LIBERTY AND SOLIDARITY
Living the Vocation to Business
How should we understand private property in the context of solidarity?

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The problem of how to square the institution of private property with the demands of Christian charity (fellowship, or solidarity) has long plagued the Church. Scripture gives a mixed reading. Sometimes private property is renounced, as in the practice of the early apostles. Sometimes it is regarded as a blessing, as in Job. But most often, the institution of private property is spoken of as carrying with it an obligation to others. Although some of the Church Fathers regarded private property as a concession to fallen human nature, the Church has long affirmed the institution independently of such concerns. Private property is seen as fitting to human nature, and is therefore a good institution. However, the right to private property is not unqualified. It must be understood as being ordered to the common good.

This leaves us with something that feels like a tension. On the one hand, private property allows individuals to own the fruits of their labors, with a primary purpose of allowing them to use their property to pursue their own self-interests. On the other hand, we are to bear in mind the needs of others as we dispose of our property. People of goodwill are then confronted with the question of how to balance their pursuit of their own interests with the call to care for others.

There are two reasons for this difficulty. First, the public square is dominated by an overly individualistic account of the human person. C.B. MacPherson refers to this as a spirit of possessive individualism, which he locates in the early modern period. On this view, we own ourselves outright. As a consequence, we also own our own labor or effort. And as a further consequence we own anything with which we have mixed our labor or effort. What we have, we have by right. The primacy of the individual is further reflected in the idea that society exists as a social contract between individuals. Because individuals are in competition for scarce resources, a social contract emerges as a means of securing the peace. We sacrifice some of our freedom to do as we like in order to secure ourselves from the harm that might be done to us by others exercising their own unfettered freedom.

This view of the human person is not entirely wrong. The tradition of Catholic social thought has echoed the insight that there is some natural right to the fruits of one's own labor. But it locates that insight in a very different view of human nature—one that affirms the importance of the individual, but which sees her as an intrinsically social being (as opposed to one who is merely social by contract).

The second reason for the difficulty we have in balancing the pursuit of our own interests with the demands of others lies in our misunderstanding of the nature of the good life. Modernity tends to view happiness as the matter of satisfying one’s preferences. But for the Church there is an objective quality to human happiness, and fallen humans may well have disordered desires that lead them away from
genuine flourishing. Such disordered desires create the illusion that the call to care for others detracts from our ability to pursue our own self-interest.

My task here is to briefly sketch out the Catholic view of private property in light of its view of the human person. I want to do this by first discussing why we should be concerned with the needs of others—that is to give a stronger foundation for understanding why there is an obligation to use one’s private property in light of the common good. I then want to take up the more challenging argument that if we had a better understanding of our own interests, we would find that there is little or no tension between the pursuit of our own self-interest and the call to be in solidarity with others. The big problem is that we have a disordered relationship with material wealth itself.

THE HUMAN PERSON IS INTRINSICALLY SOCIAL: Why we should be attentive to the demands of solidarity.

The place to start is to ask what constitutes fulfillment for a human being. If we see humans as being made in the image and likeness of God, then there is reason to think that just as God’s relational nature is essential to his being, so too is our relational nature essential to our being. Although this is a theological insight, some reflection on the nature of human beings bears it out. Consider, for example, the fact that human beings are rational. We are able to reason about the world around us, and about the actions we should take. But our ability to reason is deeply bound up with language, which is inherently social. We need words to form concepts, and those words emerge in conversations with other humans. Indeed, our ability to even know ourselves depends on seeing ourselves reflected in the eyes of another. It is no accident that the worst punishment you can inflict on a human being besides the death penalty is to put them into solitary confinement.

Because we need others for our own fulfillment, part of our perfection as human beings entails cultivating the virtue of justice—to will with whole hearts that we render to others their due. It further entails cultivating the virtue of charity—which is to take even greater concern in the welfare of others. Any view of the human person that diminishes our sense of community and connection with others, rests on the illusion that we aren’t as radically dependent on others as we really are. On that mistaken view, we may act in a way that undermines our social bonds in a way that hinders our own flourishing (even if we don’t recognize it as such).
The economic realm reflects the reality that we are intrinsically social. Although there is something to the view that individual effort should be tied to individual rewards, it is an incomplete view. Our wealth does not depend solely on John’s hard work, or Jane’s entrepreneurship. As Adam Smith notes, a good deal of our wealth stems from the simple fact that we are far more productive when we work together than we would be if we worked alone. Consider your shirt. If you had to make the shirt for yourself, from scratch, it would take a great deal of time. You’d have to pick the cotton and card it. Spin the cotton into thread. Weave the thread into cloth. Gather the materials necessary to make a dye, and then dye the cloth. And so on. By contrast, because of our interdependence, you are able to work at your job for an hour or so in order to earn enough to buy the same shirt. That difference in time is an example of the enormous dividend we enjoy as a result of the social nature of economic production. There really is something like a free lunch after all.

This is not to say that individual effort isn’t also important and shouldn’t also be rewarded. There is both an individual and a social component to our productivity. But if a good bit of our wealth draws on the social dividend, it would seem to follow that we have a natural duty to be worried about the social good as well as our own good. We benefit from the fact that we are part of society. We therefore have obligations to secure the good of the whole—and that is best embodied through the virtue of solidarity.

The responsibility to others can be exercised in a variety of ways. We can pursue it through the practice of providing good products and services at just prices; by hiring others at just wages; by meeting the needs of others through charity; through volunteer work; and by exercising our political duties as voters and citizens with an eye towards promoting the common good rather than our narrow self-interest.

**PROPER RELATIONSHIP WITH MATERIAL WEALTH**

If we left it there, we’d have an explanation for why we are responsible for both the pursuit of our own self-interest, and for the well-being of others. But we’d also still be left with the sense that the duty to care for others comes at our own expense—if we give more to others, we have to make do with less.

This tension appears to arise in St. Thomas Aquinas’s account of private property. In his discussion of whether private property is permitted, Aquinas argues that we need to consider private property from two different angles. The first angle relates to the question of how private property should be managed. And from that angle, private property is permitted—indeed is actively good. It prevents bickering. It assigns responsibility. And it channels our natural concern to look after ourselves and our families to productive uses. In setting out these principles, Aquinas has a lot of resonance with modern economic thought both in terms of why markets are superior to central planning and the notion that self-interest is a good motivator to work. The second angle, however, seems to surface our familiar tension. With respect to use, we should hold private property as if it were in common, i.e. ready to share with others in need.

“The institution of private property is beautifully suited to serving our self-interest in solidarity with the larger community.”

The argument that private property is good, because we are more likely to work diligently when it is for our direct benefit, seems to be in tension with the idea that we should then turn around and consider the fruits of our labor as though they were goods held in common. But for Aquinas there is no tension here. To see why, we need to explore more what Aquinas means when he says that it is natural for people to work more diligently to secure their own needs and those of their families.

The answer lies in what Aquinas has to say about our proper relationship with material goods. He emphasizes that they are instrumental goods… goods that are desirable in light of the ends they are meant to serve. In many ways, Aquinas shares modern sensibilities about this. Material goods support biological life, but they are also necessary to allow us to live “becomingly” in keeping with social norms. They can be used to support virtuous activities—including the virtue of magnificence which has to do with spending large sums of money well (usually in support of social goods like libraries and so on). They can be used in support of arts and crafts.
But Aquinas differs in one crucial way: unlike us, Aquinas thinks that our desire for material goods should be measured or bounded by the ends they serve. What does that mean? Aquinas offers the example of medicine. If one has a headache and it takes two aspirin to cure the headache, one wants two aspirin, not four or ten. The desire for medicine is measured by the end it is meant to serve. We should see our need for material goods in the exact same light. If it takes X amount of dollars to achieve a good life, then one needs X amount of dollars. Anything above that is surplus, and is due to the poor.

If we add this all together we get the following picture: Private property gives us responsibility for a section of the universe, to cultivate well. It channels our natural concern for ourselves to productive uses. But our natural concern for ourselves is to provision ourselves with what we need. Anything above that should be shared with others. And in such a world, the sharing does not come at our own expense. Once you have what you need, why wouldn’t you share the rest?

Of course, it’s easy to say we should have bounded desires. It’s actually quite difficult to do. In Aquinas’s day, the socially appropriate standard of living for someone was set by social norms based on one’s occupation. For example, there was a sense of what standard of living was appropriate for a baker. Once the baker had enough income to maintain that standard of living, any extra income would be surplus. In our world, we have social mobility, and that means that appropriate standards of living are set not by our position, but rather by whatever income we manage to earn. So in Aquinas’s day, it would not have been difficult to identify what was ‘surplus.’ In our day, there is no ‘surplus’—because the standard of living we are ‘entitled’ to is set by the income we manage to earn. Worse, the culture tends to keep ratcheting up the standard of living. Twenty years ago, one didn’t need a cell phone to live becomingly. Today we do. The cultural pressure to keep raising one’s standard of living is very strong and difficult to resist. But that leaves us with the predicament that a lot of well-meaning people who are objectively rich by any historical standard, can also genuinely feel like they don’t have quite enough. And as a result, they feel like there’s a tension between using their property to pursue their own ends, or to assist those in needs.

Is there any way out of this conundrum? I have just a few suggestions to make here. First, we need to work to have more wisdom about what things are really needed and what things really weren’t. Instead of thinking in terms of lists of things it would be nice to have, we should think holistically. What is a pattern of life that is really fitting and beautiful? What things really work to serve our best ends and aims? What things are really distractions? The tragedy of our disordered relationship with material goods is that it keeps us working harder and harder without really bringing us nearer to the higher human goods that constitute real flourishing. It is as if we mistakenly think that a good poem consists in a string of appealing words, rather than recognizing that the beauty of the poem lies in the careful arrangement of a few well-chosen words. Just so, our material lives should consist in the careful arrangement of a few well-chosen goods.

Second, we need to recognize the social forces that shape our consumption patterns. It is much harder to reshape one’s approach to material life on one’s own. It can be a social liability to fail to maintain material standards that are considered appropriate by the community. As a result, if we are members of a community with an extravagant and ill-considered sense of what is ‘necessary,’ we will feel pressure to keep up, even if we know that such spending patterns are essentially wasteful. To combat this, it would help to form intentional communities that would work to keep the “becoming” standard of living from ratcheting ever upwards.

And finally, we probably have to concede that insofar as we are not going to arrive at a fully virtuous relationship with material goods, we are going to have to do more that feels like a “sacrifice.”

The institution of private property is beautifully suited to serving our self-interest in solidarity with the larger community. But that harmony only obtains if we can come into right relationship with material goods—by seeking beauty, fittingness, and perfection rather than “more.” The way I like to think of it is this: we spend a lot of time worrying about how to efficiently convert resources into income. We should spend as much time worrying about how to convert income into a life well lived. Until we do, we will fail to do right by others, but we will also fail to do right by ourselves. *

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2 St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II.66.2
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