

## RETHINKING THE MORAL OBJECTION: INJUSTICE

In *The Virtue of Prosperity*, D'Souza relates an interview he conducted with T. J. Rodgers, C.E.O. of Cypress Semiconductor, on the morality of capitalism and affluence. Rodgers responded bluntly to the author's questions.

I keep hearing feed the poor, clothe the hungry, give shelter to those who don't have it. The bozos that say this don't recognize that capitalism and technology have done more to feed and clothe and shelter and heal people than all the charity and church programs in history. So they preach about it, and we are the ones doing it. They want to rob Peter to pay Paul, but they always forget that Peter is the one that is creating the wealth in the first place.<sup>51</sup>

Rodgers continued in that agitated tone about one Sister Gormley, who was known for her continuous lobbying of corporations to consider more women and minorities for jobs — “a very ignorant and arrogant woman,” in his view. In fact, Rodgers was so irritated by a letter from her that he took the time to write a lengthy letter of his own. In his response, he advised Sister Gormley to “get off her moral high horse,” and to think about what she was saying. If he took her “politically correct” suggestions, he would put the investments of all his stockholders at grave risk, imperil the jobs and livelihood (with health insurance) of thousands of his employees, and almost certainly go under.<sup>52</sup> From Rodgers's quite unsophisticated moral perspective, Sister Gormley could not have been more confused than she was. For in the interest of the moral good, she had unwittingly become an advocate for the very moral evil she was crusading against: the impoverishment of thousands.

Rodgers's words sharpen the problem theologians must face. For, as D'Souza observes, “whatever their motives, entrepreneurs are doing more than anyone else to fulfill the Bible's practical mandate to improve the living standards, and the dignity, of the disadvantaged.”<sup>53</sup> He poses this provocative but revealing question: “Who has done more to eradicate poverty and suffering in the Third World, Bill Gates or Mother Teresa?”<sup>54</sup> We have already considered the evidence that supports his implied answer.

51. D'Souza, *Virtue of Prosperity*, p. 124.

52. D'Souza, *Virtue of Prosperity*, p. 125.

53. D'Souza, *Virtue of Prosperity*, pp. 126-27.

54. D'Souza, *Virtue of Prosperity*, p. 127.

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But just how significant is this answer? I have already indicated that the mere achievement of capitalism — extraordinary as it is — does not by itself give warrant to Christian affirmation of it, much less our deep involvement in its culture. Nevertheless, it does seem fairly unappreciative not to respect that achievement for what it is. Perhaps our initial reaction should be something like the response that Jesus gave to the scribes and Pharisees, who believed his power to cast out demons was from Beelzebub. With their ideological assumptions, what other explanation could there be? We, too, may be inclined to wonder, “How can Satan cast out Satan?” (Mark 3:23). Given the enormity of the exorcism that capitalism, under the auspices of unlikely liberators like T. J. Rodgers, has performed, that is at least a fair question.

Furthermore, close attention to what Rodgers was saying in the interview suggests that entrepreneurs typically acquire wealth by a most extraordinary means — one that does not look at all immoral. As background, it is very helpful to keep in mind (as many moral theologians seem not to do) that ancient Christian teaching on acquisition and enjoyment emerged in economic conditions very unlike the ones we are trying to get clear on (new things, again). For instance, in ancient and medieval economies the primary form of wealth was land — a fixed commodity — and that is one reason why these economies were nearly stagnant and almost everyone was poor. Rarely did they enjoy cycles of growth on any national scale.<sup>55</sup> On the contrary, in such systems the only way to acquire non-hereditary wealth was to get it (usually by force) from someone else. So in these economies, the acquisition of wealth typically (almost necessarily) happened by means of war, taxation, or (presuming a difference) outright theft. The old habits of acquisition were thus mostly immoral, to say the least. It would have been true to say that an essential injustice existed in these actions.

For the same reasons, it also was true in an almost necessary way that when someone consumed a non-essential item (that is, enjoyed it) she or he was depriving someone else of the only means available for assistance (charity). Under such conditions, who would dare to disagree with Augustine’s judgment that keeping portions of wealth for personal enjoyment most often was a grave injustice? In those economic circumstances, it

55. Brian Griffiths, *The Creation of Wealth* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1985), pp. 23-31.

would be strange indeed — bizarre, even — to have moral theologians strongly affirming enjoyment as a good thing. John Wesley’s words to the typical rich would indeed be on the mark. And Hauerwas’s widely shared complaint about the essential injustice of acquisition would be, too. But is the achievement of affluence in modern economics colored by the immorality of what amounts to theft, or even murder? Rather clearly not.

The truth is that in modern market economies the main way that people acquire wealth is not by taking it away from someone else, but by taking part in its *creation*. This is fundamentally different from the way wealth was acquired in the ancient world — and for the most part, it is what businesses and corporations do. That is what the habit of acquisition is essentially all about under working capitalism. Walter Lippmann understood the moral implication of this uniquely modern phenomenon better than most in the first half of the twentieth century. “For the first time in human history,” he wrote in his extraordinary book, *The Great Society*, people had brought about “a way of producing wealth in which the good fortune of others multiplied their own,” and “the golden rule was economically sound.”<sup>56</sup> This almost magical process at work in an entire nation is what Lippmann meant by the Good Society in his essay of that name.<sup>57</sup>

This is the same point that T. J. Rodgers made in his own irritable way by reminding Sister Gormley of what his corporation did for thousands of people. By running his enterprise properly, he insured the enduring liberation of people from the evils of poverty, and he established them in conditions of enduring prosperity. What this means, as Lippmann understood, is quite remarkable. Acquisition and enjoyment in an economy such as this are not just ends for oneself alone; they are also the means to similar ends for others. This example is replicated hundreds of thousands of times under democratic capitalism. So it seems that if the acquisition and enjoyment of wealth under capitalism is typically immoral, it is not immoral in the way it was under ancient economies. Indeed (like it or not), its creative liberating dynamics seem to qualify it as a candidate for virtue.

Of course, the modern form of acquisition in view might be immoral for other reasons. It might be that the entire system works only because people ignore the inefficiencies of ethics. That is the picture of capitalism

56. Cited in the Lay Commission on Catholic Social Teaching and the U.S. Economy’s letter *Toward the Future*, p. 23.

57. Lay Commission, *Toward the Future*, p. 23.

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conveyed by the old television series *Dallas*, with its main character J. R. Ewing. The Big Oil man J. R. never missed a moral shortcut in his life, and when asked the secret of his success he quickly replied, “Once you forget integrity, the rest is easy.” Several years ago I bought a used car from a local dealer only to discover that they had cleverly disguised several annoying and expensive defects that I had to repair. This example, too, may be multiplied thousands of times in a free economy. People in business are free to cheat other people. But one of the lessons that D’Souza took away from his interviews with dozens of successful people in business is that, contrary to what we might expect, “capitalism makes people behave better than they otherwise would.”<sup>58</sup>

As Adam Smith argued centuries before, D’Souza judges that “capitalism civilizes greed, just as marriage civilizes lust.”<sup>59</sup> For instance, Rodgers explained to him that he did not write himself a huge salary because then his vice presidents would be envious, would want more money, and would have bad morale. All that would hurt his business. In this light, D’Souza contends that, in general, “The point isn’t just that capitalism makes society better off; it is that capitalism makes us better people by limiting the scope of our vices.”<sup>60</sup> Rodgers liked to think of himself as a bit of a scoundrel — he ignored speed bumps as he drove. But in running his corporation he was anything but a scoundrel — he could not ignore the “speed bumps” and be successful, too. The system not only does not prevent good behavior, it rewards it. For my part, I never went back to that car dealer, and I told everyone I knew how its managers had cheated me. (I would like to say that my actions made them repent, or drove them out of business, but, alas, they did not.) But at any rate, in any association or community, virtuous behavior towards one’s fellow members improves one’s standing among them. Conversely, vicious behavior does quite the opposite. To the extent that capitalism is a network of free human communities and associations, the same can be said for economic standing within it.

But perhaps the acquisition and enjoyment we have in view are immoral for quite different reasons. Maybe the modern forms of these economic actions, on the whole, do bring about good for many others, even as they dispose the agents to be morally better people. But perhaps the net ef-

58. D’Souza, *Virtue of Prosperity*, p. 126.

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fect is the growth of extremes between the haves and the have-nots that are morally intolerable. One of the most common mantras of modern ethics and moral theology is that the rich are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer, and that the one happens at the cost of the other. But perhaps like real mantras, the more we repeat them, the more obvious it seems that they are true, even if they are not. Once more, I will let D’Souza speak on the subject, for it seems to me that his answer is exactly right:

But what if these premises turn out to be false? What if the rich are getting richer *because they have created new wealth that didn’t exist before*? What if we live in a society where the rich are getting richer and the poor are also getting richer, but not at the same pace? If you drive a Mercedes and I have to walk, that’s a radical difference of lifestyle that might warrant speculation. But is it a big deal if you drive a Mercedes and I drive a Hyundai?<sup>61</sup>

In an economy based on the creation of wealth, the rich indeed get richer. But so do the poor. D’Souza makes the same judgment I am defending. “It turns out that our old categories for examining the issue are largely obsolete. We need a new way of thinking about inequality.”<sup>62</sup> For the inequality that exists under successful modern capitalism is not at all clearly immoral in the way inequality was under ancient social economies. In D’Souza’s example I see nothing clearly immoral at all in the extreme wealth and enjoyment of the one person over and against the relative affluence of the other.

It is right, nonetheless, to point out, as Ron Sider and others do, that in the U.S. some thirty million people still lack health insurance — but not as a moral criticism of modern habits of acquisition and enjoyment under capitalism.<sup>63</sup> For without consumer capitalism it seems obvious that there would be no health insurance at all (much less an advanced medical system with costs to insure people against). Because of modern capitalism 230 million Americans enjoy the previously unimagined benefit of medical care under the guarantees of health insurance. Because of capitalism we can actually *contemplate* extending this luxury (and it is a luxury) further to include everyone in a system of the very best medical care in history.

61. D’Souza, *Virtue of Prosperity*, pp. 71-72 (italics mine).

62. D’Souza, *Virtue of Prosperity*, p. 72.

63. “The Ethical Challenges of Global Capitalism” (transcript of a debate between Ron Sider and Michael Novak), *Discernment* 8, no. 1 (winter 2001): 2.

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But perhaps our modern habits of production and consumption are immoral when placed in the light of another, very different and new thing that the selective success of capitalism has brought into existence. That is the enormous gap between the wealth of the fortunate nations and the poverty of people almost everywhere else. By some estimates there are around one billion people in the world who live in literal material poverty, and another two or three billion who live on the edge of it.<sup>64</sup> These numbers refer to suffering that is, in both its intensity and scope, hideously evil and unacceptable to the Christian. But are they grounds for believing that our habits of acquisition and enjoyment are also evil? For this to be so, at least one of two things must be true, or, as some believe, both. One is that our economic habits are the direct (or indirect) cause of poverty in these other societies. The other is that we have the moral obligation to change our habits dramatically enough so that we can redirect our wealth to elimination of poverty and suffering elsewhere.

These questions require expanded answers that go beyond the reasonable scope of the book. Nevertheless, I have included an addendum on globalism and the ethics of global poverty as an epilogue, and in it I have suggested the direction that Christian thinking might take. To the first consideration, I will simply point out that pioneering new work in world economics strongly encourages us not to think of our economic habits as a primary or even secondary cause of worldwide poverty. If anything, they are a primary cause of whatever prosperity these poor nations have, and a dramatic reduction of our consumption and production would thus have the unintended outcome, in the long run, of creating more poverty. Moreover, if this research holds, the primary causes of poverty in these societies are legal and political, and thus internal to those societies, not external to them. Regarding the second issue of our obligations, I will argue that globalism (our technical connectedness with people everywhere in the world) does not by itself generate the strong moral obligations for affluent Western Christians that moral writers commonly claim that it does. In the light of certain key biblical narratives on social ethics, I do not believe that the obligations we have to the “global poor” are in conflict with rightly formed habits of acquisition and enjoyment. For the time being, however, I believe it is best to put these arguments on hold and to put them to the test at the end of our investigation, rather than at the beginning.

64. Sider, *Rich Christians*, pp. 1-20.

Now, what all this means in part is, as the writers of the Lay Commission Document (cited just above) indicate, that one effect of capitalism has been that the “ancient dichotomy between self-interest and the common good has at the very least been greatly diminished.”<sup>65</sup> In other words, Adam Smith was right in believing that capitalism would make something possible that had never been widely possible in economic life before — the pursuit of socially “enlightened” self-interest. The strong way to put this implication is to say that it makes possible — encourages rather — the pursuit of material gain for individuals without doing any harm to society, or to other nations. On this view, the properly formed pursuit of self-interest is generally good for everyone and everything concerned.

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*PLEONEXIA* AND MATERIALISM

Christian writers do not just claim that the habits of capitalism are socially unjust. Moral theologians like Hauerwas also typically assert that the habits of modern economic culture are very like what the ancients called *pleonexia*.<sup>66</sup> This is the spiritually corrupting vice of insatiable desire to have more and more material things. Now, there is no doubt that our modern habits include a desire for more; to consume is simply to acquire and to enjoy one more thing or other. And there is no doubt that this desire sometimes is insatiable and spiritually corruptive. But is this desire in every instance a vice along the lines of the one described by the ancients? Is the desire for more in every instance an indication of the modern evil of materialism?

This is a very difficult question for Christians, in large part because whatever answer we give grows from interpretations of difficult biblical texts. Indeed, just as there is a strong negative disposition toward affluence in moral theology, there is a time-honored tradition of asceticism in the spiritual teachings of the church. The ancient monastic vow presumes that life with a minimum of possessions (poverty), and certainly without luxuries, is spiritually better than life with abundance. Even among Protestants, certain elements of this tradition are making a strong comeback in our

65. Lay Commission, *Toward the Future*, p. 23.

66. Stanley Hauerwas, “Christian Schooling,” pp. 219-26.

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day. Their main form is not rigorous asceticism, but a gospel of simpler living, which extols the virtue of radically reducing one’s consumption for spiritual as well as moral reasons. This is in response to a growing awareness that something is badly wrong — spiritually wrong — with the way the economic culture is affecting the spiritual character of the church.<sup>67</sup> The trouble with these approaches is that they cannot very well integrate the strong biblical theme — and it is a very strong theme from beginning to end — of physical delight as God’s ultimate vision for human beings (as I argue in later chapters). The only way to make this point, however, is to go through the texts in detail, and then to offer an alternative to these more ascetic approaches as we go along.

But are there broader cultural and psychological reasons for thinking that our economic habits are self-destructive in a spiritual way? Quite a few philosophically diverse thinkers believe so. Conservative Christians like Don Eberly and William Bennett, among others, like to extol the inner virtues of previous generations in contrast to those of today.<sup>68</sup> On the more liberally expansive side, writers like Wendell Berry, Joseph Schumpeter, and Daniel Bell all predict that among the fruits of modern capitalism will be the ruin of the human spirit. In 1976, Bell wrote the highly regarded book *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*, in which he brilliantly sharpened Weber’s picture of capitalism’s evolution from a culture of frugality, hard work, and delayed gratification into one of rank hedonism and debauchery.<sup>69</sup>

But if we consider my earlier argument that capitalism rewards virtue more than it does vice, the spiritual situation does not seem nearly that grim. There is a spiritual connection, after all, between dignified work — the creation and realization of one’s vision — and reaping the fruits of that work in relative security and freedom. Perhaps too few scholars and Christian theologians have had this experience to appreciate it; I do not know. But I gather that what entrepreneurs do is not entirely different from what scholars do when they envision and write (and even market) their courses,

67. See Wuthnow, *Rethinking Materialism*. All the authors in this collection focus on the negative spiritual and moral effects of acquisition in American society. They also, however, reveal the awkward ambivalence I remarked on earlier. See pp. 8-15, in which Wuthnow treats ambivalence as a “legacy” of Christians on this subject.

68. For a very good survey of conservative Christian worries about affluence, see D’Souza, *Virtue of Prosperity*, pp. 48-49.

69. See D’Souza, *Virtue of Prosperity*, p. 49.



articles, and books. The sense of spiritual goodness and completion that comes when these efforts are successful is unmistakable to anyone who has had the great good fortune to have and to enjoy them.

For instance, I imagine that the makers of Mercedes-Benz automobiles take immense pride in the engineering and craftsmanship of these superb cars. I imagine that the production of these vehicles brings with it feelings of fulfillment and aesthetic pleasure that are not unlike what the great masters of visual art experience when they produce great art. I think we would have to have very powerful reasons for judging that these feelings are unhealthy. Furthermore, I know many people who can afford luxury cars like the Lexus or Mercedes, and (aside from the investment advantage that gives them — these cars keep their value), I also know how much pleasure they get from the nearly perfect performance of those vehicles. I think it is very like what other friends of mine get from the pieces of fine art that they own, or from the great books that they read. I see no reason not to make this comparison. Outside of base resentment, I see no reason at all to think that either form of affection is unhealthy materialism. Why not instead wish that everyone could enjoy life at those levels?

There is a growing body of writing that is devoted entirely to showing that gaining wealth does not bring gains in happiness. Clearly this is sometimes the case; there are lots of people whose habits as consumers look very much like what Walter Benjamin called “the fetishism of merchandise.” Buying stuff does not always make people at all happy. Often it leaves them empty, especially if their lives are empty to begin with. D’Souza addresses this issue in the context of high technology; his comments seem to me as sensible as they are honest and amusing:

This *condescension*, however, fails to take into account the genuine fascination, charm and delight that new acquisitions and toys give us. Wouldn’t you like to have a Jacuzzi with a built-in music system in your bathroom? How about a St. John outfit that makes you the very definition of elegance? Or a TV screen that drops out of your ceiling? Or a computer system for your car that talks to you and gives you street directions? These are fairly cool items.<sup>70</sup>

In response to those who complain that the accumulation of wealth brings

70. D’Souza, *Virtue of Prosperity*, p. 243 (my italics).

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nothing but unhappiness, D’Souza recalls a friend’s use of the familiar quip that “people who say that money doesn’t buy happiness simply don’t know where to shop.”<sup>71</sup> That, or they have never seen the looks I used to see every year on Christmas morning when my kids woke up to shiny new bicycles, or to some brand new computer game station. Only a pure curmudgeon could look into their delighted faces and see the spiritual corruption of *pleonexia*. As will be argued later, we human beings are designed by God to enjoy material things — in the right way, of course. The point, though, is that there is a right way.

But not all people do enjoy things in a way that is right. People who lack spiritual resources and are miserable to begin with often become even more miserable amid their possessions. Increased wealth merely gives them more ways to be unhappy. Even people who are not miserable to begin with may become spoiled and lost in mindless, obsessive consumption. That is what mindless and thoughtless people do when they become rich. They become mindless, thoughtless rich people. I have known quite a few people in that condition. But I also know people — many of them Christians — who have a deep spiritual sense of things about them, and who are also very affluent. These people are not miserable; on the contrary, they know that wealth is not the foundation of their existence. But they love being rich both for the freedom it gives them to enjoy life and for the immense power it enables them to offer on behalf of others. In the lives of these people affluence is itself a very great good.

In my introduction I cited the statement that Michael Novak made to D’Souza in an interview, and it pertains to this point. A good number of rich people are learning, through wealth, that there is more to life than bread, and it is affluence that thus “leads people to God.”<sup>72</sup> Among other things, Novak’s comment implies that, just as there is a true spirituality for being poor, there is a genuine spirituality for being rich. It remains to see from our scriptures what that unusual kind of spirituality might be.

When D’Souza contacted Daniel Bell, whose 1976 social critique of capitalism was among the fiercest of its generation, Bell strangely refused to talk about his earlier dire view of its failings. He had apparently withdrawn his influential thesis without notice. And in their telephone conversation Bell seemed annoyed by his own previous perspective, noting that

71. D’Souza, *Virtue of Prosperity*, p. 243.

72. D’Souza, *Virtue of Prosperity*, pp. 143-44.

“the truth is that the world is a much better place today than at any time during the twentieth century.”<sup>73</sup>

At the end of his discussion D’Souza — himself an immigrant from a poor nation — offers one last bit of wisdom to intellectuals in the West. He counsels that their alarm over affluence seems to many people on the outside almost comical, like strangely thankless whining:

At a time when people in poor countries are trying desperately to better their condition, you cannot lecture them about the moral and social perils of affluence; they would surely think that you were joking. It’s not that they would disagree with you; they simply wouldn’t know what you were talking about.<sup>74</sup>

Do Western thinkers truly mean to imply that the poor are really better off in conditions of non-affluence? For those seeking liberation from poverty for themselves and for their people, that indeed seems a strange and self-defeating premise to adopt.

At the end of this chapter, then, I come to the provisional conclusion that modern economic habits of acquisition and enjoyment as they flourish under capitalism are not necessarily immoral. Nor is it obvious that they are always destructive to the human psyche and thus to the inner spiritual strength of society. They can be shaped into habits that are immoral and destructive, to be sure. In a society like ours, excessive hedonism is an option. But it seems that it is not a necessity, and the evidence is the affluent people in whom it is not present. It remains to see whether sacred Scripture supports this judgment. If it does (and I shall argue that it does), it remains to see how and to what extent it does so. In the rest of this book, then, on this assumption, I shall seek to forge a theology of affluence for Christians seeking to live with integrity within this culture of capitalism.

73. D’Souza, *Virtue of Prosperity*, p. 141. When asked about his previous understanding of capitalism as the cause of spiritual and social decay, Bell responded, “Don’t talk to me about that. It’s all bullshit.” P. 142.

74. D’Souza, *Virtue of Prosperity*, p. 232.