

Aristotelian Ethics and the Economy of Communion

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The market economy is understood to operate on the principles of efficiency instead of the principles of morality. Economic forces are supposed to act independently of the morality of economic agents. Market forces regulate supply and demand by themselves in order to produce efficient economic outcomes. To allow market forces to operate based on self-interest and profit-maximisation ensures a just distribution of goods and services, and this serves to promote human progress. However, this economic system entails a form of determinism as the laws of the market economy are assumed to be intrinsically good and to always produce good outcomes (Ratzinger 1986, 200).

The centralised economy is understood to be at the service of the community instead of profit-making. Economic forces act justly because they are controlled by the state. Market forces are regulated by a central administration to guarantee the just distribution of goods and services, and this serves to protect the rights of every human being. A central administration regulates the forces of supply and demand in order to ensure economic outcomes that are both ethical and efficient. But this economic system is also deterministic because of the assumption that regulations are always designed to produce what is in the best interests for society at large (Ratzinger 1986, 201-202).

Key idea 1: For any economic system to be ethical, it must be guided by a philosophical account of the common good.

According to Aristotle's *Politics*, every community is formed to attain some good end because all human beings aim for something good for themselves. Since all communities are formed for the sake of some good end, the state must aim for the greatest good as it is the highest community. The supreme good of every person and community is to attain *eudaimonia* (human flourishing). Human flourishing is not a state but an activity because an 'activity' refers to the actualisation of a subject's capacity for something. On this account, human beings flourish by growing in virtue and engaging in virtuous activities.

For Aristotle, the state is formed by an organic development process in every society. By nature, human beings are unable to survive on their own. The household is a community established to provide for one's basic needs. The gathering of households results in the formation of a village. A village is a community established to go beyond the provision of basic needs. The union of villages results in the formation of a state. A state is a community that is able to provide all that is needed for human beings to flourish. In this line of thinking, the state enjoys priority over the household and the household enjoys priority over the individual. This is because the whole is considered to be more important than any of its parts.

On this account, the pursuit of goods and services comes in two main forms. *Oikonomia* (household management) is the pursuit of goods and services to supply what is needed for human flourishing. *Chrematistike* (wealth accumulation) is the pursuit of goods and services that goes beyond what is needed for human flourishing. While the pursuit in household management is *qualitative* in nature and limited in practice, the pursuit in wealth accumulation is *quantitative* in nature and theoretically unlimited. Wealth accumulation can be ethical as long as it is for the purpose of household management. When the accumulation of wealth exceeds what is needed for sustaining a good life, the result is the unjust allocation of goods and services within a state.

Key idea 2: The common good of an economic system is the production and consumption of goods and services which are needed for human flourishing.

In his encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*, Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI specifically mentioned the movement known as the “Economy of Communion” (EoC) in relation to the ethical development of business (2009, 46). Since 2017, Pope Francis has also publicly acknowledged and encouraged this movement.

The EoC was established by Chiara Lubich (1920-2008) in 1991. It serves as an important alternative to the traditional distinction between profit-based enterprises and non-profit organisations. While entrepreneurs associated with the movement focus on profit-making as an essential part of their business, they view profit as an instrument to bring about authentic human and social development as well. In particular, the EoC captures Lubich’s understanding of the “culture of giving” as opposed to the “culture of having”.

The EoC originated from the Focolare Movement, whose spiritual identity is based on striving for communion (or unity) with others. This culture of giving involves a sharing or communion of goods among Focolare members as well as helping people who are not members of the movement. Hence the EoC movement can be described as the manifestation of the culture of giving in terms of economic activity. Businesses within the EoC movement consider it necessary to make profits to ensure that they remain viable and grow. They also consider it important to distribute their profits to those who are in need and to promote social development.

Key idea 3: The Economy of Communion is a significant paradigm of integrating spirituality and business that promotes fairness and solidarity.