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# Economics as Seen by an Ethicist a Personalist Perspective

**Ekonomia oczami etyka. Perspektywa personalistyczna**

## Introduction

All human relations are more or less subject to material conditions and thus have something in common with economics. Both a number of economic doctrines and the flourishing of economic sciences can be observed today. The neoclassical economics, pioneered by Adam Smith (1723–1790), is regarded as the mainstream. It assumes economy relies on maximising production and profits driven by rivalry among people. Economists and business practitioners have long noted, however, the foundations of the model that came to be known as *homo oeconomicus*, developed by Smith and others and envisaging humans as guided by their own interest in the satisfaction of selfish needs only in their economic activities, are not only untrue but also self-contradictory. What is more, reducing economics to a branch of science that only addresses man's economic behaviour detaches the market economy from universal interpersonal values and deprives it of its specific goal.

Market economy, associated with economics, is an important area of contemporary public life. It has a considerable impact on and determines the nature of a range of domains and social relations. Unfortunately, economy, like no other area of life, is exposed to some merciless mechanisms that are dangerous to man. Adam Smith, the father of liberal economic theory, was well aware of this and desired to build an effective and ethically responsible economy (Marx, 2009, p. 77). Therefore the issue of ethical reasons for economy remains a key

question of the present times. This is also a question of how man and his place in economic life are conceived. The core question of this text is: does economy foster and strengthen man in his personal dimension or possibly reduce him and impede his personal development, and how can it do it?

## 1. The sources of wealth of contemporary societies: science, technology, enterprise

Classical economic theory identifies three factors that are important parts of the economic process aimed at the production of goods and provision of services: work, land, and capital (Losinger, 1998, p. 212). In his famous *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, Smith saw the sources of “the wealth of nations” as creative economic competition of individuals and the potential of man acting freely. In light of this idea, creative human work and enterprise become significant as they pave the way for the personalist concept of economic development centred on the human person. It should be noted this perspective is not related only to Christianity and its philosophy, since it is shared by a number of non-Christian thinkers and the so-called “ordinary citizens.” Personalist economy (Drobny, 2013, pp. 142–154; Kamińska, 2016, pp. 52–66; Wójcik, 2021, pp. 27–49), which attracts a growing interest, is the fruit of a meeting between economics and personalism. By showing the right place of the human person not only in the natural world but also in the various dimensions of social and economic life, personalism, based on the realist philosophy, can provide a new, dynamic impulse to the development of economics (Wójcik, 2021, p. 29).

Economic personalism emerged in the United States around 1991 and can be treated as a response to John Paul II’s encyclical *Centesimus annus* (Jan Paweł II, 1991; hereinafter: CA; Kamińska, 2016, p. 54). The document is the main point of reference for this discussion. Karol Wojtyła’s intellectual heritage, his philosophical texts developing the concept of man as a person, are key to the correct reading and understanding of the personalism of *Centesimus annus* and of the two earlier social encyclicals by John Paul II: *Laborem exercens* (Jan Paweł II, 1981; hereinafter: LE) and *Sollicitudo rei socialis* (Jan Paweł II, 1988; hereinafter: SRS). Man is the point shared by economics and personalism. For Wojtyła and other representatives of metaphysical and ethical personalism, i.e., Mieczysław A. Krąpiec, Tadeusz Styczeń, Andrzej Szostek, man is a person, or a substantial, real subject of being and rational and free action. By virtue of his nature, man, as a personal being, is capable of creating interpersonal and social

relations in which he preserves his own creative subjectivity, the greatest source of wealth and the fundamental common good of each community (Wojtyła, 2017, pp. 137–138). John Paul II emphasised land, its fertility and the resources it holds had been the main factor of man's wealth, but at present, owing to his intelligence, man is able to integrate land's riches and his not only physical but also intellectual work in a variety of ways. Therefore, knowledge, technology, and skills, which the pope calls a new type of property, are the basic capital of humanity nowadays (CA 32).

Science and technology have an overwhelming influence over the whole human life. The practical benefits of the virtually everyday progress in both these spheres are hard to overestimate, all the more so as they can be transferred from the domain of artefacts to man himself and society. Thanks to science not only a car or a computer can be manufactured, but also man or society can be helped (Jaroszyński, 2008, p. 9). Both the material and mental realities have been transforming in highly industrialised countries since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Highly specialised equipment facilitates, streamlines and accelerates everyday work. Improving the quality of products, they have a significant effect on the quality of human life, too (LE 5).

An equally important source of the wealth of contemporary societies is the ability to recognise the needs of others and to select the most appropriate production factors to satisfy them (CA 32). Therefore, from the personalist point of view, entrepreneurs play a crucial role in the economic sphere, since the process of manufacturing the goods necessary for the development of man and community requires the cooperation and commitment of a range of people, or even entire work communities. The organisation, planning of, and care for the correct progress of the production process highlight the key role of creative and properly disciplined human labour, with the capacity for initiative and enterprise being its major parts (CA 32). This is above all the way human talents are taken advantage of that the economic development depends on. The market consists not of inert material objects, but of particular persons. Not machines, but individuals work and commit their intellect, creativity, and spiritual powers. They display resourcefulness by introducing new technological solutions, recognise their opportunities, avoid unnecessary risk, and build networks of new economic, social, and political relations (Losinger, 1998, p. 218). All of this proves the human person is the first and foremost economic good that realises itself in action (Kamińska, 2016, p. 56). The economics, to take full advantage of the human potential, should deal not with machines, but with people, their

ideas and actions, therefore. Goods, commodities, wealth and all other notions connected with the human activity are parts of this domain (Mises, 2007, p. 78).

Man and his cognitive skills, expressed as scientific qualifications and the ability to take part in joint work, are the decisive factors for the contemporary economics (CA 32). Both John Paul II and a leading proponent of the American economic personalism, Gregory Gronbacher, draw attention to a significant relationship between economics, anthropology and ethics, between the desire for well-being and the improved living standards and a vision of man as a creative subject capable of initiative and collaboration with others. Gronbacher claims human choice is the start of the economic process,

[...] and the reality of human choices is at the intersection of economics and morality. The economy exists for the person, not the person for the economy. It cannot be comprehended as an abstract being composed of mechanical creatures the society must adjust to. The economic system must remain in step with the human nature, not the other way round (Gronbacher, 1999, p. 56).

In this relationship, any economic choices and institutions are subject to assessment and evaluation with the aid of the human nature and of the question if and to what extent they protect the dignity of every man (Gronbacher, 1999, p. 56).

Moral good, which serves to strengthen what most determines man's value, that is, his dignity, is the key ethical concept. In this sense, "morally good" means "good for man as such" (Szostek, 2015, p. 104). This is particularly important when seeking diverse forms of utilising the human potential and adding a deeper than the merely gainful dimension to the process of human work. The scientific and technological progress gradually replaces man with machines in actions that have been carried out by man before. This is true not only of industrial manufacturing, but also the defence system, agriculture, and a whole gamut of other sectors of the economy. This process seems inevitable and even desirable in a variety of ways. It involves the world of labour in advanced societies, however, it poses a serious challenge not only to economists and politicians deciding a vision of the job market, but also to ethicists (Szostek, 2015, p. 111).

From the personalist perspective, work is a major part of human vocation. As John Paul II writes, work "carries the special mark of man and humanity, the mark of a person acting in a community of persons – this mark being the internal qualification, as if constituting the person's very nature" (LE *Introduction*). Therefore, even the use of highly specialised technology does not result in an utter objectification of work, since the latter has a far more profound subjective

dimension, which results from the fact work is always performed by man being a person. As a subjective being, he is capable of a planned and intentional action, capable of self-determination and self-fulfilment. As a person, man “carries out different activities in the process of working, all of which, regardless of their nature, are expected to serve the realisation of his humanity, the fulfilment of a personal vocation specific to man by virtue of humanity itself” (LE 6). In this meaning, only man works. Machinery and equipment function. The pope stresses the goal of any work, even the most subservient, monotonous or menial on the scale of everyday values, is not an external product whose value is measured with its quality based on its market valuation, but man himself, who becomes “the creator of himself” as a conscious and free subject by dint of his work (LE 6).

By emphasising the personalist dimension of work, John Paul II speaks of “the economy of enterprise” and “the economy of entrepreneurship” (CA 32). Advocating the primacy of human labour over capital, the pope opposes these economic systems which provide for an absolute prevalence of capital and the ownership of production tools and land above the human subjectivity and freedom. Therefore, he believes regarding an enterprise as a mere production entity whose overarching objective is to generate profit is inappropriate. It indeed is an important factor of normal enterprise operation, since it signals production factors are applied correctly (CA 35). This is not the sole and the most important indicator, though. The economic success of an enterprise may happen to be achieved at the expense of the humiliation of its workers’ dignity. In the pope’s view, the objective of all production entities is their existence itself “as a *community of people* who, in their different ways, attempt to satisfy their basic needs and form a special group serving the whole society” (CA 35). An enterprise is above all an association of persons who, in diverse ways and to varying extents of responsibility, make their creative contributions to its operation (CA 43). Aside from economic factors, therefore, the growth and development of an economy and market are also influenced by moral factors. The moral development of individuals is the starting point for the improvement of any interpersonal organisation. Szafulski refers to entrepreneurship as a virtue, writing:

The virtue of entrepreneurship has a community aspect. It presumes work, sacrifice for somebody, as well as the skill of working with someone, where some undertakings are beyond individual capabilities and that’s where the element of cooperativeness (community) comes in, defined as the skill of creating a community where people cooperate for the purpose of meeting others’ needs (Szafulski, 2006, p. 202).

To invoke Gronbacher once again: “A morally healthy culture will foster a morally healthy market” (Gronbacher, 1999, p. 36).

Civilisation and economic progress in a number of areas have improved man’s living standard. Beside some extraordinary opportunities, however, they bring a range of dangers as well. With reference to the foregoing discussion, the latter’s deepest source lies in an imbalance between man’s growing scientific and technological capacities and the development of his moral strength.

## 2. Threats and problems of the market and their causes

Man is at the centre of personalist ethics. Any forms of economic and social organisation are evaluated from the perspective of how much they serve or in any way obstruct personal dignity and freedom of man. In line with the fundamental principle of personalism, “the person is a good that does not go together with use, that cannot be used as an object and a means to an end [...] The person is such a good that only love is the sole proper and fully valuable approach to it” (Wojtyła, 2001, p. 42). Respect for human dignity is due to all humans, including those yet unable or no longer able to take part in economic life. Man does not become man by virtue of being economically useful (Marx, 2009, p. 76). Economic theories are not suspended in an axiological vacuum. A moral context always applies to them (Drobny, 2013, p. 48). Therefore, the disequilibrium between capital and labour, economics and ethics leads to a crisis whose main cause is a false vision of man. This cause may be called an anthropological error. It is multidimensional and arises from a one-sided (*pars pro toto*) reading of human nature (Kiereś, 2003, p. 299). It consists in reducing man’s life to some selected aspects which then become an absolute whole (Kiereś, 2003, p. 299). It is this error that lies at the foundations of the broader crisis of the contemporary culture. It has a paradigmatic dimension as it triggers an avalanche of subsequent errors, some of them economic.

The phrase “anthropological error” was employed by John Paul II in his *Centesimus annus* as a charge against socialism. The pope identified it as follows:

It regards [...] an individual as an ordinary element and particle of the social body, so that the individual good is totally subordinated to the socio-economic mechanism; it maintains, on the other hand, the individual good can be realised without reference to independent choice and individual and exclusive acceptance of the responsibility for good or evil. Man is in this way identified with a set of social relations and the notion

of the person as an autonomous subject of decisions that, by making them, creates the social order vanishes (CA 13).

The erroneous concept of man results in a deformed law and the opposition against private property (CA 13). In socialism, man is not treated as a sovereign and autonomous subject, but a part of society. Not being a subject, he is deprived of the right to independent and responsible decisions (Jaroszyński, 2003, pp. 396–397). In this way, man,

[...] without anything he could *call his* and the possibility of earning his living by his own industry, becomes dependent on the social machine and those who control him, which considerably interferes with the understanding of his dignity as a person and obstructs the way towards the creation of an authentic human community (CA 13).

The theoretical framework of socialism as a model of socio-political life rests chiefly on materialist assumptions that presuppose a reductive vision of man, ignoring his transcendent dimension and more profound, spiritual needs.

John Paul II believed the error of economism and materialism, consisting in an utter reduction of man to the economic sphere and focussing solely on the satisfaction of material needs, is committed by capitalism as well (CA 19). The striving for increasingly satisfactory living standards is in itself right and even desirable from the ethical point of view, yet the pope warns the direct appeals by goods manufacturers exclusively to human instincts, bypassing the integral vision of man, give rise to consumer habits that are not only harmful to man's physical and spiritual health, but also contrary to his dignity (CA 36). The issue of ecology, including the human ecology, is a stark example. Possessed with an unbridled desire for the possession and use of earthly goods, man tyrannises and devastates nature instead of caring for it and developing it, thereby jeopardising his own life, too (CA 38).

Another current problem is alienation. Inspired by Feuerbach and Hegel, it was made popular by Karl Marx, for whom economic alienation is the foundation of all the forms of alienation. In the German philosopher's view, it occurs in the capitalist system and affects above all the workers, to whom both their labour and its products become alien. Work is reduced to the role of a commodity whose price needs to be continuously cut to remain competitive in the market. In effect, the more a worker produces, the poorer he is. Market mechanisms make a worker a commodity sold and traded at a market price and a rival to other workers. Remarkably, though, not only a hired, poorly paid worker, but

also an owner of the means of production, who becomes a merciless tyrant to his employees, are enslaved by their own products (Stępień, 1990, p. 62). The alienation results in a paralysis of communal and personal life – a worker is reduced to his animal nature, while a capitalist's human features are reduced to abstract forces inherent in money (Kołakowski, 2009, p. 135). It is private property that generates the defective economic and social mechanisms leading to alienation. Therefore, Marx believes its liquidation, possible only by means of a proletarian revolution, is the first step to the emancipation of workers and society (Marks, 1969, p. 82).

Although that wild capitalism described by Marx was gradually controlled with a range on initiatives like the trades unions, anti-monopoly laws or other interventions of state authorities, the capitalist ideology itself, tending to reduce the value of work to its economic effects, has preserved its vitality (Szostek, 2015, p. 110). It is carried on as part of globalisation. This is a complicated process the respective authors from their scientific disciplines will endow with economic, sociological, political, cultural or technical natures (Wajda, 2011, p. 15). Stressing the economic factors, Władysław Szymański defines globalisation as a “process of liquidating border barriers to the market that results in the integration of the global economy” (Szymański, 2004, p. 37). It undoubtedly has its upsides. The economic growth of the whole world is a fact. In the global community, the future of even the most industrially developed states is tied with the development of the world (Marx, 2009, p. 275). However, like Szostek notes, globalisation is also another shape of capitalism that escapes state control. More developed countries actuate and control certain mechanisms that are beneficial to these countries yet lead to a “suppression” or dependence of not only individual enterprises but even entire economies of more weakly developed countries (SRS 16). This is possible in the context of “the international division of labour,” where globalist entrepreneurs, interested in low production costs, seek conditions to realise their goals without considering the subjective aspects which allow workers from developing countries for personal self-fulfilment (Szostek, 2015, p. 110).

In John Paul II's opinion, alienation concerns the areas of both labour and consumption. The former arises “where its organisation is focussed on maximising production and profit while ignoring to what extent a worker realises himself as man through his work” (CA 41). It applies to consumption “where man becomes entangled in a web of false and superficial satisfactions, whereas support should be provided by an authentic and palpable realisation of his personality” (CA 41). Although the market is the most effective space for using resources and satisfying needs, it only works for the needs that can be paid for.



There are needs in man, however, that are inaccessible to the market. John Paul II writes: “What is due to man is more important than the logic of the exchange of equivalents [...] because he is man, because of his sublime dignity” (CA 34). Accordingly, alienation consists in a reversal of the relation between means and ends and man thereby “deprives himself of the opportunity for a full experience of his humanity” (CA 41).

In a variety of economic and social dimensions, this is therefore all about man and his dignity, to enable him to become more of man, more of a person.

### 3. Towards a personalist-oriented economy

The question of who man is is a starting point for any consideration of complex aspects of social life, including the important problem of the economy’s effectiveness at building an interpersonal community. Personalism claims man is a person, that is, a subject in a relation (Wojtyła, 1976, pp. 5–39). As a personal being that exists autonomously (substantially), he’s not part of a larger “whole.” His is a rational and free existence capable of making autonomous decisions. Every man is a sovereign and unique subject. His structure is material and spiritual. Therefore, in his personal acts, he transcends the material world, including the world of his occasionally egoist corporeality and needs associated with this domain, on the one hand, and is subject to the laws and determinations of the material world, on the other hand (Krapiec, 2005, pp. 119–156). The free market is the most common form of economic activity at present. It has an undeniable significance to the economic and social development of particular nations and states. An adverse effect of this situation, however, is the primacy of economic values over ethical categories, including the all-important human person.

The term “economics” currently means a science dealing with such issues as the production, distribution and exchange of goods, as well as money. Etymologically speaking, the Greek *oikonomia* literally means “home management” (*oikos* – home, *nomos* – law) (Wojtysiak, 2007, p. 289). According to Aristotle, *Economics* (this is the title of one of his works) was the ethics of family life on the one hand and the art of acquiring, maintaining and using property and goods necessary for living (Wojtysiak, 2007, p. 290). The question connected with economics and ethics concerns the reasons why man works, produces, earns money and consumes. This is the question about the purpose of these activities: why does man do it? It is also a question about the purpose of economics. In the contemporary socio-economic culture, economic success is often

treated as an end in itself. In an absolutised market, man becomes a means to generating an optimum profit on production, a “gear” in the money-making machine. Meanwhile, economy is an important instrument of releasing and multiplying personal powers and capacities of man and society. This is key to the personalist concept of economy. This is therefore a good time to return to the question posed in the beginning of this discussion: does economy foster and strengthen man in his personal dimension or possibly reduce him and impede his personal development?

The personal meaning of man’s activities remains the criterion of an answer to this question as well as a challenge. Economy exists only in a social world produced and shaped by man. Therefore, the personalist interpretation of the ultimate foundations of economy requires an insight into the human person, its personal structure and value. Such a starting point makes economics the theory of actuation and promotion of man’s potentiality and development (Drobny, 2013, p. 56) as the fundamental common good of every society. Social personalism, derived from the Aristotelian and Tomist tradition, appreciates the importance of the objectively seen common good and stresses its subjective meaning, supporting the development of human talents, the greatest social capital. This is what John Paul II means when, in his encyclical *Centesimus annus*, in the name of respect for human dignity, he asserts the primacy of human labour over both capital understood as the set of means of production, and over its products. Therefore, he warns against any forms of limiting the right to economic enterprise and freedom (CA 24). Man’s cognitive abilities, creativity, resourcefulness, competences, and entrepreneurship may become the hidden talents of the Gospel. They may also become a genuine common good bringing real profits, though. To this end, they must be adequately supported by appropriate institutions, political tools, and funding. Prudent care for such a common good is one of the most important and pressing tasks John Paul II’s document sets for politicians, entrepreneurs, and economists of any time. This is certainly an ideal which is, like any ideal, hard to attain. It constitutes an important point of reference, however, setting actions in perspective and a goal to be strived for.

Personalism expands the objective scope of economics with ethics. Its proponents will tell economists, entrepreneurs, and politicians it is not land and its deposits, not enterprises and corporations and their profits, but man who is the most important source of wealth and a fundamental common good of every community, local to national and international. The market economy, a value to the whole society, can only be developed well when this basic truth is taken into consideration.

## Conclusion

A number of economists and practitioners realise the system of free market economy needs a solid ethical foundation for values that are pre-requisite to its normal operation. Man's dignity and everything that forms his subjectivity play special roles among these values. Instituting proper relations between labour and capital, ethics and economics remains a current task of economists and politicians. A certain image of man and society lies at the foundations of any theory of the market economy, implying a hierarchy of values. In search of the most universal and firmest axiological foundation for economics, personalism suggests a return to the truth of man as a person with such inherent basic values as rationality, free will, and transcendent dignity, discovered by classical philosophy. In light of these personalist principles, it is the key task of economic institutions to protect these values and the person's development is the core criterion of their assessment. Building a better future while ignoring this principle is doomed to failure.

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## Summary

This paper is intended to reconstruct the personalist understanding of relations between person and economics. Beginning with the concept of economics as a science whose fundamental categories are the production, exchange and division of material goods and

profit, and adopting the personalist perspective, the author explores the economic roots going deeper than income alone, defined in terms of financial gain. This reasoning seems particularly important as economics is extremely susceptible to unethical mechanisms leading to various forms of alienation.

**KEY WORDS:** personal dignity, development, common good, alienation

### Streszczenie

Artykuł ma na celu rekonstrukcję personalistycznego rozumienia relacji między człowiekiem a ekonomią. Wychodząc od koncepcji ekonomii jako nauki, której podstawowymi kategoriami są produkcja, wymiana i podział dóbr materialnych oraz zysk, a także przyjmując perspektywę personalistyczną, autor bada korzenie ekonomii sięgające głębiej niż sam dochód, definiowany w kategoriach zysku finansowego. Myślenie to wydaje się szczególnie ważne, gdyż ekonomia jest niezwykle podatna na nieetyczne mechanizmy prowadzące do różnych form alienacji.

**SŁOWA KLUCZOWE:** godność osobowa, rozwój, dobro wspólne, alienacja

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