

Greed, Dyspepsia, and Despair: A Confutation of Professor Anderson

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Such sound and fury! The dismal science does, it seems, possess the power to touch a nerve. And perhaps there is good reason for this since economics rests upon some rather disturbing assumptions about the nature of man. It assumes for example, that human wants, as evidenced in the market place, are insatiable and no respectable economist¹ is in the habit of arguing for a reduction in Gross National Product. And if we accept Lord Robbins's famous definition of economics as *the science which studies the relationship between ends and scarce means which have alternative uses* it requires little philosophical thought to envision the concomitant phenomena of power, property, status, greed, conflict, bargaining, game theory (and practice), deception, politics, and, of course, the good old Clausewitzian standby, the pursuit of policy by other means, namely, war. As Professor Robinson has shown (1964) the root assumptions of economics are not only disturbing but necessarily ideological. And so it is that Anderson and I differ, not upon the truths of economics, but upon the philosophical implications. There are deep roots to his passion, and to mine.

In many respects Anderson and I are at one though that conclusion is not easily arrived at in the midst of all that shot and shell. Perhaps he will forgive me if I use another metaphor. After all, it is just another minor author² rushing (mothlike) with hurried and apologetic prose into the candleflame of his critique. This critique is rather like a pint of ale dispensed by an avuncular but over-vigorous barman; too much head and too little substance; mildly stimulating but also flatulent, and with some bitter dregs.

FROTH

Professor Anderson commits errors of fact, interpretation, logical fallacy, and worst, omission. Thus, illustrating his point briefly but not at all exhaustively, his first sentence contains three errors of fact. I did not argue against public spending (one), to the contrary if anything; nor did I mention bureaucratic inefficiency (two); nor did I support the rich against the poor (three). Instead my article sought to show how the W_o poor could be W_i rich, and conversely. Again, he would misinterpret by suggesting

that I would “use teachers to change an economic system.” Hardly! One could at best attack the economic infrastructure very indirectly through seeking changes in teacher-value orientations.

The logical fallacies are pre-eminently those of *ad hominem* – poor Friedman, poor Maslow, poor Mrs. Thatcher – and “black and white” thinking (pain *or* pleasure, happiness *or* misery ... continua being confused with dichotomies).³ But the most grievous error is that of omission, to wit, missing the point. No mention is made of the postulated correlation r between wealth and happiness which the article assumes to be both positive in direction and of some magnitude. What is this r like? If curvilinear – how curvy and how linear? It is this perplexity and obscurity which allows of Anderson and I having an argument at all.

But enough, let us write off these differences to mere exuberance and excess of zeal. Let us turn instead to more argumentative substance.

BREW

In the latter part of his critique Anderson expresses the fear that any adoption of my position is likely to lead to an educational state of affairs consisting “largely of reading Plato and Kant as one joins the queue to pick up one’s unemployment cheque.” But given that even unemployment assistance is an attempt at redistribution of W_0 and but another facet of our elaborate compensatory and equity-seeking taxation mechanism, then the simultaneous input of some W_i might not be undesirable. And, moreover, the fear is unjustified anyway. It is a very North American prejudice that the study of the liberal arts (and the acquisition of W_i) is in some way effete, enervating, and debilitating – that to read Plato or Kant, or Sartre or Marx, might somehow undermine the Protestant ethic, reduce the GNP, swell the ranks on welfare, and impair the efficiency and effectiveness of industry. If there is a danger in skewing the curriculum, as I *have* suggested, towards the humanistic it is that *values* might be questioned and perhaps even undermined and changed. And this might lead, conceivably, to re-interpretations of r in the personal felicity equations of the followers of such curricula. But hardly to the neglect or damage of collective welfare and individual careers. And, for that matter, Kant, that apostle of duty, is more likely to support the most bourgeois of aspirations and is already required reading for the elite leadership of our armed forces (Canadian Forces, 1975).

Anderson also exhibits, in his admittedly space-constrained remarks, a touching faith in economic man, economic realism, and the general cash nexus. People do it for the money is his basic tenet. This is a dangerous partial truth. To be sure money is fundamentally useful as a motivator, but it would be unwise to make any simplistic generalization (Handy, 1976: 45–47). Men and firms tend to satisfice (Simon, 1965, xxv) and when, say, a large insurance corporation seeks to *render a service* (this

bothers Anderson) its need for profit is as a necessary but not *sufficient* condition to that end. And the end would be the provision of a form of economic security to its clientele. And so I work as a professor in large part so as to eat, but were I to apply Anderson's logic would be a fool because I could achieve that W_o end (as could he) much more efficiently elsewhere. It is W_i which complicates the equation and so enriches life as it enriches individuals.

And there is another simplification in Anderson's critique which is bothersome: that the good man can only be defined negatively as he who has fought against notorious evil. But upon what W_i foundations does one define the evil? Surely, unless I am being obtuse, this would vindicate at once every terrorist of whatever stripe? Not to mention the Führer of the Third Reich. But perhaps his point is that, psychologically, it is somehow easier to discriminate between and react against evils than to choose between contending goods.

Anderson correctly identifies the central term as W_i . But because of my failure to define this term with positivistic precision he charges me with the creation of "a farrago of nonsense." To this I shall plead guilty if my critic will allow me the tiny concession of inserting a hyphen between *non* and *sense*. It is indeed non-sense. W_i will always be non-sensical in this way for it is the stuff of inner, phenomenological experience, not subject to public verification and calibration by instruments. Only a logical positivist would have it otherwise. All the important terms in our lives – and hence all the important things with which the schools should in some way deal – are similarly non-sensical: love, compassion, understanding, consciousness, self, mind, soul, will, spirit, fraternity, awareness, *participation mystique*, joy, pain, ego, God ... When Anderson can define any of these his charge will take on some weight and meaning instead of being itself nonsensical (without the hyphen).

That W_i will not yield semantically, however, does not detract from the fact that this kind of wealth depends upon schooling as one of its critical factors of production.

DREGS

Now to the bitter sediment. And the bitterness stems from the truth, not the exaggeration, in what Anderson has to say. His vignette of the realities of the school is best quoted in full.

The teachers, at least those in junior and senior high schools, are scrambling to stay alive and sane, as they make their way through the ordinary curriculum. Pupils drink liquor, smoke pot, engage in sexual activity, do menial work after school hours and work at the curriculum to get into medicine, law, business administration, and engineering at various levels. A tiny handful will want to become poets, musicians, and writers, and read philosophy, but no one would ever want to build a curriculum for them, not even at the university ...

All this has the ring of truth and hard-headed, tough-minded observation. Not the whole truth by any means but sufficient to be deeply disturbing because it yields by inference a very bleak world view. A world of greed, dyspepsia, and despair, of "I've got mine, you get yours." A world where what really counts (what really, *really* counts) is greed, lust, power, property, and status – where the aim of the school must be to fit fighters for the jungle, where the strong go on to medical and law school and the weak to the welfare office. As long as the system guarantees fullness for the belly, clean straw, a statutory quota of orgasms, and a pay check in the mail the unexamined life is (for Anderson, anyway) well worth living. And there is no place in such a W_o kingdom for idealists, closeted or otherwise. What is bitter then is the extent to which the world appears to support him.

Yet it would be wrong and dangerous for educators of other persuasions not to keep this dark world view within their field of vision. Until it is clearly seen and courageously embraced it cannot be transcended. Anderson does us all a service here. Without W_o we die. Without W_i we do not live. That is why this exchange of blows, technically known as dialogue, is important. If pursued seriously enough it might advance our understanding of the mysterious r , of the way in which we both do and *ought* to combine W_o and W_i , perform our felicity calculus, and design educational curricula. And so I must conclude by raising the glass to my learned colleague and wishing him, *good health!* And an infusion of W_i .

NOTES

- ¹ Schumacher (1973) is the most obvious exception to this generality.
- ² The minor authorship is incontestable but the "just another" is a trifle deflating.
- ³ One can only recommend the classic work by Thouless (1930) by way of remediation.

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