

REDEFINING THE MEANING OF 'MORALITY':

A CHAPTER IN THE CULTURAL POLITICS OF CAPITALISM

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ABSTRACT: Taking its clue from Max Scheler's *Ressentiment* and Max Weber's work on the "spirit" of capitalism, this article argues that the rise of capitalism brought not merely new economic institutions, such as private property and free markets, but also a reconception of morality in accord with the demands of those institutions. Moreover, this new morality, as Scheler argued, was based in the very sort of resentment of which Friederich Nietzsche had accused Christianity. The paper identifies two places where the "transvaluation of values" entailed in such resentment is evident: in the bourgeois notion of "private property" and especially in the perversion of life and utility values. Life ceases to stand as its own value but must make itself useful for capitalist profit-making: it must be earned.

Friederich Nietzsche, in *The Genealogy of Morals*, unleashed the harshest indictment ever directed against Christianity: he accused it of a most profound perversion of values—what he termed the “transvaluation of values”—and diagnosed Western civilization, which had fallen under its sway, “sick.” In perhaps that work's most poignant passage, Nietzsche described the genesis of Christian morality:

they [the imagined inventors of Christian morality] are transmuting weakness into merit....

Impotence, which cannot retaliate, into kindness; pusillanimity into humility; submission before those one hates into obedience to One of whom they say has commanded this submission—they call him God. The inoffensiveness of the weak, his cowardice, his ineluctable standing, and waiting at doors, are being given honorific titles such as patience; to be *unable* to avenge oneself—even forgiveness (“for they know not what *they* do—we alone know what *they* do). Also there's talk of loving one's enemy—accompanied by much sweat. Now they tell me that not only are they better than the mighty of this earth, whose spittle they must lick (not from fear—by no means—but because God commands us to honor our superiors), but they are even better off, or at least they will be better off someday. But I've had all I can stand. The smell is too much for me. This shop where they manufacture ideals seems to me to stink of lies.¹

¹ *The Birth of Tragedy and The Genealogy of Morals*

Christianity, according to Nietzsche, seethes with resentment: out of its own inner, vital-psychic sickness and envy for what it is too weak to claim for itself, Christianity has degraded strength into a disvalue, while elevating weakness into a positive value.

Max Scheler, in his *Ressentiment*, defended Christianity against Nietzsche's fierce assault, charging that Nietzsche badly misunderstood the Christian message, confusing the institutionalized church for the essence of Christianity. True Christian forgiveness and love of one's enemies do not stem from weakness, as Nietzsche claimed, but from strength—one has the power to retaliate but chooses not to do so—and only when based in strength do such Christian virtues have meaning. Nietzsche did, however, Scheler argued, have a proper insight into the fundamental value perversion of modernity, but such a perversion stems not from Christianity, as Nietzsche contended, but from what Scheler termed the “ethos of industrialism”. Drawing from the investigations of classical German social scientists, such as Werner Sombart, Max Weber, Ferdinand Toennies, and Georg Simmel, into the history and psychology of modern industrial life, Scheler applied Nietzsche's notions of the “transvaluation of values” and “*ressentiment*” in a most poignant and unsettling critique of modern economic life. The aim of this paper is to extend Scheler's analysis and criticism, focusing upon two main areas where the perversion of values in modern economic life is highly apparent: 1) the notion of ‘freedom’ entailed in market theory and 2) the relationship of instrumental to life values.

I. The Virtue of Economy and the ‘Freedom’ of Markets

The virtue of economizing was captured in the Scholastic notion of *liberalitas*,² derived from the Aristotelian notion of moderation (*sophrosyne*) and designating behavior befitting a free person. To be sufficiently self-controlled to

(1887), trans. Francis Golffin (Garden City, 1956), pp. 180-81. Emphases in the original.

² Sombart, *The Quintessence of Capitalism: A Study of the History and Psychology of the Modern Business Man*, trans. and ed. M. Epstein (1915; New York, 1967), p. 240.

moderate one's expenditures according to one's true needs and income, not only results in fiscal responsibility but also *liberates* one from impulse and desire in order to pursue authentic fulfillment (*eudaimonia*). By contrast, what Aristotle described as the "natural slave" is unable to moderate his/her consumption, is bound to his/her desires, and is consequently unable to grow as a person toward his/her own proper ends, or *telos*. Indeed, only for the free person is economizing a virtue, for only s/he does so out of free choice and self-control, while the natural slave does so only from necessity.³

In the Christian tradition the virtue of economy has often been tied to the ideals of voluntary poverty and sacrifice. Meister Eckhart, for example, interpreted Jesus's proclamation, "Blessed are those who are poor in spirit" [Mt. 5:3], to mean, "he is a poor person who wills nothing and knows nothing, and has nothing."⁴ Only through the emptying (*kenosis*) of oneself of all desire to possess "self and things", is one free to receive the fullness, the riches, of God's heaven. Indeed, Scripture is replete with warnings against attachments to material wealth, the most famous of which is found in Matthew (6: 19-21): "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart be also." Would-be followers of Jesus are unable to follow him precisely because they are unable to surrender their attachments to earthly possessions. Thus, the virtue of economy, in this Christian tradition, is the capacity, stemming from spiritual strength, not weakness, as Nietzsche claimed, to empty oneself of ego and its desires

³ Sombart's analysis is supported by Michel Foucault, *The Care of the Self*, Vol. 3 of *The History of Sexuality* (New York, 1986), pp. 39-66, and "On the Genealogy of Ethics: an Overview of Work in Progress," interview in Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, 2nd ed. (Chicago, 1983), pp. 229-52.

⁴ *Breakthrough* (Garden City, 1981), p. 213. See also Matthew Fox, O.P., Commentary on Eckhart, p. 219, and Erich Fromm, *To Have or To Be?* (New York, 1981), pp. 48-54.

and wants so that one can thereby be *free* to follow one's conscience, i.e., to follow Christ, to turn toward the True and the Good—to turn toward God—and to serve Christ by serving one's neighbor. Correspondingly, authentic freedom comes only with self-control of one's desires. If I cannot control my desire for luxury, I am a slave to all those who can provide or deprive me of it, and if I am hungry and know not how to fast, my hunger might drive me to violate my own conscience. But if I desire nothing, not even my own life, then no power on earth can compel me to perform evil: I am radically free to seek the Good.

The rise of the bourgeoisie in Renaissance Italy brought the secularization of the virtue of economy: saving and thrift became valued as means to increased earthly, rather than spiritual, wealth. Sombart described the rise of what he sarcastically termed "Holy economy":

Not enforced thrift, mind you, but thrift exercised willingly. Poor folk knew the first kind of thrift from bitter experience. But now rich men became thrifty, and this was the unheard thing. Before long, the original doctrine of not spending more than you were earning gave rise to its corollary of actually spending less than you were earning. The idea of saving thus came into the world; of saving not as a necessity but as a virtue. Thrifty management now became the ideal even of the rich, in so far as they had become "bourgeois." ... Seigniorial conduct was no longer regarded as the ideal to aim at; a well-ordered economy was what mattered most. Thrift was loved; thrift was elevated to the position of being the one virtue of economic activities.⁵

Closely following monetary thrift was thrift in the use of time: "Time is money," as Benjamin Franklin proclaimed:

In short, the way to wealth, if you desire it, is as plain as the way to market. It depends chiefly on two words, industry and frugality; that is, waste neither time nor money, but make the best use of both. Without industry and frugality nothing will do, and with them everything. He that gets all he can honestly, and saves all he gets, will certainly become rich⁶

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 106. See also Scheler, p. 158.

⁶ *The Writings of Benjamin Franklin*, ed. Albert Henry Smyth (1907), vol. 2, pp. 370, 372, as quoted by Sombart, p. 117.

The new bourgeois spirit, Sombart claimed, could be summarized in three words: "Frugality, Industry, Moderation"—that "was the motto that might have been observed hung in letters of gold in many a warehouse and shop."⁷

For what purpose, though, was this wealth, to which the virtues of economy lead, to be amassed? Franklin answered: "liberty"! Wealth enables one to be independent of others:

think what you do when you run into Debt; *You give to another, Power over your liberty.... The Borrower is a Slave to the Lender, and the Debtor to the Creditor*, disdain the Chain, preserve your Freedom; and maintain your Independence: Be *industrious and free; be frugal and free.*⁸

Wealth is to be valued not in order to increase effectual demand for consumable goods—that comes later in the history of capitalism—but as a means to increased freedom. Implicit in Franklin's claim seems to be the assumption that the generation of wealth is an individual and not a social matter, that it does not require interdependence. What concerns us here, though, is the peculiar way in which the emerging bourgeois mind conceived the virtue of economy in terms of personal liberty and how such a notion of economy contrasts to that of an earlier time: economizing enables one to amass wealth, which in turn liberates one from dependencies upon others, but for ancient and medieval moralities the desire for and attachment to unlimited wealth posed one of the greatest threats to one's freedom! Here we see the beginning of the transvaluation of the values of economy and freedom. Let us look at its further development.

Both classical and neoclassical economics have held that the proper end of economic activity is consumption and the satisfaction of consumer demand, which the same theories hold to be unlimited. Adam Smith is most explicit:

Consumption is the sole end and purpose of all production; and the interest of the producer ought to be attended to, only so far as it may be necessary for promoting that of the consumer. The maxim is so perfectly self-evident, that it would be absurd to attempt to prove it.⁹

John Maynard Keynes wholeheartedly concurs: "All production is for the purpose of ultimately satisfying a consumer."¹⁰ 'Economy' is identified in bourgeois morality with 'efficiency', rather than with conservation, and is measured by hypostatized units of exchange value: it means getting the *most* consumption for one's money, even when that entails a proliferation of wants. But a notion of economy that looks to consumption, fueled by unlimited desires, as its ultimate end, is the direct antithesis of earlier notions that based economy in restraint, and even the nullification, of such desires and the *minimizing* of consumption.¹¹

II. Instrumental and Life Values

According to Scheler, the transvaluation of values in modern life is most clearly visible in the perversion of the values of instrumentality and life:

the *most profound* perversion of ... values is the *subordination of vital values to utility values*, which gains force as modern morality develops. Since the victory of the industrial and commercial spirit ... this principle has been penetrating ever more deeply, affecting the most concrete value judgments. Putting it briefly, we can say that the "*noble*" is being subordinated to the "*useful*"—"noble" standing for those qualities that constitute the value of life in living organisms.¹²

Indeed, this perversion, Scheler claims, is the very essence of

⁷ Ibid., p. 121.

⁸ Franklin, "The Way to Wealth" (1757), in *The Spirit of American Philosophy*, ed. Gerald E. Myers (New York, 1970), pp. 129-30. Emphases in the original.

⁹ *An Inquiry into the Nature and Cause of the Wealth of Nations* (1776), ed. Edward Cannal (Chicago, 1976), II, 179.

¹⁰ *The General Theory of Employment, Interest, and Money* (New York, 1936), p. 46.

¹¹ Scheler, p. 159, and E. F. Schumacher, *Small Is Beautiful: Economics as is People Mattered* (New York, 1973), p. 5.

¹² Scheler, pp. 154-55. Emphases in the original.

"the ruling *ethos of industrialism*: the exaltation of utility values and instrumental values over vital and organic values It is rooted in the *ressentiment* of the vitally unfit against the fit, of those who are partially dead against the living!"¹³

In short, Scheler accuses the modern bourgeoisie of the very resentment that Nietzsche ascribes to Christianity!

This resentment had grown steadily since the thirteenth century, when the bourgeoisie was still under the domination of the old aristocracy and the Church. Then suddenly, Scheler describes,

This *ressentiment* exploded and its values spread and were victorious. As the merchants and representatives of industry came to dominate, especially in the Western countries, *their* judgments, tastes, and inclinations became the selective determinants of cultural production, even in its intellectual and spiritual aspects. Their symbols and conceptions of the ultimate nature of things ... came to replace older religious symbols, and everywhere *their* type of valuation became the criterion of "morality" as such.

....

[T]he merchant's and the industrialist's professional values, the qualities that enable this particular type of man to succeed and do business, are set up as *generally valid* (indeed the "highest") *moral values*.

What are these instrumental qualities that the industrial ethos has elevated to the status of the highest moral values? Scheler continues:

Cleverness, quick adaptability, a calculating mind, a desire for "security" and for unhampered transactions in all directions (and the qualities that are fit to bring about these conditions), a sense for the "calculability" of all circumstances, a disposition for steadiness in work and industriousness, economy and accuracy in concluding and observing agreements: these are the cardinal virtues now.¹⁴

Sombart notes that for the early bourgeoisie, "Wealth was undoubtedly prized, and to obtain it was the passionate desire of every heart. But wealth was not an

end in itself. Its only virtue lay in the creation or preservation of life-values."¹⁵ In later bourgeois morality, though, life is made accountable to wealth and the efficient production that creates it, and the older notion of a 'right to life' gave way to 'earning a living':

now life itself—the sheer *existence* of an individual, a race, a nation—must be justified by its *usefulness* for a *wider* community. It is not enough if this life contains higher values than usefulness can represent—its existence must be "earned." The right to live and exist, which the older preindustrial morality included among the "natural rights," is denied both in theory and in practice.¹⁶

The impersonal forces of the market—what Ludwig von Mises terms "the discipline of the market"—compel one to serve the abstract goals of maximal profits and gross domestic product, regardless of whether such activity is life-enhancing or life-destroying. Life ceases to exist for its own sake but must make itself economically accountable. Throughout bourgeois society there is much concern for the 'health' and 'growth' of businesses and economies but little concern for the health and growth of persons: indeed, the latter is willingly sacrificed for the former. Scheler writes: "*objects* have become *man's lord and master*, and the *machine* has come to dominate *life*. The 'objects' have progressively grown in vigor and intelligence, in size and beauty—while man, who created them, has more and more become a cog in his own machine."¹⁷ Economist E. F. Schumacher made a similar point: "Call a thing immoral or ugly, soul-destroying or a degradation of man, a peril to the peace of the world or to the well being of future generations, as long as you have not shown it to be uneconomic you have not really questioned its right to exist, grow, and prosper."¹⁸

In the more advanced stages of the industrial ethos the transvaluation of instrumental and life values becomes internalized. That is, persons' own *self-value* is

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 162.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 155-56. Emphases in the original. See also Sombart, pp. 121-29.

¹⁵ Scheler, p. 155.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 158. Emphases in the original.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 172. Emphases in the original.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

tied to their marketability as economically productive machines: one 'sells oneself' in the labor market and packages and 'brands' oneself in whatever manner is necessary to make a sale. Posted on my university's bulletin boards were advertisements proclaiming, "*Your Future Depends on How You Market Yourself.*" And on this recent "Made In America Tour" with Jay-Z, Kanye West urged young African Americans to learn how to "package, brand, and market" themselves, in order to, like him and Jay-Z, "make it in America." Moreover, in an age that values machines and gadgets over life, people increasingly see themselves as well-oiled, smoothly functioning machines and adopt mechanistic views of life in order to preserve their senses of self-worth: one strives to enhance one's productivity and efficiency by multi-tasking and implementing better time-management techniques. As Scheler writes, "'life' itself no longer is an original phenomenon, but merely a complex of mechanical and mental processes. The mechanistic view of life sees the living being itself as a 'machine,' its 'organization' as a sum of useful tools which differ only in degree from artificially produced tools."¹⁹ Largely absent in the modern individual is an inner sense of intrinsic, irreducible worth as a person: one sees oneself as a relatively cheaply replaceable piece of capital—indeed, we often speak of 'human capital' and 'human resources' without any sense of having said anything oxymoronic—and is thus driven continuously to affirm one's value in terms of one's economic productivity and efficiency.

The perversion of instrumental and life values is manifest, too, in the bourgeois family. Economy's primordial rootedness in life-values, rather than in values of production, is shown in its original meaning as '*oikos-nomia*', namely, care of the human household, whose heart is the constellation of familial relations: the well-being of the family is the original measure of economy. Increasingly, though, as Scheler claimed, families adjust—relocate and restructure themselves—

to industry's demands. Like individuals, families often see themselves mechanistically, e.g., in terms of their 'functionality' or 'dysfunctionality', and model themselves upon industrial standards of productivity and efficiency. Persons often see their family positions in terms of economic functions: economist Thorstein Veblen's description of the bourgeois wife as an expression of her husband's "conspicuous leisure" and "conspicuous consumption," illustrates such a tendency.²⁰ Children, too, are viewed as commodities or investments: Nobel laureate Gary Becker's *Treatise on the Family*²¹ illustrates this point, and Edward Albee, in his play *The American Dream*, satirizes it. I think, though, especially of the father who loudly complained to me when his son changed his major from business to philosophy, "I expect a better return on my investment!"

Earlier social thinkers had already observed much of that to which Sombart and Scheler pointed. Max Weber, for example, already observed how, in its efforts to make the world wholly calculable, for the sake of increased efficiency in production and the unlimited amassment of wealth, the spirit of capitalism reduces what is spontaneous and alive into what is predictable and dead, viz., commodities. He summed up this 'spirit' in the words of Ferdinand Kuernberger: "They make tallow out of cattle and money out of men."²² Ferdinand Toennies, too, observed that the positive science underlying modern business and technology "reduces the living to the dead" in order to maximize efficiency in production.²³ Scheler, however, following Nietzsche, extended Weber's and Toennies's analyses by identifying the fundamental value perversion underlying such modern tendencies. He wrote, "We see that everything living and vital is eliminated from this strange picture. This world is an accumulation of logicians

²⁰ *The Theory of the Leisure Class: A Study of Institutions* (1899; New York, 1953).

²¹ (Cambridge, 1991).

²² *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (London, 1930), p. 51.

²³ *Community and Society*, trans. Charles P. Loomis (New York, 1963), p. 36.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 160.

standing in a huge engine room—bloodless, emotionless, without love or hatred.”²⁴ And he closes his *Ressentiment* with this chilling indictment of modern bourgeois life:

If we consider the transvaluation of the relation between tool and organ in its totality, we must conclude that the spirit of modern civilization does not constitute “progress” (as Spencer thought), but a *decline* in the evolution of mankind. It represents the rule of the weak over the strong, of the clever over the noble, the rule of mere quantity over quality. It is a phenomenon of decadence, as is proved by the fact that everywhere it implies a *weakening of man’s central, guiding forces* as against the anarchy of his automatic impulses. The mere means are developed and the goals are forgotten. And that precisely is decadence!²⁵

Such is the transvaluation of instrumental and life values inherent in the “ethos of industrialism.”

Conclusion

It is important to note before closing that Sombart’s and Scheler’s criticism are directed *not* at the *institutions* of capitalism but at the ‘*spirit*’, in Weber’s sense, that animates them, although historically the latter grew up with the former. Consequently, Scheler is quick to note that such a ‘spirit’, or ‘ethos’, is often as much alive in the institutions of various socialisms as it is in capitalist enterprises,²⁶ and socialists can embody bourgeois values as well as capitalists. Thus, the above discussion should by no means be interpreted as favoring one ‘-ism’ over the other: both can and have a) bastardized the notions of economy and freedom and b) transvalued instrumental and life values in the wakes of their developments.

What is most called for, then, in response to these perversions of value is not the mere erection of economic institutions of one form or the other, or even of some third alternative. Rather, what is required is a radical rethinking of the value foundations for any future

economic edifice, and such is an enormous task, as Nietzsche well recognized: “What is this or that table of values really worth?’ must be viewed under a variety of perspectives, for the question ‘valuable to what end?’ is one of extraordinary complexity.” Surely “what is the proper end of economy?” is more than a strictly economic question. Indeed, mainstream economists claim that it is not an issue for economics at all, since economics is a science of *pure means*, the study of the efficient means for the attainment of ends already posited by individuals and social systems. We began this essay with Nietzsche’s indictment of the “transvaluation of values” in the modern West, and while we saw, following Scheler, that he misplaced the cause of that perversion, it is nonetheless appropriate that we return to him for advice in curing the ills that have been described: “All sciences are now under the obligation to prepare the ground for the future task ..., which is to solve the problem of value, to determine the true hierarchy of values.”²⁷ Nietzsche’s advice is sound, for surely such an enormous task is not the domain of any single discipline but of all disciplines together—indeed, of all humanity. Nothing, therefore, is more important for the science of economy than its joining hands with that larger humanity in rethinking what Nietzsche termed “the true hierarchy of values.”

²⁴ Ibid., p. 164.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 174. Emphases in the original.

²⁶ Manfred S. Frings, “Max Scheler: Capitalism—Its Philosophical Foundations,” *Philosophy Today* 30 (Spring 1986): 38.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 188.