

Wellbeing and Wealth

Defining wellbeing and wealth:

Personal

If one were to ask the proverbial man in the street what it meant to be wealthy or to be poor then one might find a ready response. To be poor is to lack financial resources and to be rich is to possess financial resources, and lots of it. For more reflective people it is not quite as simple as that. Firstly there are no absolute standards of poverty and wealth. They are, to some extent at least, relative conceptions. For some, one may be rich if one has enough food to eat and can keep warm. For others, one would be poor if one could not afford a television or gain access to the internet. The index of poverty and wealth clearly varies according to our society and expectations in life. It is not unreasonable to ask:

What are the thresholds of poverty in Birmingham today and how are they defined¹? What can or should we do so that people do not fall below these thresholds? Are our expectations reasonable? Are the expectations insufficiently ambitious? What can be done to help individual people improve their financial situation? Do campaigns to lift the minimum wage help²? Would credit unions and 'micro-financing' help?

Communal/social

The problem of definition becomes more complex when one begins to recognise that financial resources are not just a personal matter but also social or communal. Some local authorities and some regions of the nation clearly have more financial resources than others by virtue of their industry, access to markets, the possible exploitation of natural resources, their heritage or the efficiency of the local market. Again it is not unreasonable to ask:

Is Birmingham maximising its opportunities for the benefit of all? Could more be done? In weighing up the relative contribution to overall wealth, could one say that in the City, on average, individuals are poor but collectively rich? Or, vice versa, on average, individually rich but collectively poor? Neither rich nor poor on both counts? Does it value its heritage? Are human and other resources wasted?

¹ The government defines this as 60% or less than the national average.

² Currently minimum wage levels are: £5.80 p/hr for over 22 year olds and £4.83 p/hr for 18-21 year olds as at October 2009. There is a campaign for a higher 'Living Wage' run by organisations like the Citizens Organising Foundation (£6.50 p/hr)... www.cof.org.uk

If finance were the only thing that mattered, calculating individual or collective wealth and maximising them might be a mere technical matter requiring bureaucratic solutions. The Pope thought that our economic situation required more and observed:

Often the development of peoples is considered a matter of financial engineering, the freeing up of markets, the removal of tariffs, investment in production, and institutional reforms — in other words, a purely technical matter. All these factors are of great importance, but we have to ask why technical choices made thus far have yielded rather mixed results. We need to think hard about the cause. Development will never be fully guaranteed through automatic or impersonal forces, whether they derive from the market or from international politics. *Development is impossible without upright men and women, without financiers and politicians whose consciences are finely attuned to the requirements of the common good.* [para 71]

Conceptions of development

Severine Deneulin summarises in an unpublished paper the widely promulgated four key principles of human development as follows:

"There are four key principles to human development:³

- *Equity*: every person needs to be given the opportunities to live a flourishing human life. Or in the jargon of the capability approach, every person needs to be able to enjoy valuable 'capabilities', or freedoms,⁴ such as the freedom to be healthy, to be educated, to participate in the life of the community, and to live in a peaceful environment.
- *Efficiency*: optimal use of existing resources for promoting people's valuable freedoms.
- *Participation and empowerment*: people are subjects of their own development, not objects of policies. People are actors, individually and as groups, of their own destiny.
- *Sustainability*: progress in human development needs to endure over time, and cannot be at the detriment of future generations. This refers not only to the environmental dimension, but also financial, social, political, cultural and other dimensions of human life."

Such conceptions of development, as she recognises, fundamentally focus on means, skills, or techniques, they do not yet define what we live for or what we live by. Equity, for example, is

³[1] For a pedagogical introduction to human development, see S. Alkire and S. Deneulin (2009), 'Introducing the Human Development and Capability Approach', in S. Deneulin with L. Shahani (eds), *The Human Development and Capability Approach: Freedom and Agency*, London: Earthscan.

⁴[2] In his writings, Amartya Sen now uses interchangeably 'capabilities' and 'freedoms'."

notoriously difficult to define if it is to mean anything more substantive than the rational requirement to treat all like cases alike. Secondly, one can be efficient in one's inhumanity as history has demonstrated. Participation and empowerment is no guarantor of personal or communal good; even democracies can be oppressive as Socrates found to his cost. Further, just and unjust societies equally appear to have the power of self-perpetuation. To redeem such qualities [equity, efficiency, participation and empowerment, sustainability] one requires a conception of the good to which such 'capabilities' might lead. We need a deeper conception of society than everyone pursuing their own interests, with least hindrance from others, and facilitated as much as possible by a bureaucratic state. It is for this reason the Pope has turned to truth and love as the two qualities to which any good society should aspire and against which economic activities are to be judged.

In seeking to develop Birmingham do we pay attention to the key principles of development? Have we also thought beyond these 'capabilities' to the kind of society we seek to create and how would that change what is done?

Necessity of a broader definition for wealth

The problem of the definition of wealth becomes still more complex when it is realised that the focus on financial resources, whether personal or social, may itself be a major distortion in our understanding of wealth. The link of wealth to wellbeing is made precisely for that purpose. The notion of the common good and social capital means more than access to collective financial resources. Individually, one may have substantial financial resources but possess a poor quality of life. Contributory factors to a poor quality of life might well consist of the following: poor health and inadequate access to health care, failing relationships and lack of family life and support, deficiencies in the quality of the air we breathe or in the water we drink, the lack of access to open spaces, long commuting times to and from work, an oppressive built environment, insufficient opportunities for creative and artistic life, a poor education and poor educational standards in schools, a poverty in social institutions/organisations and so on.

The Pope's encyclical *Caritas in veritate* locates economic life within a context of truth and love. It is always worth reflecting:

What are the elements that contribute to human well being? Quite independently of considerations of financial resources, can we say that people in Birmingham are rich or poor? What are the elements that would figure in such a broader accounting? Where and how, in short, are truth and love nurtured?

New criteria

It is clear from religious traditions that financial resources are but means to an end, a point well made in the parable in Luke 12: 16 – 21 in which a rich man seeks to build ever bigger barns to store his wealth and which ends by God saying to the rich man:

“Thou fool this night thy soul shall be required of thee: Then whose shall those things be, which thou has provided? So is he that layeth up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God.”

What does being rich toward God mean? What, in life, are the ends in themselves that determine the deeper sense of wealth? How might such considerations influence our assessment of the relative wealth and poverty in Birmingham?

The encyclical may help for the Pope mentioned ‘Truth’ and ‘Love’. The first suggests knowledge and understanding, the second the quality of 1. our relationship to our environment or to nature, 2. our relationship to each other [individually and groups] and 3. our relationship to the transcendent.

If we were to review the first, namely, truth, we would have to look not only at the quality of the educational provision: schools, colleges, Universities in the City but also at other institutions such as the museums, public libraries, access to the internet, the state of the media etc..

Modernity often supposed that knowledge was relative to the individual; more recently, there is much talk of the social construction of reality – knowledge is what we collectively create. Both could lead to forms of relativism that may undermine a serious commitment to truth and understanding. The truth located in God acknowledges the otherness of truth and the claims it makes on us; one that demands openness, courage and commitment from us individually and collectively.

How well do we meet these criteria of living for and by the truth in Birmingham? Could we do more? Is there sufficient openness?

The second consideration offered by the Pope was love. Economic life must be evaluated in terms of the cultivation of love, we are never rich until we are rich in love. This is not intended as a shallow romantic notion but as an observation on the importance of the relationship of a self to what is other, in effect caring for the other as ends in themselves for whom or what they are. Assessing the quality of the relationships that are formed in a society is acknowledged by some who speak of ‘thin’ and ‘thick’ societies. As we understand this, the distinction is a measurement of the extent, diversity and depths of relationships that are possible in a society.

From the perspective of the three spheres mentioned earlier:

(a) How much do we value our relationship to the environment and to nature in Birmingham? Where is this evident? Could we say that in this regard we were rich or poor in the City?

(b) How attentive are we to the scope for developing relationships between individuals? Is our

built environment and the character of our society such as to lead to social isolation or does it encourage and support family life and social interaction? What can we do to overcome obstacles to a 'thick' society?

- (c) How attentive are we to the relationships between groups? In valuing diversity do we also encourage ghettos or are they areas where we like to visit each other? Are there sufficient common meeting grounds? What are the roles of schools in this regard? If there are faith schools do we encourage relationships between them so that we do not demonise the other?
- (d) The significance of the religious sphere is in encouraging a sense for the other that is beyond our world and which is the source of creativity and hope. How much do we allow for this or do we in practice in a secular society seek to curtail this from fear of differences?

There is yet another feature about locating the economy in love. The efficient market appears to be grounded in the fair exchange of goods and services between individuals and between collective entities. Distortions appear where there are imbalances in the relations of power to negotiate e.g. in situations created by monopolies. Otherwise the market seems to be built on the effective pursuit of self-interest balanced against the interest of the other. Love adds a different dimension, perhaps even dissonance, notably what the encyclical refers to as gratuitousness. Love is always gift, never earned nor can it be demanded. If economic life is to work well and be a means to an end, it is strictly a case of developing wealth in order to give freely. Communally it cannot be right to be grudging about giving all free access to the wealth of social life. A serious question to be raised in the City is:

Are there any who are excluded? Is there anything we can do to give the City the reputation of being a giving City?

The role of religion in our economy was first raised by M. Weber nearly a century ago when he wrote about "the development of the modern economic ethic of the Occident". He stated, "The term 'economic ethic' points to the practical impulses for action which are founded in the psychological pragmatic contexts of religions" (P.19f. R. Robertson *Sociology of Religion*). Weber does not offer a simply story. The relationships between economic life and religion are evidently complex. For as he points out "An economic ethic is not simply a 'function' of a form of economic organisation; and just as little does the reverse hold, namely, that economic ethics unambiguously stamp the form of the economic organisation." Furthermore he claims, "No economic ethic has ever been determined solely by religion ... the religious determination of life conduct, however, is also one [alongside geographic and historical ones]– note this – only one, of the determinants of the economic ethics." Still the impact of an 'economic ethics' is considerable in Weber's view as he also claims that "the characteristic features of an economic ethics may change the course of history" so whatever the role of religion one is clearly advised to take note of them.

the various peoples, by which the individual defines himself in relation to life's fundamental questions^[62]. What eclecticism and cultural levelling have in common is the separation of culture from human nature. [para 26]

Charity does not exclude knowledge, but rather requires, promotes, and animates it from within. Knowledge is never purely the work of the intellect. ... Intelligence and love are not in separate compartments: *love is rich in intelligence and intelligence is full of love*. [para30]

Likewise the truth of ourselves, of our personal conscience, is first of all *given* to us. In every cognitive process, truth is not something that we produce, it is always found, or better, received. Truth, like love, "is neither planned nor willed, but somehow imposes itself upon human beings"^[89]. [para 34]

The market is subject to the principles of so-called *commutative justice*, which regulates the relations of giving and receiving between parties to a transaction. But the social doctrine of the Church has unceasingly highlighted the importance of *distributive justice* and *social justice* for the market economy, not only because it belongs within a broader social and political context, but also because of the wider network of relations within which it operates. In fact, if the market is governed solely by the principle of the equivalence in value of exchanged goods, it cannot produce the social cohesion that it requires in order to function well. *Without internal forms of solidarity and mutual trust, the market cannot completely fulfil its proper economic function*. And today it is this trust which has ceased to exist, and the loss of trust is a grave loss. [para 35]

The economy in the global era seems to privilege the former logic, that of contractual exchange, but directly or indirectly it also demonstrates its need for the other two: political logic, and the logic of the unconditional gift. [para 37]

He saw civil society as the most natural setting for an *economy of gratuitousness* and fraternity, but did not mean to deny it a place in the other two settings. ... While in the past it was possible to argue that justice had to come first and gratuitousness could follow afterwards, as a complement, today it is clear that without gratuitousness, there can be no justice in the first place. ... Charity in truth, in this case, requires that shape and structure be given to those types of economic initiative which, without rejecting profit, aim at a higher goal than the mere logic of the exchange of equivalents, of profit as an end in itself. [para38]

When both the logic of the market and the logic of the State come to an agreement that each will continue to exercise a monopoly over its respective area of influence, in the long term much is lost: solidarity in relations between citizens, participation and adherence, actions of gratuitousness, all of which stand in contrast with *giving in order to acquire* (the logic of exchange) and *giving through duty* (the logic of public obligation, imposed by State law). [para 39]

An overemphasis on rights leads to a disregard for duties. Duties set a limit on rights because they point to the anthropological and ethical framework of which rights are a part, in this way ensuring that they do not become licence. Duties thereby reinforce rights and call for their defence and promotion as a task to be undertaken in the service of the common good. [para 43]

Striving to meet the deepest moral needs of the person also has important and beneficial repercussions at the level of economics. *The economy needs ethics in order to function correctly* — not any ethics whatsoever, but an ethics which is people-centred. [para 45]

When nature, including the human being, is viewed as the result of mere chance or evolutionary determinism, our sense of responsibility wanes. In nature, the believer recognizes the wonderful result of God's creative activity, which we may use responsibly to satisfy our legitimate needs, material or otherwise, while respecting the intrinsic balance of creation. If this vision is lost, we end up either considering nature an untouchable taboo or, on the contrary, abusing it. Neither attitude is consonant with the Christian vision of nature as the fruit of God's creation. ... But it should also be stressed that it is contrary to authentic development to view nature as something more important than the human person. This position leads to attitudes of neo-paganism or a new pantheism — human salvation cannot come from nature alone, understood in a purely naturalistic sense. This having been said, it is also necessary to reject the opposite position, which aims at total technical dominion over nature, because the natural environment is more than raw material to be manipulated at our pleasure; it is a wondrous work of the Creator containing a “grammar” which sets forth ends and criteria for its wise use, not its reckless exploitation. [para 48]

Truth, and the love which it reveals, cannot be produced: they can only be received as a gift. Their ultimate source is not, and cannot be, mankind, but only God, who is himself Truth and Love. [para 52]

One of the deepest forms of poverty a person can experience is isolation. ... Pope Paul VI noted that “the world is in trouble because of the lack of thinking”^[128]. ... Thinking of this kind requires a *deeper critical evaluation of the category of relation*. [para 53]

The Christian religion and other religions can offer their contribution to development *only if God has a place in the public realm*, specifically in regard to its cultural, social, economic, and particularly its political dimensions. The Church's social doctrine came into being in order to claim “citizenship status” for the Christian religion^[135]. Denying the right to profess one's religion in public and the right to bring the truths of faith to bear upon public life has negative consequences for true development. The exclusion of religion from the public square — and, at the other extreme, religious fundamentalism — hinders an encounter between persons and their collaboration for the progress of humanity. [para 56]

No consideration of the problems associated with development could fail to highlight the direct link between *poverty and unemployment*. In many cases, poverty results from a *violation of the dignity of human work*, either because work opportunities are limited (through unemployment or underemployment), or “because a low value is put on work and the rights that flow from it, especially the right to a just wage and to the personal security of the worker and his or her family”^[143]. [para63]

Often the development of peoples is considered a matter of financial engineering, the freeing up of markets, the removal of tariffs, investment in production, and institutional reforms — in other words, a purely technical matter. All these factors are of great importance, but we have to ask why technical choices made thus far have yielded rather mixed results. We need to think hard about the cause. Development will never be fully guaranteed through automatic or impersonal forces, whether

they derive from the market or from international politics. *Development is impossible without upright men and women, without financiers and politicians whose consciences are finely attuned to the requirements of the common good.* [para 71]

The media can make an important contribution towards the growth in communion of the human family and the *ethos* of society when they are used to promote universal participation in the common search for what is just. [para 73]

Scientific discoveries in this field and the possibilities of technological intervention seem so advanced as to force a choice between two types of reasoning: reason open to transcendence or reason closed within immanence. We are presented with a clear *either/or*. Yet the rationality of a self-centred use of technology proves to be irrational because it implies a decisive rejection of meaning and value. [para74]

Social and psychological alienation and the many neuroses that afflict affluent societies are attributable in part to spiritual factors. A prosperous society, highly developed in material terms but weighing heavily on the soul, is not of itself conducive to authentic development. The new forms of slavery to drugs and the lack of hope into which so many people fall can be explained not only in sociological and psychological terms but also in essentially spiritual terms. The emptiness in which the soul feels abandoned, despite the availability of countless therapies for body and psyche, leads to suffering. *There cannot be holistic development and universal common good unless people's spiritual and moral welfare is taken into account, considered in their totality as body and soul.* [para 76]

All our knowledge, even the most simple, is always a minor miracle, since it can never be fully explained by the material instruments that we apply to it. In every truth there is something more than we would have expected, in the love that we receive there is always an element that surprises us. We should never cease to marvel at these things. In all knowledge and in every act of love the human soul experiences something "over and above", which seems very much like a gift that we receive, or a height to which we are raised. [para 77]