyterian. Due to his high academic profile, he was constantly invited to join organizations to defend the faith, to practice apologetics. One of them promoted the idea that the Bible proves that ether exists, therefore it is true. Maxwell refused to support these ideas, much to the chagrin of his fellow Christians. He argued that the physics of 1876 would be different from 1896, predating a bit of Karl Popper's falsifiability – today, the ether is an extinct doctrine (McNatt, 2004). And some Christians do not seem to have learned the lesson. William Dembski (1999), one of the main representatives of the intelligent design movement, wrote that 'intelligent design is just the Logos theology of John's Gospel restated in the idiom of information theory'. The use of the word 'just' betrays an unwarranted overconfidence. What will happen to this argument when scientists move on from current information theory?

This shows the problem of science-based apologetics: they are founded in this principle that science and Christian doctrine are true, but it does not give the due attention that science is always changing. For fourteen centuries, scholars relied on the Ptolemaic astronomical model. C. S. Lewis (1964, p. 216) called it one of the most beautiful intellectual constructions mankind ever produced, by combining 'splendour, sobriety, and coherence' (and it was the foundation of his *Narnia* and *Space Trilogy* series). It was the base of much of Christian apologetics, including the Church Fathers, focusing on the perfection of the celestial sphere being akin to the perfection of the received Christian doctrine. And yet, the Ptolemaic model was surpassed not just because of new observations, but because the mental disposition of scholars, and people in general, also changed (*ibid.*, p. 219-220).

And if economic theories are not value-free, that also applies to theology. González (1990, p. 221) argued that Augustine of Hippo created the basis of later Christian conformism with tolerance to inequality and in favour of the privileged because Augustine saw the 'true' human

law as extension of the divine one – no more ‘do not conform to this world’ (Romans 12:2), but rather accept the rule of the privileged. This has had negative consequences for centuries. In the 1930s, Karl Barth shocked the Western European theological academia by criticizing natural theology. But his reasons are important to consider, because the Nazi intelligentsia wanted to place *Mein Kampf* in the same level as the Bible. Being a supporter of the Barmen Declaration against Nazi intervention in the churches, Barth saw Nazis appropriating natural theology to their means (Houtz, 2016). Although some may think he went too far, Louth (1969, p. 271-272) argued Barth had a point, because natural theology fails to consider grace – undeserved and unpayable favour – and similarities between the believer and the non-believer, as if natural theology existed to benefit a particular view of the world. That fosters presumption, not faith. The result is that God becomes ‘part of the machine’ (Pennock, 1999, p. 308). Western European thought in the 17th century, then, evolved to what Charles Taylor (2007) called ‘providential deism’, a prologue to complete secularism: ‘the successor to agape, [the Christian love], was to be held strictly within the bounds of measure, instrumental reason, and perhaps also good taste.’ (*ibid*, p. 247). Thus, Hawking, an agnostic, could write about discovering the ‘mind of God’.

If God becomes part of the machine, then this can be modelled and used to support the machine’s ideology. Returning to Augustine’s theology of conformism, it provided a basis for the stratified feudal society and ideas such as the divine right of kings. Although making a connection between 5th century ideas and today requires a more rigorous treatment, we can see similar ideas *in vogue*. Although the theology of conformism is fundamental part of religious Traditionalist politics (Teitelbaum, 2020), they also are in nonreligious contexts. Sociobiology, just like rational choice theory, provides an alluring and totalizing explanation of human action. Important biologists such as Stephen Jay Gould and Richard Lewontin pointed the issues with it, because it does not address structural sources of inequality (Allen et al, 1975). Roscoe (2014) argued some evolutionary biologists, such as Richard Dawkins¹, turn evolution theory into a neoliberal (a)theology of conformism.

And that brings to the last point. Mekvabishvili writes that ‘evolutionary theory and its modifications are not based on scientific facts and belong to a purely philosophical category.’ I am not a biologist myself, but from what I know ‘nothing in biology makes sense except in the light of evolution’ (Dobzhansky, 1973). As put by Russo and André (2019, p. 123):

Science, as a process, starts with the acceptance of our ignorance about a natural phenomenon and by seeking natural explanations for it. Hence, ignorance drives the engine of Science. Even if evolution were, hypothetically, rejected, contested by new data, scientists would have to study hard to find an alternative natural explanation that was able to explain everything that evolution explains to day plus the new data that contested it.

¹ Dawkins became a controversial figure as an antireligion public intellectual. In refuting the idea that evolution theory necessarily leads to moral degeneracy, Pennock (1999, p. 336) mentions Dawkins’s example of someone who uses evolutionary theory as a source of existential relief. Pennock emphasizes that this is a personal case, nothing guarantees that evolution leads to atheism, but one can see Dawkins finding this personal meaning as similar to a religious experience.

Because evolution theory is a human creation, it is flawed. But that also applies to theology, because it is also science, and thus a human creation, imperfect, flawed and in constant need of being reevaluated by its practitioners. Mike Anderson (2015) argued that 'anti-evolutionism provides a very precarious basis for faith in the Creator' because it tells us to not engage with evidence that says otherwise (or worse, claiming that it is there as a test to Christians). It favors a 'self-flattering, populist common sense perspective that truth about God is manifest to the natural human intellect,' i.e. that will 'coincidentally' validate our biases and ideologies (Anderson, 2016).

This discussion also highlights issues of the meaning of mainstream itself. In biology, evolutionary theory is mainstream and there are few contenders. But, in economics, the tenets of neoclassical economics have been disproven, unverified, refuted both at empirical and theoretical level so many times (browsing the WEA's site, who hosts this journal, can give us a modest sample of critiques to orthodox economics). And yet, it still remains the same: rational economic agents in a general equilibrium framework. It has changed at a snail's pace. And the main journals still publish thousands of studies in these lines yearly, PhDs students in the most prestigious centres are taught these doctrines and so on. And yet, the majority of economists still subscribe to it because it opens to a wide range of issues and has produced good enough results. And, especially, no heterodox doctrine managed to get enough clout to challenge its hegemony or serviceability. Being a heterodox economist is still a career gamble.²

That being said, the article does show the limits of altruism itself. Most of the criticism of altruism are associated with Randian jeremiads, but these are distractions. A more careful analysis is needed and Mekvabishvili provides a literature review of it. Easterly (2014) showed that many attempts to 'altruistically' help the underdeveloped countries ended up making everything worse, because it is a process that treats the one helped passively. When I was a teenager, before entering college, I never understood what Paul meant in 1 Corinthians 13:1-3³, that you can die for someone and yet have no love. After finishing my PhD. in economics, I could say 'Ah, that is how'.

The documentary *Freakonomics: The Movie* (Ewing et al, 2010) provides an example of these limitations, even though it was supposed to be a celebration of its results. In the section 'Can you bribe a 9th grader to succeed?', it depicts an economic experiment in a school in Chicago. The documentary followed a few students who participate in an experiment developed by University of Chicago economists in which students would be paid for better grades – to test

² From a personal point of view, I have to admit it feels a bit weird making a case for the mainstream of a discipline (Biology) and for the heterodoxy of another (Economics). Anti-evolutionism, however, is mainstream in some Christian circles. I remember telling the pastor of a church that I don't go anymore that I don't subscribe to young-Earth creationism, because it has more to do with 19th century scientific methodology than the Bible; he replied by calling a creationist physicist to do a conference series in that church. In the day of the conference, he said all who don't subscribe to this particular view of creationism are heretics and, then, he spent a lot of time defending reactionary politics, like telling robbers where the houses of families who don't support gun rights are. Needless to say, it didn't convince me.

³ 'If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.'

the very economic hypothesis of ‘incentives matter’. The documentary makes clear that the economists behind the experiment are doing it for science, you can even say they are ‘altruistic’. Their objective is to get better grades in a quick and low-cost way. The result is that they observed an increase in the average grades, but it was not as high as they expected. In the conclusion, the economists are making plans to redo this study with even younger students.

In my opinion, this shows lack of self-awareness from rational choice economics. If you teach children that they will be paid for better grades, will they learn that studying is good or will they learn that studying is a job, that requires payment in order to be done?⁴ In other words, the documentary does not consider what will happen if the incentive is removed or even if the children internalized what they were supposed to. Plus, it does not consider people who have different incentive structures – what if some students were neurodivergent, such as having attention deficit disorder, with a different reward processing structure (Beauchaine, Ben-David and Sela, 2017)?

The use of the edgy term ‘bribe’ in Ewing et al (2010)’s section title is meant to gratuitously shock the viewer, following the click-bait tradition. But what if we reword it? ‘Can you bribe a person to behave altruistically?’ Why aren’t we talking in terms of bosses bribing their workers to work, instead of paying wages to them? If incentives matter (or just read that as ‘if bribes matter’), can we find the *right* incentives, so that we can have the *right* result, so we can have the *right* people for the *right* social result? In other words, ‘Can you bribe a person to be *good*?’ An even better rewording is ‘With enough bribes, can you make a person a *good* person?’ Let us go to the *reductio ad absurdum* of thinking like a ‘freak’: is non-bribeable *good* behaviour even possible?

The issue is that altruism, as exposed by Mekvabishvili, might be empty. C. S. Lewis (1952) said that there is a difference between ‘nice people’ and ‘new men’. However, questioning the statement ‘incentives matter’ does not mean endorsing ‘incentives do not matter’. Incentives can help forming ‘nice people’. Incentives can matter. A lot. While the *Freakonomics* experiment was awkwardly framed as an attempt to find ‘algorithms’ of human behaviour, the reality is that stipends can make all the difference for the disadvantaged. To use an example I am familiar with, the Brazilian ‘*Bolsa Família*’ program, which provided cash transfers to poor income families, has had significant impacts to reduce poverty, allowing families to spend less time into just thinking how to survive. In fact, one of the issues of the program is that the value of transfers was too low (de Souza et al, 2018).

In Brazil, there is a saying: ‘the hungry are in a hurry’. Whether these communities might revert if the transfers stop is not immediately relevant, they need at least a minimum to flourish and they need in the ‘now’. And this shows the relevance of the altruism literature. Taylor (2007, p. 255) wrote that the greatest achievement in the 17th philosophy, from which altruism would be an heir, is in the fact that

...for the first time, we have such an opening to the universal which is not based in some way on a connection to the transcendent. Even if we think that this appeal is insufficient, because it leaves something important out, we have to recognize

⁴ To be fair, the interlude before the section has one of the economists mentioning how the incentives to his own daughter failed when she started exploiting his incentive system. But, even so, the impression I had is that he talks about it as if it was just a curiosity.

that the development of this purely immanent sense of universal solidarity is an important achievement, a milestone in human history.

In order to analyse or criticize altruism, this needs to be kept in mind. It is questionable, however, if altruism can create 'new men', as if humans were just an input-output mechanism. Altruism lacks a concept of grace, one of the first casualties of providential deism (Taylor, 2007). The Cross is 'foolishness' (1 Corinthians 1:18) because the gap between God, who is gracious and immutable, and our knowledge, our science, is always changing – can we find the *vera causae* of everything? That includes economics and theology as disciplines. So, independent of what we believe, we shouldn't presume God, history, economics, physics, any field of study exists to validate what we think is the truth.

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