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MSW v. Sirico: Part II

Michael Sean Winters | Jan. 30, 2013 Distinctly Catholic

Yesterday, I set out [1] the core of my economic argument against the proposition that the free market is adequate to care for the poor, an argument that was defended by Father Robert Sirico in our debate Monday night at the University of Colorado at Boulder. Today I turn to the ethical problems with the argument. (I had thought to include the deeper theological problems, but that is best left for tomorrow or this will be an overly long post.)

Whenever there is an economic catastrophe, of the kind we experienced in 2008, it is good to remember that such catastrophes always afflict the poor the hardest. In this sense, culture mimics nature: the wealthy who owned vacation homes struck by Hurricane Sandy could stay at their off-season homes, but the poor who lost their homes to the storm had to go to shelters. In the wake of a financial crisis, we are always told that it was caused by ?excess? on the part of a few bad apples. Of course, the day before the economic collapse, these bad apples were the geniuses, the risk-takers, the ones who got the really big bonuses.

If we are to blame these crises on the lack of sound moral formation by the actors in the economic drama, that does not really tell us much. If men were angels, almost any economic system would do. In fact, the system rewarded the behavior that led to excessive risk-taking. The banks, competing with one another, felt the need to take ever greater risks, and then to bet against the risks they had taken by creating derivatives. At the time, this was all pure genius and some people got very rich. But, it was a house of cards and, self-evidently, the system itself was incapable of stopping the excess before it led to catastrophe.

Why should ethical rules affect economic actors and not economic laws. Laws teach as well as enforce, a point made well by Cathleen Kaveny in her new book which I started on the plane ride out to Colorado. She noted the title of one of the principal civil rights laws of modern times is the Americans with Disabilities Act, not the Disabled Americans Act. The title of the law itself asks us all to look first not at the fact that the people who were the subject of the act are disabled but that they are American. The laws of the market, similarly, invite us to pay attention to certain things about human nature ? their acquisitiveness, their sense of competition, etc., - and not other things about human nature, such as our capacity for contemplation and solidarity.

Take the example of a fifty year old man who lost his job at a factory because the company introduced robotics. Now, none of us would think the government should have stepped in these last hundred years to subsidize the horse and buggy industry in the face of competition from the automobile industry. But, for that fifty year old who has been laid off permanently, is the market really free? Why would a company pay to re-train him when it can train a twenty-five year old in the same tasks? After all, training is a big payroll investment in any company, and with the fifty year old, the company can only reap its return on investment for fifteen years while investing in the twenty-five year old?s training would let the company reap a return for forty years. The market provides an incentive to let the fifty year old fend for himself, and so only the community and the government can step in to help re-train that fifty year old so that his last fifteen years of employment will be productive. (I should add that I intend to die in harness, and in my last moment, I hope some massive heart attack or stroke will take me,

and as my face falls forward into my computer, my nose will hit the ?publish? button on my final blog post!) But, the deeper question remains: why should the actors, and not the rules, be subject to ethical evaluation.

When Pope John Paul II was invested with the pallium in 1978, he gave a famous sermon that struck two themes: ?Fear not!? and ?Open wide the doors for Christ.? On that second theme, the Holy Father encouraged us to open wide the doors for Christ, he instructed us to open the doors of education, of culture, of state, of everything. He did not say ? ?Oh, but wait a minute. Economic rules are different. Keep those doors shut.? In short, there is nothing particularly Christian about the ethical foundations of the market.

Indeed, it is the case from reading Father Sirico?s writings that ethics is always an ?add-on.? By way of example, he writes about globalization in his book and states, ?This increasing ability to share our God-given and complementary gifts with one another holds out the possibility of enlarging the scope of our communion and solidarity.? Okay, I will stipulate to that. But globalization also holds out the possibility of worker exploitation and a race to the bottom for wages among different underdeveloped countries. This is because there is not intrinsically Christian, or moral, about the free market.

Let us look at the behavior the market requires. What values does it celebrate? Who are its heroes? The market celebrates the self-made man, not the man who evidences solidarity. The market, drenched in Calvinistic roots, celebrates frugality and thrift, not gratuitousness and generosity. The market requires self-assertiveness, not self-surrender. The market is all about activity and not at all about contemplation. The market evidences competition not cooperation. The morals of the market leave out fully half of the Christian moral framework!

Father Sirico answered this charge in the debate by stating that the market is not specifically Christian, it is a free, empty place into which we bring our moral values. I deny that it is a free space: As noted above, the market demands and encourages and values certain types of behavior over other types of behavior which it disfavors. If you open a pizza parlor and you are committed to paying your workers a living wage and covering their health care, and consequently, charge a bit more for your pizzas, and a competitor opens up a pizza shop across the street and he does not give a hoot about his workers? living conditions and consequently has lower payroll costs which he passes on to his customers in the form of cheaper pizza, how will that play out? So, while Father Sirico may claim that the market is a free and open space, in fact, he is shoveling the values we associate with the Scottish Enlightenment into that supposedly empty space. Needless to say, the values of the Scottish Enlightenment are not my values.

The champions of the free market do something else I find ethically pernicious. The Catholic Church has long recognized the necessity of self-interest and private property, in part because all schemes to abolish them tend towards a collapsed eschaton, a wrong-headed attempt to establish the Kingdom of God on earth by human machinations. But, the Church, especially St. Thomas Aquinas, recognizes self-interest and private property as necessary as a consequence of original sin. The right to private property is certainly not absolute, as Father Sirico acknowledged, but it is also rightly viewed with a bit of ethical suspicion, as are all things that are consequent on original sin. This Father did not acknowledge. Indeed, Father Sirico and other Catholic conservatives try to wiggle self-interest into a virtue by citing its capacity for creativity. The danger, the ethical danger, of confusing something we tolerate as a consequence of sin, and a virtue, is almost too obvious to require comment.

These ethical concerns leave us with a question, a question posed by Professor David Schindler in his magisterial book ?Heart of the World, Center of the Church.? Does the market create a spiritual poverty that is coincident with its creation of material wealth? If so, are we really helping the poor ? or helping ourselves ? if we embrace the market as uncritically as its champions desire? And, it is to these questions we shall turn tomorrow.

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