

## Metaphysics and the Principle of Economy

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Nancy Fox, like most neoclassical economists, argues that the market would be a more efficient means for distributing organs for donation than the system currently in place. She asks, “Should people be allowed to sell their bodily organs, either while alive or after death?” She doesn’t directly answer her question one way or another, but she unequivocally affirms that the market would best allocate these scarce resources.

Four thousand people die waiting for organ transplants while another 12,000–15,000 people die each year whose organs could be used. Neoclassical economists find the market a reasonable means of allocating usable organs, which get uselessly buried every year with their “owners.” To allow the market to distribute these organs would produce a more efficient system. Everyone has his price; no one is harmed and some are better off. The proposal is Pareto superior.<sup>1</sup>

Fox identifies well the universal “reason” that currently defines our reality. “Everyone has his price.”<sup>2</sup> This is the “principle of economy.” It is both the metaphysics and practical wisdom that forms our political and economic reality. This essay explores this principle by first laying out what it looks like in concrete practice through an imagined futures market for organ donation. The second step is to raise questions as to why this is objectionable. I will then suggest it is

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<sup>1</sup> D. Stephen Long and Nancy Ruth Fox, *Calculated Futures: Theology, Ethics and Economics* (Waco, Tex.: Baylor University Press, 2007), 31.

<sup>2</sup> This universal reason is the “thought” that “gripped” Philip Goodchild in his *Capitalism and Religion*: “The thought that everything may be reduced to a price, a mere quantity—even thinking, even piety, is an obsessive-compulsive vision which has gripped me and has produced the perspective worked out here” (Philip Goodchild, *Capitalism and Religion* [New York: Routledge, 2000], xv).

objectionable because it is false. That is to say, it does not accord with what is real. To do this will require a discussion of metaphysics, and especially the metaphysics of the market. Of course, to object that a futures market for organs is not real and therefore should be rejected will also require a discussion of what is real, which will be given at most a tentative expression in the concluding section of the essay.

### *1. Futures Market for Organ Donation*

Imagine what the principle of economy (“everyone has his price”) means for a possible futures market and how it will ask me to think about my body. In the future competing corporations might emerge that allow me to trade my body parts on the market. I make a contractual obligation in the present to give my organs upon my death, or possibly under well-defined exigent circumstances. The future owner of my organs likewise asks me to keep them in good working order. I consent to abide by certain conditions in order to attain the maximum price—I watch my cholesterol, curtail my use of alcohol, refuse to smoke or eat fatty foods, and exercise regularly so that my body parts will have great demand. The present value of my organs depends upon my voluntary obedience to the contract. Upon my death, I as the “owner” of my kidneys, corneas, hearts, lungs, or liver allow them to be traded through the market mechanism. The corporation extracts the “surplus value” that exists between the remuneration they paid out during my lifetime and that which I received for lending out my organs on the futures market. They are betting I die early, perhaps in an accident on my bicycle. They may even pay more if I both keep in shape and engage in life-risking behaviors. I am betting on a long life so that I might extract all the surplus value of my body parts while still living.

I do not know if such a futures market will come to pass. If it does, however, I would not find it surprising. The possible reason for it, this principle of economy, will seem too sound, too incontrovertible, to withstand its logic. This principle suggests that “everyone has his price.” This allows me a “freedom” not to participate. If the price for my organs is that they do not have a price, the market will take that price into account. In other words, no one can escape the logic present in the principle of economy. No matter how strenuously I denounce it or protest against it, my denunciation and protest will not be able to resist its logic; for the logic of this principle actually encourages protest. It simply means that the “value” I place on my organs is zero. The

futures market gives me the “freedom” to do that. It does not require that I participate, but because by giving my organs the value of zero the market has deemed even my rejection commensurable with others’ willingness to participate I am nonetheless participating in the market. My “zero” is calculated in with those who are willing to give a different value to their organs. Therefore, the fact that those of us who have moral or theological objections to such a market are not required to participate does not mean we have escaped the logic of the principle. If others find such a market to be an efficient means to distribute scarce goods and increase productivity at the same time, the moralists and theologians can object all they desire. What they cannot do is proclaim the incommensurability of organs as commodities to be traded and valued. That decision will have already been made. We already have similar market mechanisms for fetuses, both to bring them to term through surrogacy and to prevent bringing them to term through the market reality of abortion. The market is neither pro-life nor pro-choice, it simply turns everything into a commodity, gives it a formal value, and allows it to be traded. You have the “freedom” to oppose trading in fetuses, and your opposition is calculated into the market cost. Why not do the same for body organs? The objection to be raised must ask what the conditions are that make possible the fact that the decision has already been made to construe reality this way.

Notice how this principle construes my body. I am not my body; I now have a “relation” to it. I am no longer my body; I am its “owner.” What is in my body is my property, and I somehow stand outside it as its owner, and am able to give it a “formal” value that lets me know when I should enter into the market to place my property up for sale. Isn’t this a logical extension of the “ownership” society that has dominated both the Republican and Democratic parties in U.S. politics for the past several decades? The anthropology behind this “ownership society” is that we are all first individual property owners, who will not be dependent upon future generations for sustenance, as with a pay-as-you-go social security system or single payer health care system, but instead we are each responsible for our own futures. Just as my life savings is now “property” that I must secure through trading in equities, bonds, or hedge funds, so my body organs are likewise commodities that help me secure my future.

I hope that this thought experiment about a futures market for body organs will help shed light on how theology can and should address economic realities. Inasmuch as you find such a potential

market as objectionable as I do, the experiment challenges us to figure out why. To what are we objecting? After all, Fox is correct, it is “Pareto superior.”<sup>3</sup> Not only is no one harmed; many will be advantaged. The futures market would violate neither a minimal principle of non-maleficence (do no harm) nor one of beneficence (do good). On the surface, it seems unobjectionable. We can make objections about potential abuses, but they could easily be addressed through proper regulations. So what *is* it? What *is* it about such a market that I as a theologian find so thoroughly objectionable? And this question of what it “is” will require us to examine what kind of “relation” it asks me to have with my body.

## 2. *Metaphysical Objections*

The objection arises precisely at this question of the “is”—asking “what *is* it?” The objection cannot stay at the level of the “surface”; for “on the surface” the principle of economy defines the shape of what is real. It gives it its form. The objection must go “beyond” the surface questions. This I think is the role of the theologian. The objection even goes beyond questions of the different methods theology and economics “employ,” as important as they may be. It goes beyond the question of ethics, of whether we are utilitarians, deontologists, or virtue theorists. Even before these questions, the objection raises a question of fundamental, basic reality that has to go beyond the surface appearance of the form of the principle of economy. It is this question of the “beyond” itself, a *metaphysical* question that brings with it a profound objection. The crucial difference between the neo-classical economist who can envision such a market and the theologian who cannot has to do with how we understand reality itself; the difference is metaphysical. For this reason, if we simply treat economics as an autonomous, neutral social-scientific discipline and then seek to correlate theology to it, the results will be disastrous. The question that we must begin to ask again is “what is real?” For theology and economics do not define two different subject matters; they define the same subject matter—that which is (*quod est*)—differently.

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<sup>3</sup> Pareto superior states that the policy will make some better off without making anyone worse off. Exchanges can continue to take place until they reach a condition of Pareto efficient or optimal. It means that the situation is now such that by making some better off others will be made worse off.

Capitalism and its attendant economic analysis presume a metaphysics for which it seldom argues and therefore seldom thinks it needs defense. It just is. That is to say, it assumes that it is doing nothing more than describing the way “reality” works. This is called “positive economics.” It is supposedly value neutral and does not depend upon any theological or metaphysical presuppositions to ply its trade. It is just a “social science.” But herein lies a profound mistake. It does assume a metaphysics, one which usually goes unnoticed. It is this metaphysics which allows for questions such as “why shouldn’t we have a market for organs? for babies? for fetal tissue? for sex? for nearly anything that can be transformed into a commodity?” to appear “rational” in the first place. I will explain the content of this metaphysics below, but before we can even discuss the content, some discussion of the form of metaphysics is necessary. The modern era claimed to bring an “end to metaphysics.” Few people ever study it, and few think it impinges on their everyday life. Metaphysics is assumed to be a science only pursued by speculative philosophers. For this reason my claim that economics assumes a metaphysics will at least raise some eyebrows. To convince anyone that such a claim should not be dismissed outright I first need to address the question “what is metaphysics?”

To claim someone is doing “metaphysics” these days is often to do nothing more than hurl a philosophical invective. This was especially true of logical-positivists who thought they had a verificationist theory of meaning. A. J. Ayer was such a logical-positivist who claimed that metaphysics had no meaning because we had no way of verifying its claims as true. Without a procedure that could verify something, it was not false; it lacked meaning altogether. After Ayer, “metaphysics” became a philosophical invective. It meant someone was pursuing an argument that was meaningless. But outside unphilosophical scientists, few still hold to Ayer’s discredited theory. The theory was discredited because there was no way to verify the verificationist theory of meaning. Ayer’s claim that you had to have a method to verify the truth of your claims could not meet its own standard of verification. Nothing verifies verificationism. For this reason, metaphysics can no longer simply be an invective. To say, “Now you are just doing metaphysics,” as if it implies abstracting from reality to some ideal other world, is a charge that has little to no purchase anymore. You might as easily dismiss an argument by saying, “You are only engaging in the shell game known as verificationism.” In fact, this thought experiment

of a futures market demonstrates why metaphysics matters in everyday life.<sup>4</sup>

Of course, it is not only the logical positivists and scientists who proclaimed the end of metaphysics, so did postmodern deconstructionists. Metaphysics was associated with a dreaded ontotheology where “Being” as origin, cause, and goal thinks everything within its structure such that all we can do is play within it, seeking to “turn it” (*Verwindung*) and escape momentarily its colonizing power or imperialistic unity.<sup>5</sup> To give metaphysics that kind of power is to understand power as our basic reality. Some pragmatists also find metaphysics deeply problematic because it kept us from being attentive to what really matters. Metaphysics constructed a “mirror of nature” that secures the presence of a sign from a beyond such that the sign itself becomes unnecessary through the ideal, eternal foundation that secures its otherwise changing temporality.<sup>6</sup> All of these tired accounts of metaphysics have kept philosophers and theologians from asking questions that really matter. They keep us trapped, like a fly in a bottle, in a reductivistic version of the linguistic turn. Metaphysics is not so easily flattened. It is, as Giles Hibbert suggests, the inevitable opening of a sign that always exceeds its context; or as William Desmond puts it, the beyond that interrupts immanence “in the middle.”<sup>7</sup> If signs only refer to themselves, or only designate an individual thing (*res*) within their context and nothing more, then we are trapped in a representationalist epistemology and an immanent ontology that falsely assumes it is closed off from the metaphysical. Our knowledge

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<sup>4</sup> For a fuller discussion of this, see D. Stephen Long, *Speaking of God: Theology, Language, and Truth* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2009).

<sup>5</sup> For some postmodernists, metaphysics cannot be “overcome” (*Überwindung*) because metaphysics itself tends to be an “overcoming” of that which came before in order to achieve the new. This has become our fate, and they rightly recognize that the postmodern is not just the next stage of the “new.” That would merely reproduce the modern. The postmodern recognizes that the “end” of metaphysics is not its dissolution, but repetition. It cannot be overcome, but it is dangerous because it is a totalizing view of “being.” For this reason, the political task is to play within it, constantly “turning” (*Verwindung*) it back on itself.

<sup>6</sup> See Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1979).

<sup>7</sup> For Giles Hibbert’s argument see Matthew Levering’s *Scripture and Metaphysics: Aquinas and the Renewal of Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 2–5. William Desmond has written extensively on the question of metaphysics. See in particular his *Being and the Between* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1995).

merely represents in our mind what lies before us and nothing more. What is is simply what appears on the surface. We lose any sense of mystery or depth to the things that are before us. But if a sign exceeds its context, expressing something more than merely an indicative reference, then we must question the reality underlying statements such as Fox's that "the market [is] a reasonable means of allocating usable organs, which get uselessly buried every year with their 'owners.' To allow the market to distribute these organs would produce a more efficient system."<sup>8</sup> We must look beyond the surface of such a statement, beyond the bare representation of this sign as a proposition designating an uncontestable reality even if it has mathematics on its side, and ask what is really going on here. What *is* it?

### 3. *What is a Futures Market for Organs?*

What is going on when any economist calls for a future market for organs are a number of metaphysical claims about reality in terms of specific commitments to language, truth, and reason. First, the underlying reality that makes a futures market possible is an account of reason dependent upon the principle of economy that "everyone has his price." Second, this account of reason correlates well to a minimalist understanding of truth. This theory of truth, as put forward by Paul Horwich, states that "each proposition specifies its own condition for being true." We do not need anything more than the proposition itself to make sense of our use of the term "true." The point of this is to explicitly deny, as Horwich does, that truth is in any sense "mysterious."<sup>9</sup> Finally, this all assumes a theory of language that is primarily "designative," and set within a "representationalist epistemology" where strong claims for what we know and cannot know prohibit claims for what is real. Language primarily "designates" or "indicates" a reality. It is not mysterious. It does not express or evoke something deeper than that which can basically be pointed to, placed in a proposition, and understood in the form of a statement: "This is that." Let me address each of these in turn.

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<sup>8</sup> Long and Fox, *Calculated Futures*, 31.

<sup>9</sup> Paul Horwich, *Truth*, second edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), vii.

*3a. Principle of Economy and Relations of Reason*

Marilyn McCord Adams begins her two-volume interpretation of the work of Ockham by reminding us that the “locus classicus” for the “problem of universals” was “medieval discussions of usury.”<sup>10</sup> The problem of universals was related to the crucial metaphysical question in the late Middle Ages. But as McCord Adams suggests, the questions of metaphysics and of economic exchange were, and are, inextricably and confusedly linked. Although we must beware of any easy causal overdetermination, as if the metaphysics of Duns Scotus and William of Ockham are the direct causes of Walmart, the “family resemblance” between the principle of economy used so thoroughly by William of Ockham and that underlying the neoclassical economist’s defense of a futures market for organs cannot be denied. Ockham’s principle of economy is not identical to that of the economists. His principle sought to “economize” the need for universals in order to explain reality. His “razor” sought to do away with unnecessary universals. It focused on the particulars. He certainly did not teach that everything had its price. Nonetheless, if reality were not first reduced to a collection of particulars that could be designated, then it would not be possible to have the kind of futures market where everything can be assigned a value as a particular thing and nothing more and then traded for something else. Universals are nothing more than our mind’s attempt to collect particular things under generic categories. A popular defender of the scientific character of the modern market like Christopher Hitchens celebrates William of Ockham for this principle. His denial of universal causes by tracing causes back to the bare “act of understanding” led him to “anticipate the coming of true science when he agreed that it was possible to know the nature of ‘created’ things without any reference to their ‘creator.’” The principle of economy need not ask the question of any beyond if it can adequately define everything on the surface.<sup>11</sup>

Ockham of course deserves a better interpreter than Hitchens. Ockham did not invent the principle of economy. It goes back to Aristotle, and can be found in Scotus and Aquinas where it had a

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<sup>10</sup> Marilyn McCord Adams, *William Ockham*, vol. 1 (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), 3.

<sup>11</sup> Christopher Hitchens, *god is not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (New York: Twelve/Hachette Book Group USA, 2007), 70.



properly limited use. Newton later adopted it as the principle of science.<sup>12</sup> But Hitchens is correct on this point: the principle of economy poses an important challenge to theologians. What do universal essences, angels, saints, divine Persons add to our description of reality? Why not be content with a basic understanding of empirical causality coupled with the assumption that universal relations are best understood in terms of formal concepts that our act of understanding gives to things?

Charles Taylor has likewise raised the centrality of the principle of economy as essential for the rise of the modern social imaginary, although in a much less favorable light than Hitchens. For Taylor, nominalism

rejected the discourse-thought model of the real. It denied that there are real essences of things, or universals. True, we think in general terms. But this is not because the world exists in general terms as it were; on the contrary, everything that is is a particular. The universal is not a feature of the world, but an effect of our language. We apply words to classes of objects, which we thus gather into units; that is what makes general terms.<sup>13</sup>

Language then has only an instrumental role in that it refers to “objects” primarily as particulars through concepts that are nothing but relations of reason. They are not real relations. Language does not so much express “reality” as it collects and points to it. What must not be lost in all of this is how this principle of economy not only affects our understanding of language, but also economic exchange, which can be explained in the distinction between a real relation and a relation of reason and how this distinction affected how we think about the value of money.

The distinction between a real relation and a relation of reason is a medieval distinction, which has played itself out in modern economics. A real relation assumes an intrinsic relationship between the

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<sup>12</sup> The principle of economy states, “Do not posit plurality unnecessarily” (*Pluralitas non est ponenda sine necessitate*). Newton used a revised version in his natural philosophy: “It is vain to produce by many what can be produced by few” (*Frustra fit per plura quod potest fieri per pauciori*). See Rega Wood, *Ockham on the Virtues* (Lafayette, Ind.: Purdue University Press, 1997), 22).

<sup>13</sup> Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2004), 158.

*relata*. One entails the other, like the relation between a parent and child or fire and smoke. A relation of reason abstracts from the real relation and mediates it by way of a third party who gives the “reason” for the relation, such as when I state the proposition “the tree in my backyard is in front of the shed.” Nothing intrinsic exists between the tree and the shed that would make this relation real per se; it is a relation that I give to the *relata* based on the form they take from where I stand. It is only a relation of my understanding. The relation itself has no real essence; it is conceptual. If I stand on the other side of my shed, the form the relation takes will differ.<sup>14</sup> From that vantage point, the tree is in back of the shed. We moderns seem only to see the world through relations of reason that can always be other, given that our perspective is a priori contextually determined, and therefore both limited and constantly shifting. But this has also had an impact on how we think about money.

We can see how this medieval distinction works itself out in the modern principle of economy with its potential futures market for organs. I lose a real relation with my body; it becomes a *relata* to which a conceptual reason alone can define the relation once I gain a shift in perspective. If I see things in terms of “Pareto optimality,” then this new conceptuality relates me to my body as “owner” of “commodities” such that this universal conceptuality makes it seem perfectly reasonable that I enter into an exchange with these commodities as long as I find “value” in the exchange. I am under no force or compulsion to see things this way; they could be otherwise. But nor am I permitted to block this perspective of others by claims about moral or theological truths. Yet the underlying metaphysics for this is a claim for what is true, because this can only arise when all relations become conceptual rather than real. Only after this transition in our understanding of relations will this argument be convincing as an adequate description of what really is. Before this transition, perhaps begun by Scotus and Ockham and completed by Kant, “I” and “my body” could not be conceived as *relata* that exist apart from each other and then are brought into relation through concepts. To make my body organs *relata* that can then be brought into a “relation of reason” to “me” made no sense at all. Something significant shifted before this idea, this principle of economy, rendered such a thought reasonable.

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<sup>14</sup> I am indebted to Mark Johnson for this explanation of real relation and the relation of reason.

What has shifted? I am sure many things shifted before such a futures market became conceivable. We cannot look for one simple all-encompassing explanation or we would merely repeat the principle of economy itself. The shifts were complex transitions in notions of time, space, theology, metaphysics, everyday practices, political life, and anthropology. We can see the beginning of one shift, a shift in metaphysics and its relation to money, in Ockham's defense of Scotus's interpretation on the relation between money and its value. It is a "relation of reason" defined not only by the intellect but also by an act of will. When William of Ockham explains the relation of reason, he does so by using the value of money as an example. He writes:

Since a coin has no value except by virtue of a voluntary institution, an act of will preceded by an act of the intellect, it follows that the value [of the coin] can be called a relation of reason. And in this way one can preserve the claim of Scotus, who says that a relation of reason can be caused both by an act of the intellect and by an act of the will.<sup>15</sup>

Here are some of the seeds for perhaps the first "new era economy" where money and its value are no longer really related in terms of consumable goods as they were for Aquinas, but now the value of money will primarily be vendible. The relation between money and value is now volitional and conceptual. The relation—what it is—can be determined either by the intellect or will, but it is not "real." This of course led to one of the great tragedies in history, where the Franciscans' desire to follow Jesus' poverty backed them into a sharp division between money and its use in order to answer their critics. Because money could not be separated from its use without violating the usury prohibition, the Franciscans were accused of not really abandoning ownership of property. If they "used" it they "owned" it. They argued, against Aquinas, that a distinction could be made between its use and ownership. The use is not found in the nature of the thing but in the intellectual and volitional use made of it. The distinction between real relation and the relation of reason is analogous to this distinction between use and ownership. The Franciscan case

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<sup>15</sup> William of Ockham, *Quodlibetal Questions*, vols. 1 and 2, trans. Alfred J. Fredoso and Francis E. Kelley (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1991), 588.

should remind us that good theory does not always emerge from good practice.<sup>16</sup>

Once money and its value are divided, and a conceptual act of will or reason determines it, then the value becomes purely formal. Because it has a form without content, money can be used to purchase anything, including “things” that once were considered neither consumable nor vendible such as time, or things that were once considered “real relations” such as the relation between me and my future, my labor, or my body organs. This purely formal value is then traded based solely on one consideration—maximization of utility, where utility itself is purely formal. This becomes a logical, albeit not necessary, extension of the principle of economy—“everyone has his price.” It is purely formal because this universal does not really exist apart from the “reason” that constructs it.

Utility, as the last universal, is a subjective answer to the question, “Does it increase your pleasure or diminish your pain?” Even though it is subjective, it can be quantified by putting a number to it. Value is determined by my willingness to continue exchanging until the exchange no longer serves my satisfaction. (This is known as marginal utility.) The numbers produced can be placed on a two-dimensional chart. They show us reality, and we are consistently told that this flattened, nominalist reality is the only real that is. If we do not obey it, it will crush us. As Thomas Friedman warns, “Get flat or you’ll be flattened.”<sup>17</sup> All robust intrinsic goods and evils fall away before this principle of economy. It is even enshrined in U.S. corporate law, as can be seen in the 1919 Supreme Court ruling in *Dodge v. Ford Motor Company*, where a CEO has the legal obligation to his or her shareholders to maximize profits. Economists and ethicists are in ready supply who defend this principle of economy. As Elaine Sternberg put it, “Business organisations that seek anything but long-term owner value are guilty not of socialism, but of theft.”<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> John Thomas Noonan, *The Scholastic Analysis of Usury* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1957), 60. For an excellent discussion of the Franciscan case see Kelly Johnson’s *The Fear of Beggars: Stewardship and Poverty in Christian Ethics* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2007), 51–69.

<sup>17</sup> See Thomas L. Friedman, *The World Is Flat* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005), 123.

<sup>18</sup> Elaine Sternberg, *Just Business: Business Ethics in Actions*, second edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 6.

*3b. The Principle of Economy: Language and Truth*

The principle of economy as an uncontested universal reason is not only the basis for globalization and the universal market, but it also brings with it an understanding of language, truth, and politics. As Charles Taylor explains, in modernity language becomes “designative.”<sup>19</sup> The designative tradition runs from Hobbes, through Locke and Condillac, and has a significant residue in Quine, Davidson, and Rorty. Here language primarily designates objects in the world; language places us outside the objects, trying to represent them to ourselves as best we can. Taylor states, “Like all naturalistic theories, these theories are framed as theories elaborated by an observer about an object observed but not participated in.”<sup>20</sup> The designative theory assumes a use of language based on quantitative judgments that are non-subject dependent. It contributes to a mechanistic universe. This also produces a politics characterized by the two dominant modern notions of equality and direct access. In contrast, Taylor notes that premodern societies were “vertical,” where politics was a participation within Ideas to which no one had direct access, but each person or group’s access was mediated through others. Taylor explains:

The principle of a modern horizontal society is radically different. Each of us is equidistant from the center; we are immediate to the whole. We have moved from a hierarchical order of personalized links to an impersonal egalitarian one; from a vertical world of mediated access to horizontal, direct access societies.<sup>21</sup>

Although such a politics has some distinct gains, such as its critique of patriarchal relations, it also brings with it some loss. Everyone is reduced to an individual. This flattens the world such that we no longer need any distinctions of perfection to make sense of who we are. We don’t need priests, saints, or holy persons who mediate to us goodness, truth, and beauty. Nor do we have any need for angels or gods. We are all equal individuals standing equidistant from each other.

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<sup>19</sup> Charles Taylor, *Human Agency and Language: Philosophical Papers 1* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 255.

<sup>20</sup> Taylor, *Human Agency and Language*, 255.

<sup>21</sup> Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries*, 158.

Such a politics lacks mystery; it is disenchanting. This has a correlate in a minimalist understanding of truth.

In his book *Truth*, Paul Horwich states that many philosophers and others find agreement in two “points about truth”: “Each proposition specifies its own condition for being true (e.g. the proposition *that snow is white* is true if and only if *snow is white*), and, second, that the underlying nature of truth is a mystery.” He then argues that the “general thrust” of a minimalist theory of truth “is to turn one of these sentiments against the other.” He writes, “I want to show that truth is entirely captured by the initial triviality, so that in fact nothing could be more mundane and less puzzling than the concept of truth.” Truth becomes nothing more than the trivial exercise of pointing and saying, “Snow is white.” All the conditions for stating that truth are found in the proposition itself. The whole point of minimalism is, like our direct access societies, to avoid any mysterious or metaphysical claims about what truth is.<sup>22</sup> There is an undeniably strong family resemblance among the principle of economy, a representationalist epistemology, language as designative, politics as a direct access society, and truth as minimalism. All of this comes together in order to produce the conditions that allow something like a futures market to appear rational in the first place. Organs are individual commodities that can be designated. The truth of what they are can be found in the uses to which we put them. Those uses can be given a number, compared, and traded. No hierarchy of goods exists that might suggest some things are incommensurable with others and to understand them we would need the mediation of something higher than what they appear to be on the surface. No real relation causes us to question if such a system truly defines what is real. What is real is defined by Pareto optimality. But is this an adequate answer to the question “what is real?”

#### *4. The Incarnation*

We have now come some distance from our initial thought experiment about a futures market for organs. In this much too abbreviated form, I have suggested that the difference between Fox’s and my own theological analysis of such a market requires further discussion of what is real. This involves a metaphysical analysis, which includes

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<sup>22</sup> Horwich, *Truth*, vii.

accounts of what constitutes reason (the principle of economy), language (designation), epistemology (representation), truth (minimalism), and politics (direct access societies). But these constitutive aspects of a putative reality are false because they cannot account for how reason, language, truth, and politics actually function. They overlook a crucial element in our everyday life; it is a gift that comes only because we can commune and communicate with others. To take this into account requires that reason acknowledges mystery, that language expresses truths that are more than mere designations, that how we know entails more than mere representations, that truth is less something we possess and more something that possesses us and that we cannot escape, and politics will always entail some hierarchy of goods. This is why I have a certain confidence that a futures market for organs will not actually come into existence. Or if it does, other features of our common life will not be reduced to the principle of economy. Life is too richly communal to be cut down to size. Everyday life is much more of a “communion” than a bare assertion of a simple explanatory principle—“everyone has his price.” Like the enclosure of land that destroyed the commons so that people would be forced to work in Adam Smith’s pinmaking factory, the principle of economy can only dominate through an act of will.

Truth will remain mysterious, which is why philosophers will continue to seek to “cut it down to size” (as J. L. Austin put it) and always fail (as J. L. Austin did).<sup>23</sup> Language always expresses more than it designates. People reason outside the conceptuality of the principle of economy. Political life remains as much about the mediation of hierarchically ordered goods as it does equal individuals who must first each be atomized into victims who are then given rights to be protected from potential evils. This is what is real and we know it because we live it. It takes an act of power or forgetfulness to avoid it, which of course is possible. And although such privative acts have their day, they can never fully define what is “real” because they are privative. In other words, we cannot escape a semiotic view of our world where language, as inadequate as it is, always does more than our theories about it permit. This often perplexes the philosophers, especially those who think they have overcome metaphysics, but it shouldn’t perplex theologians.

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<sup>23</sup> J. L. Austin, “Truth,” in *Truth*, ed. George Pitcher (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1964), 26.

Charles Taylor recognizes a linguistic turn other than the designative one, a turn which does not eschew metaphysics, one where language always expresses more than what it designates, a “more” we can and must articulate even though we can never fully do so. Theology remains the tacit background for such an expressivist view of language. He states:

So the paradigm and model of our deploying signs is God’s creation. But now God’s creation is to be understood expressively. His creatures manifest his *logos* in embodying it; and they manifest the *logos* as fully as it can be manifest in the creaturely medium. There can be no more fundamental designative relation, precisely because everything is a sign. This notion is nonsense on a designative view. For words can only have designative meaning if there is something else, other than words or signs, which they designate. The notion that everything is a sign only makes sense on an expressive view.<sup>24</sup>

This makes sense for us because we know that which is most real about creation, that which is most natural, is best illumined by the doctrines of the Trinity and Incarnation. The Second Person of the Trinity, the one in whom and for whom creation exists, has also become creature. This helps us see why truth is mystery and language is expressive. Language signifies like the humanity of Christ. We bow before him not because we confuse divinity with humanity. The former, we know, cannot be indicated by creaturely means. But how do we know that? It obviously exceeds any kind of verificationism. It cannot be designated. We cannot point and say “there is God.” Is this something that can be known? Most people throughout history thought they did know it and were not troubled by the supposed limitations of language to express it. This is because they were not yet trained to reduce language, truth, and politics, as we are. But those of us who are Christians tacitly know we cannot reduce them either; for in Jesus’ creaturely existence God is fully present. This is the only way to make sense of our most basic act as Christians—we worship Jesus as God without confusing divinity and humanity. Jesus expresses God without God holding something back from us, which is why the Chalcedonian definition states he is true God and human. We must have

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<sup>24</sup> Taylor, *Human Agency and Language*, 223.



the doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation to make sense of this. If they define for us what is true, then we will need to challenge the understanding of truth, language, politics, and metaphysics that undergird the possibility of a futures market for body organs. Both “realities” cannot be correct. That we will need to challenge them is also reflected in our worship when we elevate the host and say, “the Body of Christ,” or read the Scriptures and proclaim, “the Word of the Lord.” In fact, to understand anything before us as “creature” already assumes something more, something that is not creature against which it becomes intelligible. We not only lose God if we forget this, we will also lose “creatureliness” as well, turning it into bits of matter that can always be traded for something else. This requires that we recognize that what we do with language, how we take it up, exceeds the mere structure language gives us. Therefore we need not look at its structure in order to discover meaning or truth. Too much of modern theology, influenced by the nominalist and designative linguistic turn, works solely with a surface grammar. It fails to see the expressivist character of language. We are not trapped within language.

A futures market for body organs divides me from my organs, turns them into *relata* that can be given a designative relation, and then relates them through a conceptual reason that has as its basis an act of will. They are traded with other *relata* by being made formally equivalent. The fact that this primarily works only against the backdrop of the death of the owner demonstrates what it is. It is evil and therefore cannot be real. But our bodies are not signs grounded in a formal equivalence. They are “images of God” that point to the Image of God. Their reality can only be expressed well when we acknowledge that they are signs that express something that can never be exhausted, the infinite itself. This is why they should not be killed, aborted, eaten, left to rot, traded as commodities for the price of labor, sliced and placed in museums, or broken up into parts and invested in a futures market. The natural inclination to be repulsed by such activities can only be abandoned by a “conversion” to a false metaphysics that trains us to see surface images rather than the depth of the reality all around us. This is only sustainable by an act of power. Meditation upon the Incarnation strengthens our vision to see the more.

