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THEOLOGICAL ONTOLOGY, POVERTY, AND ETHICS

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Summary:

Theological thinking about poverty, wealth and justice has to begin with biblical ontology, otherwise the biblical rules do not make sense. Ontological “players”, (God, humans, the world, the devil) that participate in the ethical principles dealing with poverty determine the “rules of the game”. The argument of the article is that we cannot make use of the biblical principles of ethics without accepting its ontology.

THE QUESTION OF ONTOLOGY

It is impossible to discuss theological ethics taking into account Biblical ontology or metaphysics. In this matter theology agrees with those philosophers who like N. HARTMANN assert: “Philosophy cannot enter upon practical tasks without knowledge of being as such. For the tasks themselves grow out of a total datum of existing realities, and these must be understood and penetrated to the root before man can venture to shape them according to his goals.”¹Of course, there are philosophers, especially of the analytic tradition, who vigorously oppose this, notably Hilary PUTNAM, who gave a series of lecture with the title Ethics without Ontology.² Another analytic philosopher, W. O. QUINE asserts “...reference and ontology recede to the status of mere auxiliaries.”³

For Biblical ethics generally, and dealing with the problem of poverty ontology specifically, cannot recede into some unimportant auxiliary concept or idea. The problem of eternal existence (necessary being), the establishment of Biblical anthropology and the relationships of human beings with the world, the environment, cannot be indifferent to ontology. The problem of poverty is not just a “scientific problem” dealing with logical propositions. What is involved are powerful emotions - compassion, envy, indignation, greed and the like. It is impossible to understand and ethically control these emotions (related to worship and idolatry) without seeing the world through the Biblical ontology.

Just one example, before we come to the description of Biblical ontology: “Whoever mocks the poor insults his Maker (Proverbs 17:5)”. This statement is ethically meaningless if we do not accept Biblical dualist Creator-creation ontology. Understanding the problem of poverty in theological ethics presupposes “four players” in the “field of reality”. These “four players” are: (1) God, (2) humans, (3) the world, (4) the devil. These “four players” enter into quite

complicated relationships in regard to such notions as needs, desires, property, ownership, worship, care, giving, rights, stealing, judgment etc. These relationships are deemed ethically “right” (“just” or “righteous”) or “evil” (“unjust”, “unrighteous”) according to whether they are given their place in our actions in agreement with their “ontological status”. (Eg., the “ontological status” of the environment (the world) is defined by the fact that it has been given to man to keep and to rule over it. Therefore it is unethical to put it on the same level of importance as human beings not to say as God.) Their place in ontology implies the important roles and positions of the “players” in ethics, in our case the ethical problems of poverty. The most important “player” is God. His ontological status of the Necessary Being and the Creator, Owner and Sustainer of all other existences makes him the main owner, lawgiver and judge of everything. It should be quite obvious that this in an important way affects the poverty-related ethical problems.

The next player(s) are human beings. The description of humans as both “the image of God” and “the dust of the earth” makes the upper and lower limit of his/her place in ontology. This is further complicated by the fact of sin, which for our purposes could be defined as “confused ontology” making non-gods into God and vice-versa. (Property-related idolatry, greed etc.)

The world is given “roles to play” as the means of sustenance, the living space and the place where God's will/calling is to be realized. Again, the broken relationship of humans with God complicates the ontological status of the world in the eyes of man/woman. The world is at the same time both a good creation of God and an source of temptation that leads to enmity against God. Today, it is not fashionable, to say the least, to believe and speak of a personal devil. (The things were very different for some time after the World War II, while the memory of the horrors lasted.) But in the theological ethics based on the Bible evil is not only some mishap or stupidity of humans, but there is much more sinister side to it - an intelligent evil that tries to destroy all creation of God.

THE BIBLICAL VIEW OF POVERTY AND WEALTH POVERTY

Merriam Webster's dictionary gives the following definition: “...the state of one who lacks a usual or socially acceptable amount of money or material possessions”.⁴ It is obvious that this definition speaks of relative poverty in certain social environment - poverty is “what is socially unacceptable”. There are also definition of so calle “absolute poverty”, that define poverty not by relative wealth but by availability of the things necessary for survival - water, food, shelter, clothing, health care and education. Poverty is first of all viewed negatively. Where the western thinking stresses the economic aspect of poverty, the ancient near eastern mind understood poverty in the context of shame and honor. Poverty means first of all dependence, vulnerability; humility and oppression. Leviticus defines the poor as those who are lowly because their “power [lit., hand] wavers” (25:35) or is insufficient (14:21). This means intrinsic weakness or outward injustice (Proverbs 13:23). One aspect of such weakness is slavery - it may be caused by both the intrinsic weakness or the outward injustice (2 Kings 4:1; Amos 2:6-7; 8:4-6). On the other hand, the Bible speaks of poverty as the consequence of moral lassitude, especially laziness (Proverbs 6:11; 10:4; 13:18; 20:13). Poverty is not only

a result of disobedience to God but also it may lead to it, so the wise man prays: “Remove far from me vanity and lies: give me neither poverty nor riches; feed me with food convenient for me: Lest I be full, and deny thee, and say, Who is the LORD? or lest I be poor, and steal, and take the name of my God in vain” (Proverbs 30:8-9).

The paradoxical view of poverty in the Bible can be seen in its positive assessment, although not poverty in itself is deemed positive but some of the related virtues and attitudes. The most important positive attribute of poverty is that it gets “God's special attention” (Psalm 12:5; 14:6; Proverbs 19:17).

WEALTH

In the Bible (Old Testament) riches are viewed as blessing from God. (Proverbs 10:22 “It is the LORD'S blessing that makes a person rich, and hard work adds nothing to it.”) On the other hand wealth gotten by greed is considered a curse: (Proverbs 1:19 – “Such is the end of all who are greedy for gain; it takes away the life of its possessors”. Proverbs 28:22 – “The miser is in a hurry to get rich and does not know that loss is sure to come.”) Some very negative words about the rich can be read in the books of the prophets: eg. Amos 6:4,7; Isaiah 10:1-4; Jeremiah 5:26-29.

BIBLICAL DEALINGS WITH POVERTY

The responsibility of alleviating the plight of the poor is basic to biblical faith. At the basis is the nature of God as one who hears the cries of the poor (Psalm 12:5). The deliverance from Egypt is presented as the great exemplar of God's justice to the needy (Psalm 68:5-10; Exodus 2:23-24). In the law attention is given to social structures that affect the poor. The land is to be left fallow every seventh year “that the poor . . . may eat” (Exod. 23:11). In this year the landed means of production are to be given over in their entirety to the poor and the debts of the poor are to be cancelled (Deuteronomy 15:2). It is part of the Messianic expectation (Isaiah 11:4) seen fulfilled in Jesus (Luke 1:52-53; 4:18-21). The hope for “good news proclaimed to the poor” (Luke 4:18; 7:22) was ancient (Psalm 68:10-11; Isaiah 29:18-19; 35:4-6).

Biblical Economic and Social Legislation

God who is the owner of the world (Psalm 24:1), the owner of the land of Israel (Leviticus 25:23) the Sustainer of life (Psalm 104:30), the Lawgiver (Isaiah 33:22) is also “a God of the poor” (Proverbs 22:22) is compassionate towards the poor (Psalm 72:13). In the Bible we can see both “supernatural” and “natural” interventions of God on behalf of the needy and oppressed. The legislation in Israel did what may be called “natural” intervention in favour of the poor. Here are some examples: Equal treatment in court (Exodus 23:6); no postponed wages (Leviticus 19:13; Deuteronomy 24:14); no interest on loans (Exodus 22:25; Leviticus 25:36); providing for the poor during harvests (Leviticus 19:9; Leviticus 23:22); considerate business dealings (Exodus 22:26; Deuteronomy 24:10); the Jubilee year (Leviticus 25). The Bible in the Old Testament does not predict ideal society even if all the laws of God are followed. Deuteronomy 15:11 says expressly: “For the poor will never cease out of the land”.

Biblical Admonitions against Greed and Wealth-Related Idolatry

Biblical theology knows very well the danger of wealth turned into an idol. Although wealth is one of the main channels of blessing from the Lord (Psalm 112:1-3) it easily leads to heart attachment, oppression and self-satisfaction (Psalm 49:6; 62:10). Wisdom and poetic literature frequently deal with these attitudes and give guidance how to govern one's conduct in these temptations (Psalm 73).

APPLYING BIBLICAL ONTOLOGY

It is easy to sketch the six relations between the “ontological players” (1) God□humans, (2) God□the world, (3) God□evil, (4) Humans□the world, (5) Humans□evil, (6) Evil□the world. It is more complicated to describe how the roles of the “players” and their mutual relations translate into modern scientific fields of study. The areas of study, research and action against poverty can be obtained combining the roles of the four “players”. Just to name a few of them: theology, philosophy, ethics, economics, politics, medicine, sociology, demography, agriculture etc. It is impractical and unnecessary to further multiply these combinations, because the logic is easily followed and the number of combinations is impossible to count precisely, some of them may be quite indefinite and difficult to clearly distinguish from others.

One of the most interesting narratives where we can see the interplay of the above mentioned “players” is the biblical book of Job, especially the first two chapters. Job is a righteous and wealthy man who becomes a battlefield of both visible and invisible forces. The account of his experiences raises multitude of theological, ethical, logical and other types of questions that in the end, if we consider our curiosity, are left unanswered. The important point is that to answer these questions is impossible without taking into account each of the four players because all of these take an important part in the unfolding drama. Other biblical narratives that may be used for this sort of analysis are eg.: Genesis 12-13, Ruth 2 or 1 Kings 21. If the reader is interested in the deeper analysis of these narratives, here are some questions he/she can try to answer: (1) Who are the “players” in the narrative?, (2) What are the respective roles of the “players”?, (3) How is wealth & poverty viewed in the text?, (4) What are the attitudes of the “players” to wealth and poverty?, (5) Which principles of the biblical (Old Testament) law are being applied or can be seen in the text?

In conclusion I would say that it seems to me that theological thinking about poverty has to begin with ontology – God and the „big picture“ of the whole drama of existence. The „big picture“ helps to see things in perspective - the relative value of wealth and the possible positive consequences of poverty in the biblical worldview.