A Recovery of Practical Wisdom for Sustainable Futures—a theological perspective

by Celia Deane-Drummond | April 2019

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The liberal economic case for the market has traditionally been that the pursuit of self-interest will generate the greatest welfare for society. Such a view is accepted on a wide scale, including those who hold to religious and Christian beliefs. We find a variant of that view in the prosperity Gospel, common among some evangelical fundamentalists, and also, poignantly, the religious position apparently preferred by Donald Trump.[1] The triumph of David Hume in contemporary thought means that the good to be sought in the political sphere is now one dominated by utilitarian ethics, so that philosophy is grounded in the way things are, rather than an ideal to be sought and a sense of a higher or more noble vision of the good life that is animated by civic virtue.

Greed, based on the old English term *graed* or *graedig*, stemming from *eager*, and defined as an insatiable desire for more, and sometimes backed up by spurious religious claims, is particularly problematic when dealing with ecological and environmental goods, not least because there are not infinite stocks of natural reserves or ecological 'resources'. Given climate change impacts, there are also important justice issues at stake: my desire for excess comes at the expense of the suffering of others, both human and other life forms. However, it is not always easy to tell where to draw the line and what that 'too much' might look like, especially in the context of Western cultures.

The purpose of this essay is to explore how we might begin to rechannel and reorientate our basic human self-interested desires so that the more that we seek is for goods that don't exploit our neighbours, be they human or non-human. While an oblivious pursuit of material gain is one side of the problem, there are also complexities associated with an increasing awareness of the difficulties at hand. The shocking global climate disturbances along with extinction of thousands of species brought about

through human activities, either directly or indirectly, can seem to be of cataclysmic proportions, leading to eco-anxiety or even despair. Such negative emotions may show greater awareness of the problem, but do not necessarily help to find a way forward, either individually or collectively.

Practical wisdom (*phronesis*) in the Aristotelian tradition is distinguished from both theoretical knowledge (*episteme)* and the productive knowledge (*poiesis*) of technique (*techne*). While Artistotle had a place for theory that included access to the transcendent serenity of the divine being and was distinguished from the life of the *polis*, *phronesis* has its own sphere of practical activity that includes the *polis*.[2] Practical wisdom in the thought of Thomas Aquinas draws heavily on Artistotelian thought in its triapartite structure of deliberation, judgment and action. Practical wisdom is also concerned with making judgments about what specific dispositions look like in given contexts, such as what does it mean to show justice, to express compassion and so on, and often virtue is situated at a mid point between two different vices. To give an obvious example, courage sits between foolhardiness and cowardice. The point of practical wisdom or prudence in the classic Aristotelian and Thomistic traditions is that it sought to find a mean between different extremes across different virtues. In the case of having what we need, it is not always clear precisely how meeting needs in a given cultural setting might then turn into unjustified greed. Further, it is not always clear what justice requires, including economic justice. Practical wisdom, through a process of careful deliberation, helps to get these judgments right, and then turn them into action. This is what is meant by the concept of the mean. It is very easy to rationalise our desires: practical wisdom helps to sort out true reason from rationalisations by probing our deepest desires and questioning precisely *why* we desire what we do. Although Aristotle generally separated *theoria* from practical wisdom, Aquinas sought to engage one with the other, so that practical wisdom sat alongside the virtue that works in relation to theological knowledge, namely, wisdom as such. Theological traditions also add another vital ingredient as well, namely, *caritas*, understood to mean love of God and neighbour.

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Theological Presuppositions

I suggest that there are various steps that need to be put in place in order to arrive at a different kind of framework for economic and human flourishing, and I will deal with each one in turn:

1 | *Presuppositions about human nature.*

The idea that humanity is basically selfish and so will act in ways that will try and accumulate for itself as much as possible reflects a negative view of human nature. Saint Augustine of Hippo believed that human beings were created perfect and in the image of God, but due to a historic Fall that perfection was corrupted. He posed the notion that original sin is passed down from Adam to all future generations of humanity. There are differences among Christians as to how to interpret what remains after the Fall. Roman Catholic thinkers generally believe that while our desires are distorted as the result of the Fall, we still bear the image of God, albeit imperfectly. Our natural, human desires therefore are more likely to tend towards the good, rather than evil, but these can be supplemented and even transformed further by the action of God's grace. Protestant thinkers generally believe that the Fall was so drastic an event, humanity became totally corrupted, and therefore our natural inclinations will tend towards evil without the transforming grace of God.

Once evolutionary Darwininsim came to be

accepted culturally, religious ideas of a literal Fall seemed archaic and difficult to understand. Those who hung onto such a belief in a literal sense are known as creationists.[3] In secular theory, the association of Neo-Darwinism with ideas such as the 'selfish' gene reinforced a basic negative stance about human nature, and even though the selfishness referred to concerned gene conservation, the idea of maximisation of individual benefit having positive impact on reproductive potential was presupposed. Charles Darwin was originally concerned with positive moral sentiments and not just competitive aspects of natural selection, as in his *The Expression of Emotions in Man and Animals*, written in 1872, a year after his *Descent of Man*. Subsequenctly, Neo-Darwinian theories sought to explain the presence of hypercooperation in human communities and altruism in social animals within an overall framework of perceived evolutionary advantages of survival and reproduction. More recent evolutionary debates have challenged a strict Darwininian interpretations of altriuism, arguing in favour of a much more basic tendency to cooperate that exists alongside the need to compete for resources. Social Darwinism, in as much as it was interpreted in competitive terms, propped up neo-classic economic theories.

One of the challenges for evolutionary anthropologists is working out more precisely what human societies were like in their earliest cultural practices, including their systems of exchange, based on fairly fragmentary evidence. An initially popular view that humanity was basically violent, driven by selfish desires and survival needs eventually gave way to the idea that early human communities were entirely peace loving, the 'noble' savage.[4] Neither of these portraits of human nature are correct. What is interesting, however, is that the perception of humanity as basically selfish seems to be the most persistent one in liberal economic theories. Some philosophers also challenge what the term 'human nature' might mean anyway, but in this context it refers to an attempt to find universal characteristics drawn from empirically based work on early human remains and inferred behaviours.

What is becoming particularly clear is that early humans in communities that are far older than our own species had the capacity for long-lasting compassion towards those who were sick and vulnerable.[5] Over time, other capacities, including the ability to think into the future, or meditate about the significance of past events, began to be added to our repertoire of social skills.[6] Foresight and memory are also important facets of practical wisdom. Exchange of goods over long distances and to those communities that may or may not have been related is integral to the first nascent systems of economics. These were intensely challenging times for the first human societies, faced as they were by extremes of climate, giant predators that seemed, from fossil evidence, to find in humans a ready meal. Close collaboration along with social bonding and tool use, as well as care for the vulnerable in those communities and even, eventually, intricate expression of cave art as far back as Neanderthals, gives us a rather different picture of early humans than the popular stereotypes sometimes associated with 'cave man'.[7]

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2 | *Entanglement as integral to human becoming*

It is more common these days to recognise that living in our intestines are millions of bacteria that help us digest our food and in general are thought to be necessary for human wellbeing. What is rather less well appreciated is that associations between beings populate every living cell of our bodies. Small organelles in each cell called mitochondria inhabit our cells and provide the energy conversion biochemistry that makes life possible at all. Plant cells have other organelles called chloroplasts, which serve in fixing carbon, using the energy of sunlight.

Carbon dioxide fixation in living plants is far more efficient than anything that can be done through human technologies. Mitochondria and chloroplasts were once archaic bacteria and free-living algae respectively. Once incorporated into cells they are no longer capable of being free-living.

However, there are other mutualistic associations that abound in the living world, including, for example, the *Rhizobium* bacteria that inhabit pea root nodules and permit them to fix nitrogen. Beyond these, close associations between different species show that co-evolution is common, where one species evolves in close association with another. The way dogs have evolved from wolves in association with human communities goes back tens of thousands of years, and indeed any domesticated animal or plant in different human cultures, are some obvious examples.

> **Our natural, human desires therefore are more likely to tend towards the good, rather than evil, but these can be supplemented and even transformed further by the action of God's grace.**

The point I am making here is that human beings from the very beginning have been entangled in the life of other beings. So, to presume, as we often do, that human beings are somehow totally detached from the natural world is a mistake. It is true that human beings are capable of creating cultural worlds that allows us to ignore the biological worlds in which we are situated. Entanglement between beings in the social sphere is also recognised in cultural anthropology through careful analysis of the interlaced histories of humans and other species. Historically this is resonant with the work of social psychologist George Herbert Mead, who proposed an inter-subjective understanding of the self, though he understood such subjectivity to be constructed, rather than having a biological basis. Just living on the earth and ignoring our grounded and entangled natures where we dwell in the land is a philosophical, anthropological and, I would also suggest, a theological mistake.[8]

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3 | *Naming the goods that we seek.*

Psychological research has shown that once a certain standard of living is reached, any further increase in wealth does not necessarily lead to an increase in happiness, and in some cases the opposite, despair, as those goods that we had hoped would give satisfaction prove to be empty. Pope Benedict XVI in his encyclical on human development *Caritas in Veritate* (2009) calls this 'superdevelopment'. There may be other reasons why people seek higher salaries, and this is often related not so much to the actual wealth generated, but other issues such as a comparative measure with others, or the status that is often attributed to rates of salary. The idea of climbing up a ladder of success measured in terms of increase in wealth, status or other goods is assumed to be a basic human compulsion in capitalist societies. Learning to perceive things differently can come through a different theory of social justice, where goods are not couched in terms of contracts between persons, but through working out what brings the most opportunities to do what we most desire. This theory, also known as the capabilities approach and worked out in some detail by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum is one that I have considerable sympathy with.[9] The emphasis on the need to respect relationships between people as a good, over and above contractual assumptions that presuppose mutual gain frees up a different way of perceiving what the good that we seek might be, including not just extrinsic goods, but also intrinsic values related to character and moral development.

At the same time, the capabilities approach only includes religion and our ecological

relationships as factors among many that we need to take into account. So, our ability to express religion, and our ability to live in an environment where we have access to clean water, or access to healthy and plentiful fresh food sits alongside other opportunities for education, sanitation and so on. While many other traditions will also, certainly, recast the goods that we seek in a different way, the point is that given the predominance of religious belief within the world community as a whole, trying to understand what those goods look like from an inside perspective is critically important.

So, for a religious believer, religion is not just one factor among others as named in the capabilities or other secular approaches, but rather a much more fundamental option that shapes all other options. It is important to be clear what I am trying to say here. I am certainly *not* arguing for the need for a prior or compulsory conversion to either a particular religion or a religious perspective. Many other fields including social psychology, anthropology, folk cultures, the arts and human sciences will be critical of the current presuppositions about what the goods are that we seek and it may well be the case that in practical terms they come up with a similar list of changes that are needed in contemporary society. In many respects these will resonate and come alongside a specific religious view. The point is that understanding from within a particular standpoint is important if this is going to make sense to those who are religious believers, and the combination of ideas are likely to be distinct and perhaps challenging from a secular standpoint. Love for God and neighbour qualifies and puts in perspective all the other goods that those who are religious seek. So, the good that religious communities in particular try to seek is discovering God's will for their lives and working out how to implement that. If that means a measure of renunciation, about which I will say more next, then that seems like a light sacrifice to make. The deep happiness, dare I say deep joy, is far more fulfilling from this standpoint than other forms of material gain, even though we may find getting to that point entails a struggle. Those who are committed to ecological transformation from other perspectives, whether they be secular or religious, will also find the struggle satisfying at a much deeper level than materialism. Ecological relationships are more than just one of the goods among others, for without it other relationships are impossible. If the Earth System collapses then the natural support systems for all other goods no longer exist.

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Loving the natural world, *biophilia,* is something that many environmentalists experience, sometimes combined with a religious sense in a nature mysticism that brings an experience of both awe and wonder. If the goods that we seek are related to the flourishing of the whole planet, including other beings, then becoming involved in activities that promote that flourishing will also bring a deep sense of happiness. Taking delight in the natural world are experiences that resonate not just with Christian saints such as Francis of Assisi, but also, among many others, early American environmentalists such as Henry Paul Thoreau (1817–1862), who, in *Walden*, explores the positive sense of delight at knowing himself to be immersed in the natural world. Such aesthetic and sometimes mystical experiences have value that cannot easily be mapped onto a straightforward liberal economic model. Loving the natural world and the multiple beings within it, like any other relational experience, escapes monetary categorisation.

4 | *Re-orientating our desires*

While many recognise that relationships are important, including our relationships with each other and the natural world, shifting our habits of consumption is much more challenging. So, if we are to take positive

delight in the natural world, other tendencies in the opposite direction need to be tackled as well. One of the most insidious and pervasive tendencies in our Western culture is that towards greed. Although a sociology and psychology of patterns of consumption resists the view that the *only* motivating factor is greed, learning to reorientate desires towards goods that are different and less damaging to both people and planet remains a challenge. Further, any consumption, whether based on greed or not, generates a carbon footprint.

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Practical wisdom helps to make good judgments about whether a particular action is greedy, not just in terms of how we *feel* about a particular action or not, but also whether the consequences of our particular consumptive habits work against the common good. Part of the challenge is that understanding these longer-term impacts are often disguised, complicated and difficult to ascertain. Greed does not just work against relationships with each other, it also works against our relationship with God. It is hardly surprising that all the major religious traditions are aware of the dangers of greed in the religious and moral life and admonitions against it are embedded in their traditions.

The scope of greed moved from the fifth century writer Cassian's understanding as *filargyria*, or love of money, to a much more general sense in Augustine of Hippo of *avaritia*, that is, wanting more than is enough, and named by him as 'the root of all evils'. One of the challenges is, of course, working out what that *enough* means, and again, practical wisdom helps to make good judgments about what is sufficient in a given case. Ambrose of Milan thought of avarice as the most important vice inflicting Christian society, and so focused his attention on it for the work of conversion from pagan materialism to Christian spirituality. While Origen demanded that Christians should practice total renunciation and live in relative poverty, Clement of Alexandria argued that money was not corrupting as long as it did not dominate our desires, and the rich needed to be prepared to give alms to those who were less fortunate. The challenge throughout the history of the Church has been how to navigate between these two alternatives, though there are complicating problems implicit in both positions. If the first practice of total renunciation seems like an abdication of political agency, the latter is more conservative politically, and seems just to accept the *status quo* as well as suggesting a somewhat simplistic, materialistic way of dealing with inequity. In the gap, it seems to me, is what justice requires and what is owed to whom.

> **If we are to take positive delight in the natural world, other tendencies in the opposite direction need to be tackled as well.**

Traditions of fasting or ascesis are common to Christian and many other religious traditions. Often viewed negatively by observers, the actual experience of those who practice such disciplines may be rather different. As with greed, there are decisions to be made about what is or is not an appropriate level of abstinence. The point of such exercises is to *school our desires* so that they no longer attach to the drives that feel to us are not under our control. Food is also a basic requirement for life, but many of those living in Western societies have access to and consume far more food than they need, along with habits of wastage. Gluttony is, in this sense, connected with greed. In this case, of course, total renunciation of food makes little sense as it leads to a self-punishment that goes against practical wisdom. Practical wisdom acknowledges the good of food, but would press for learning to eat more frugally, not just for the sake of the planet, but also for health and wellbeing.

Even if as individuals we may find ourselves willing to both reorientate and perhaps in

some cases renunciate some of our desires, how might that impact on structural issues of society about which we usually feel we have very little control? One way to remind wider society about the importance of renunciation is through public acts that demonstrate such common desires. In a Christian community this can be done through public liturgical celebrations that encourage such practices, such as that in the season of Lent. Sometimes, however, decisions are difficult to make and it is hard to tell what is or is not appropriate to do in given situations, especially in those situations where we stand to gain a financial reward. Practical wisdom is an important aid in our discernment and orientation of priorities so that our individual desires and goods are kept in check in the light of the common good, but without denying the value of our own good.

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Seeking practical wisdom

1 | *The depth of wisdom in Christian thought.*

One of the key characteristics of the Hebrew Bible is an extensive treatment of wisdom, *chokhmah*. This term is also cognate with the Arabic word *hikma*, and the Greek *Sophia*. Confucian traditions also pay close attention to wisdom. Just as the ability to love is honoured across different religious divides, so the search for wisdom is valued across very different cultures and religious traditions, with distinctive forms of expression in each case. Philosophy means, quite literally, *philosophy*, love of wisdom. However, in the Western world a richer understanding of philosophy as wisdom is often reduced in the public sphere to *love of reason*, especially critical reason. While critical, analytical reasoning certainly has a role in clarification, the ancients had a much broader understanding of philosophy that concentrated on the meaning of the good life in a way that included exemplary stories and narratives as well as purely logical discursive reasoning.

A sociological interpretation of religion goes some way towards recognizing the place of religious beliefs in the public sphere. Insights from these approaches, including those of social scientists such as Peter Beyer, for example, draw up a broad map of religious practice and its sociological relevance. [10] However, from a theological starting point this descriptive and critical task of understanding the place of religious beliefs, however helpful, is not sufficient. A thick description from *within* a particular tradition can help show how within those frameworks practical wisdom will be worked out in practice. I will therefore outline what this looks like within Christian traditions, without implying that such a perspective is somehow strictly *necessary*. The point is that Christianity can inspire those who are believers towards a different way of acting, and recommendations for practice may indeed have resonance with other approaches, be they Christian, other faiths or none.

The Christian tradition combines the practical Hebraic tradition of *chokhmah* found in the Wisdom literature with the Greek cosmological tradition of *Sophia*. In the Hebrew Bible, gaining wisdom cannot be detached from love and respect of God, so the 'fear of the Lord' is the beginning of wisdom. The Proverbs are replete with anecdotes and stories about how to gain wisdom, and the book of Job is striking in its attempt to overturn traditional understandings of wisdom in the light of knowing God as creator of all that is, including special care for animals other than human beings. Such a thread is not unheard of in the Hebrew Bible, since one of the oldest covenants described is the Noahic covenant, a covenant between God and all living creatures. In Christian theology, the personification of wisdom in the Hebrew Bible as Torah becomes translated in John's Gospel to Christ, who is not just Logos incarnate, but Wisdom incarnate as well.[11] The ultimate Wisdom that is sought is therefore divine Wisdom, which

qualifies and puts in perspective other forms of wisdom, and may indeed overturn them.

This brief excursus into the richness of wisdom thinking forms the background to how ancient Christian thinkers came to understand the meaning of practical wisdom or *phronesis* that was a critically important dimension in the conduct of a truly moral life. The point in naming the above is to show how deeply embedded wisdom thinking is for Christian thought, rightly understood. So, it is not just about making practically astute judgments about how to act, but integral to what God is like, and how the divine becomes incarnate in the world. This provides a rather different incentive for acting wisely compared with political or practical expediency. Aristotle was a particularly important philosopher in helping to shape the meaning of practical wisdom for Thomas Aquinas, whose systematic writings on the moral life have proved to be one of the most influential in the history of Christianity. Thomas combined Aristotelian *phronesis* with a clear sense that the ultimate wisdom is found in our relationship with God, and that relationship is best described in terms of *caritas*, or loving friendship with God.

> **While critical, analytical reasoning certainly has a role in clarification, the ancients had a much broader understanding of philosophy that concentrated on the meaning of the good life in a way that included exemplary stories and narratives as well as purely logical discursive reasoning.**

2 | *Taking time to deliberate.*

Practical wisdom includes not just inspiration from the tradition to act wisely, but an initial phase of deliberation where such knowledge is integrated prior to any decision taking place. There are different aspects of practical wisdom that are important to flag up in the light of new models for prosperity. Of the different aspects of practical wisdom in the deliberative phase, the ability to have an accurate memory of the past, or *memoria*, is one of the most significant. Sustainability, by definition, is concerned with the future, though its meaning has habitually and perhaps ironically often been truncated so as to exclude environmental flourishing and only focus on economic and human goods. The practice of *memoria* becomes more difficult the further back in history we go.

However, if we allow ourselves to include pre-history as part of *memoria* in an imaginative reconstruction of the past at the dawn of human existence some 300,000 years ago[12], then entanglement with other creatures and our densely relational human ecologies were a matter of human survival and not just an optional extra. Even relatively recently, a mere few thousand years ago at the dawn of the birth of Christianity, the strong sense of being embedded in a cosmological world that included other creatures was very strong, and still is in many cultures today. This is one reason, perhaps, why the ecumenical Orthodox Patriarchate, Bartholomew I, has insisted for so long on the importance of ecological awareness. The point is that greater acknowledgement of these interconnections will impact on the particular decisions made at an individual or collective level in terms of patterns of consumption. While that acknowledgement may come from secular theories as much as religious ones, framing this in the context of Christian belief gives such ideas a boost to those within faith communities.

Practical wisdom in the deliberative phase is also about circumspection, reason and insight. Circumspection means paying close attention to what is the case in the present. The dangers and threat for a functional Earth System is all too clear for those who have kept track of scientific discussions around climate change, biodiversity loss, the breaching of different planetary boundaries, including crucially ecologically sensitive nitrogen and phosphorus cycles among other earth system threats. Sustainable development goals, developed by the United Nations in 2015, can be crystallised into five basic aims, that of People, Planet, Prosperity, Peace and Partnership. Such goals are shared across

different religious traditions and can form the framework for a broader commitment to multi religious solidarity in achieving those aims.[13] The specific goal of Prosperity cannot be achieved or even understood in isolation from the other four aspects. Gaining information about what these different aspects look like is the task of circumspection, while reason and insight help us to work out more closely how they might intersect with each other. Again, there are common threads in secular approaches to Prosperity, but the point of practical wisdom is to hold everything together, so circumspection, reason and insight along with memoria. Yet practical wisdom has another crucially important element as well, that of foresight.

3 | *Making right judgments*

Foresight is the ability to imagine accurately what different scenarios might entail. The climate scientists have already spoken up and claimed that we need to act now in order to reduce the probability of unacceptable global temperature rises that will inevitably impact the most vulnerable first. Those in the poorest nations of the world are generally the most vulnerable, not only because the climate is subject to more extremes and greater unpredictability, but also because the ability of those countries to put in place adaptation strategies is weak. Foresight is about making right judgments about whether those predictions are trustworthy or not. Given that there is growing evidence that past prediction by IPCC reports if anything underestimated the extent of the change, the situation is likely to be even more serious.

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It would be easy to panic, given the above, but practical wisdom also includes caution, so making sure there is a check on any decision so it is not made impulsively or arising out of fear of the future. *Solertia*, another aspect of practical wisdom, is the ability to make good judgments in the face of the unexpected, so if a sudden and dramatic climate event took place, *solertia* would be in place to allow a habit of good judgment to inform the more spontaneous judgment that would be needed in such an emergency.

4 | *Transforming character and gaining solidarity*

So far I have talked about specific environmental decision-making that is at once collective in its deliberation, but also individual. But practical wisdom also has other roles in the moral life that bear specifically on more daily practices that I alluded to earlier. The judgments of practical wisdom help to discern what different virtues need to entail, and where those virtues become vices. For example, we all have a need for basic necessities in life such as food, clothing, access to water, and so on. But, in our own specific context, how can we tell *more precisely* what counts as greed, what counts as too much, given what we know not just about our own situation as those living in the prosperous West, but in the light of the global context in which we find ourselves? How do we know *more precisely* what justice entails?

If we are not to be riddled by either excessive guilt from the considerable privileges that we have or engage in self-punitive withdrawal activities that take us away from being of any influence in the wider public sphere, then we need to search after and actively make our day-to-day decisions through a process of practical wisdom. The motivation for doing that search comes from a sense of solidarity with those who are already suffering and from our own understanding that the creatures in the world in which we live are gifts of love that should not be abused. Further, the future of our planet and our children are at stake, even if we are not aware of this in a way that many who are living on vulnerable island communities, such as the Solomon or Marshall Islands are aware. Their habitat, where they have lived for many thousands of years, is now under threat of

oblivion, along with the fragile ecosystems in which they are placed. The point is that environmental ethics is also a *human* ethics: the two are closely interconnected in a way that was not so obvious to environmental ethicists a generation ago.

5 | *An alternative wisdom-based economics*

At a more structural level, what might an alternative economics look like? The idea that faith traditions may have something to contribute to an alternative financial system is gradually taking hold from a secular perspective, even though Catholic social thought has offered a deep critique of both capitalism and state socialism ever since Pope Leo XIII's encyclical *Rerum Novarum* (on Capital and Labour) was published in 1891. John Paul II and then Pope Benedict XVI developed these ideas in the light of contemporary issues. Pope Benedict XVI's economy of gratuitousness was worked out in his encyclical on human development, *Caritas in Veritate* (2009). He was also highly critical of the market economy, though perhaps less voracious in his criticism compared with Pope Francis' *Laudato Si'* released in 2015, who managed to integrate in a more obvious way, ecological problems and issues. For Benedict XVI, there was a critical need to regulate the market so that it did not serve to exploit those who were most vulnerable and poorest members of society. However, it was not all that obvious in precise terms what such an economic approach of gratuitousness might look like.

> **If we are not to be riddled by either excessive guilt from the considerable privileges that we have or engage in self-punitive withdrawal activities that take us away from being of any influence in the wider public sphere, then we need to search after and actively make our day-to-day decisions through a process of practical wisdom.**

At the investment level there are other bold initiatives in place that take the situation of climate change seriously, such as the Oxford Martin Principles for Climate Conscious Investment. The aims are as follows:
1) Commit to reaching net zero emissions from their business activities; 2) Develop a plausible and profitable netzero business model; and 3) Set out quantitative mid-term targets compatible with their net zero goal. Public acts of solidarity, such as divestment from investing in fossil fuels, only make sense if they are part of a broader commitment to a net zero business model. Further, principles such as the Martin Principles need to be qualified by awareness that many so called biofuel initiatives also have a negative impact on the livelihood of indigenous communities. The point is that each of the so-called principles for investment needs to be scrutinised in so far as they adhere or otherwise with the different demands of practical wisdom. The Martin Principles are future-orientated, but how far and to what extent do they take into account the *memory* of different histories and narratives of investing wisely?

> **A wisdom approach to structural economics is holistic in taking account all the different elements simultaneously in a way that I would argue is more nuanced and complicated compared with the kind of decision making that has so far existed to date.**

One promising approach that does genuinely seek to incorporate insights from faith traditions and has been established in Edinburgh is an alternative financial model motivated by a joint Christian and Muslim partnership known as the Edinburgh Finance Declaration, publically announced on 23 October 2018. It is an ethical approach to finance that allows access to finance for the poorest members of society. The six shared values framework which inform this approach are (1) Stewardship (2) Love of Neighbour (3) Human Flourishing (4) Sustainability and Purposefulness (5) Justice and Equity and (6) Common Good. This

integrated approach in tune with the interlacing of sustainability and prosperity is a good example of practical wisdom in action while at the same time being embedded in two different religious communities working in partnership, showing that alternatives to the existing financial and economic system are both possible and achievable. While secular theorists will recognise common threads with the approach being adopted through this partnership, framing in an explicitly religious way captures the imagination of those within those traditions and encourages greater solidarity across religious and cultural divides. The goods achieved, therefore, go further than simply the good of a different perspective on prosperity, but rather those goods are interwoven with the life and flourishing of the community as such.

> **At its best a theological understanding of the world reinforces such a position by putting stress on the dignity of each person, the dignity of all life and the overarching need to work for peace rather than violence and restrain an excess of the selfish desires that are common to our lived experience.**

6 | *Practical wisdom as economic action*

At a structural, more political level there are various projects currently under discussion, including the Green New Deal Resolution in the USA introduced by Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Senator Ed Markey in February 2019. The examples which follow show what I would call *incomplete* versions of practical wisdom in the political sphere. That is, there are some aspects which resonate with practical wisdom, but they do not yet incorporate all its aspects in a way that is desirable. A wisdom approach to structural economics is holistic in taking account all the different elements simultaneously in a way that I would argue is more nuanced and complicated compared with the kind of decision making that has so far existed to date. The aim of the Green Deal resolution is radical: to decarbonise the US energy system and end emissions of carbon dioxide from burning fossil fuels.

Other radical aims are to promote health coverage for all and ensure decent jobs and living standards by making colleges affordable. The triple policy of sustainability, health and job provision through education is a holistic one, but is it realistic? Economist Jeffrey Sachs[14] argues that the green new deal resolution is affordable. First would be a more radical replacement to alternative energy sources including electric planes for short hauls and advanced zero carbon fuels for long haul flights. The more challenging proposition relates to foresight, that is, how far, in the present political climate, such policies will be adopted on a broad enough scale. A smaller scale government initiative in the UK incorporated into the Green Act of 2011 to promote better energy use in homes in 2013 was also known as the Green Deal, and was succeeded by the Green Home Improvement Fund. It only lasted a few years once the target of reaching a million homes had been reached. Difficulties with this scheme were related to its lack of attention to those living with fuel poverty, and the risks of income saving being spent on fossil fuels, hence not improving the overall carbon footprint. While appearing to be beneficial in many respects, as in the US example, there was a lack of foresight in terms of the actual benefits that might accrue from such schemes.

Concluding Remarks

I have argued in this paper that a liberal understanding of the market presupposed self-interest, reinforced by populist interpretations of Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection, which portrayed the living world as competitive, 'selfish' and bent on its own survival and success. I have argued that such ideas, even in purely evolutionary terms, are only a partial truth. Evolutionary biologists today are much more likely to stress the importance in human survival of close entanglement with other creatures, and hyper cooperation within human communities

that is its distinctive mark over and above other closely related species. Our human nature has the capacity for extreme violence, but also extreme forms of compassion and other regard.

At its best a theological understanding of the world reinforces such a position by putting stress on the dignity of each person, the dignity of all life and the overarching need to work for peace rather than violence and restrain an excess of the selfish desires that are common to our lived experience. Once this alternative approach to anthropology is acknowledged, the first step is to name what desires drive and motivate us in our daily practices. Taking delight in the natural world and being concerned for the flourishing of all life is the mental ecology within which alternative practices can start to take shape.

While in the fullest theological sense wisdom includes love of God and neighbour, practical wisdom is more down to earth, and is about daily individual actions as well as knowing what counts as deliberative forms of justice at the political and social level, which is a position that can be shared with those of any religious belief or none.

Recognising where we are going wrong, which in the Christian tradition is named as sin, includes ecological sin as well as other sins. Unbridled greed does not allow ecological and even social responsibility to flourish. To a greater or lesser extent therefore, a Christian has a vocation to undertake a form of ecological conversion, which deliberately recognises those attitudes and actions, which cumulatively contribute to devastating consequences for others, even though the individual acts may seem, at least on the surface, to be fairly harmless. Part and parcel of such conversion is a different approach to understanding prosperity, so that the seeking of wisdom and not just material gain becomes the goal of human life. While in the fullest theological sense wisdom includes love of God and neighbour, practical wisdom is more down to earth, and is about daily individual actions as well as knowing what counts as deliberative forms of justice at the political and social level, which is a position that can be shared with those of any religious belief or none.

I have explored different aspects of practical wisdom or prudence that includes three phases: deliberation, judgment and action. Memory and foresight are also critically important, especially in the context of how to design a new economy that will be fit for a zero carbon world. The dream of a better future cannot afford to remain simply utopian but needs to be translated into reality. Practical wisdom is one such tool, but I suggest that it needs to be situated in a broader context of love, solidarity, justice and compassion. Our future, the future of all life on the planet and even the health of the planet itself, depends on it.

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About the Author

Celia Deane-Drummond, currently Professor of Theology and Director of the Center for Theology, Science and Human Flourishing at the University of Notre Dame, USA, is going to be the inaugural Director of the recently founded *Laudato Si'* Research Institute, Campion Hall, University of Oxford.

Endnotes

1—Percy, Martyn 2019. The Religion of Trump. Economic Justice and the Church Today: Ecumenical Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ethics Panel, European Academy of Religion Annual Conference. Bologna. March 5th.

2—For a more detailed discussion of phronesis in Aristotle, Newman and other scholars see Joseph Dunne, Back to the Rough Ground: Practical Judgment and the Lure of Technique. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993.

3—In contemporary debate, many creationists are also suspicious of what they perceive as the moral untrustworthiness of science more generally, hence are likely to be climate change deniers, quite apart from whether there is any evidential basis for that science.

4—Widerquist, Karl and Grant S. McCall 2018. Prehistoric Myths in Modern Political Philosophy. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

5—Spikins, Penny 2015. How Compassion Made Us Human: The Evolutionary Origins of Tenderness, Trust and Morality. Barnsley: Pen and Sword.

6—Deane-Drummond, Celia and Agustín Fuentes (Eds) 2017. The Evolution of Human Wisdom. Lanham: Lexington .

7—Fuentes, Agustín 2016. The Creative Spark: How Imagination Made Humans Exceptional. New York: Dutton/Penguin.

8—Deane-Drummond, Celia 2014. The Wisdom of the Liminal: Evolution and Other Animals in Human Becoming. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.

9—See Robeyns, Ingrid 2017. Freedom and Responsibility Through a Capabilities Lens. CUSP Essay Series on the Morality of Sustainable Prosperity, No 4. Online at: cusp.ac.uk/themes/m/m1-4.

10—See for example Beyer, Peter 2011. Who Shall Speak for the Environment? Translating Religious, Scientific, Economic and Political Regimes of Power and Knowledge in a Globalised Society. In Deane-Drummond, Celia and Heinrich Bedford Strohm (Eds): Religion and Ecology in the Public Sphere. London: T & T Clark, pp. 21-38.

11—For further discussion of Jesus as the Wisdom of God, see Deane-Drummond, Celia 2000. Creation Through Wisdom: Theology and the New Biology. Edinburgh: T & T Clark.

12—The date of the first appearance of Homo sapiens is a contested one, but there is a growing consensus that it is further back in time than commonly supposed, and that a narrow definition of different hominin species needs to be replaced with a broader sense of different hominin kinds emerging in somewhat fluid interlaced relationships.

13—A high level international conference on 'Religions and Sustainable Development Goals' was hosted by the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development and held at the Vatican from 7-9th March 2019, https://www.vaticannews.va/en/vatican-city/news/2019-03/vatican-conference-development-religions-poor-earth-sdgs-turkson.html

14—Sachs, Jeffrey 2019. Green New Deal is Affordable and Feasible, February 22nd , CNN.com, edition.cnn.com/2019/02/22/opinions/green-new-deal-sachs/index.html

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A prosperous society is concerned not only with income and financial wealth, but also with the health and wellbeing of its citizens, with their access to good quality education, and with their prospects for decent and rewarding work. Prosperity enables basic individual rights and freedoms. But it must also deliver the ability for people to participate meaningfully in common projects. Ultimately, prosperity must offer society a credible and inclusive vision of social progress. The over-arching goal of CUSP is to contribute to that essential task.