

## The 'Is' and the 'Ought' — Social Ethics for Social Justice

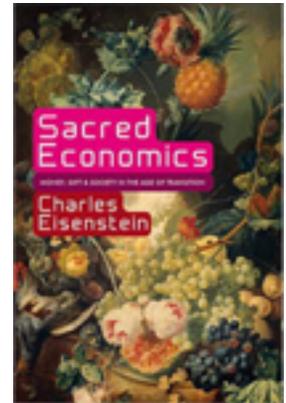
Rev. Jaco B. ten Hove — November 16, 2014

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**READING** from *Sacred Economics*:

*Money, Gift, and Society in the Age of Transition*,  
Chapter 2, “The Illusion of Scarcity”)

A relatively new voice in the discussion about our collective future: is speaker, writer and teacher **Charles Eisenstein**, and his provocative book [\*Sacred Economics\*](#). Eisenstein has a refreshing take on money that has caught the attention of many advocates for change. Here is just a glimpse of the context for a Sacred Economics:



*It is true that human activity is vastly overburdening the earth today...*

*On the other hand, an enormous proportion of this human activity is either superfluous or deleterious to human happiness. Consider first the armaments industry and the resources consumed in war... Consider the housing industry here in the United States, with the enormous*

*McMansions of the last two decades that again serve no real human need... Consider the food industry, which exhibits massive waste at every level...*

*Another type of waste comes from the shoddy construction and planned obsolescence of many of our manufactured goods... (All this waste) is ultimately a consequence of our money system, and it will be reversed in a sacred economy...*

*A world without weapons, without McMansions in sprawling suburbs, without mountains of unnecessary packaging, without giant mechanized monofarms, without energy-hogging big-box stores, without electronic billboards, without endless piles of throwaway junk, without the overconsumption of consumer goods no one really needs is not an impoverished world.*

*I disagree with those environmentalists who say we are going to have to make do with less. In fact, we are going to make do with more: more beauty, more community, more fulfillment, more art, more music, and material objects that are fewer in number but superior in utility and aesthetics...*

*Part of the healing that a sacred economy represents is the healing of the divide we have created between spirit and matter. In keeping with the sacredness of all things, I advocate*

*an embrace, not an eschewing, of materialism. I think we will love our things more and not less. We will treasure our material possessions, honor where they came from and where they will go...*

*Economics, it says on page one of textbooks, is the study of human behavior under conditions of scarcity. The expansion of the economic realm is therefore the expansion of scarcity... (Actually), we live in an abundant world, made otherwise through our perceptions, our culture, and our deep invisible stories...*

*Money, which has turned abundance into scarcity, engenders greed. But not money per se—only the kind of money we use today, money that embodies our cultural sense of self, our unconscious myths, and an adversarial relationship with nature thousands of years in the making.*

*All of these things are changing...*



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Things are indeed changing, and the competing stories of scarcity and abundance are often unseen players in the dramas of our time. Our personal and collective relationship with each is telling. Do you find yourself speaking more from one position than the other? Can we change our attitudes about them?

Scarcity and abundance dance with us all the time, whether or not we notice them affecting us. Once visible, though, they invite us to examine the lenses we use to see the world. But how can we read *any* tea leaves of the vast culture in which we are embedded, let alone

accurately perceive an emerging, interconnected planetary civilization? How can we know right from wrong, good from bad, mere escapist temptation from perverse poison?

All of us live and move and have our being based on our own, often unexamined understandings of the universe and the meaning of life. We continually make assumptions about How Things Work, and our actions rely on these assumptions. We are always constructing a worldview that wants to be coherent with what we believe.

And we ground ourselves, one would hope, in ethics that guide our behavior positively, so that we can feel authentic in our living and moving and being, able to contribute more to solutions than to problems.

Actually, that last bit (contributing more to solutions than to problems) is an ethic of mine that I inherited from my activist mother, an ethic that may not be shared by all, I admit. But I suspect we are gathered together here under the Unitarian Universalist banner because we do share many of the same ethics.

Not too far outside of our band of liberal religionists, however, are others whose ethics I don't understand (or don't appreciate). They seem to look at the same reality, presumably, and assess it differently, behave differently, and thus live and move and have their being grounded in an apparently different set of ethics.

Which is where the allegedly shared American practice of democracy comes in, I suppose—that messy, inexact process of decision-making, which is so horrible yet still better than anything else yet devised. The prominent realist theologian of the mid-20th century, [Reinhold Niebuhr](#), helps me be patient: “(The human) capacity for justice makes democracy possible,” he said 70 years ago, “but (the human) inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary” [*The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness*, 1944].

At the least, I can try to improve the odds that my ethics are transparent in my living, moving and being. So if I and we believe what we sing—that, as the hymn declares, “our world is one world (and) its ways of wealth affect us all”; that “our world is one world, just like a ship that bears us all”—then the ethics we live by should reflect that truth, shouldn't they? Hopefully, “where fear and greed make many holes...our hearts can hear a different call” [#134, Cecily Taylor, *Singing the Living Tradition*].

This is absolutely a call to promote our [7<sup>th</sup> Unitarian Universalist Principle](#): “respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.” Our hearts might even hear a

call to seek “justice,” an important word also found among our UU Principles AND reputed to be a deep American value, formative in our national Pledge of Allegiance. Early in my school days, I memorized it, ending: “...with liberty and justice for all.” Not just “we should *strive* for justice,” but “*with...justice for all.*”

And the subtitle of my sermon (taken from the same subtitle of a book by the very liberal Christian theologian and activist [Gary Dorrien](#)) adds a significant adjective to these pivotal nouns: “*Social Ethics for Social Justice*” [[Economy, Difference, Empire](#), 2010]. We are, at heart and in action, *social* creatures, so ethics and justice are, of course, at play in community, locally and globally.



Our pre-eminent UU theologian of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, [James Luther Adams](#), in arguably the most formative book of his work, *The Prophethood of All Believers*, defined ethics as “faith seeking understanding in the realm of moral action” [pg. 4]. In other words, social ethics calls us to learn what is and advocate for what ought to be.



Adams spent much of his long career affirming the essential role of social institutions, which can usually embody and support moral action more effectively than lone individuals can (although they’re also good at feet-dragging, to be sure). Good intentions, though, are not enough. “Like love, justice does not become incarnate through simple proclamation” [p. 110]. We are even more accountable to an ethic of consequence than to an ethic of conscience [p. 247], declared Adams.

He steadfastly affirmed the valuable path of intentional, voluntary association with others. Where Jesus was to have said of his followers, “By their *fruits* shall you know them,” Adams famously spun this alternative: “By their *groups* shall you know them.” Some of the most important choices we make determine with whom we will associate, thereby also illuminating what ethics we will live by, and which kind of justice we stand for.

Indeed, justice has steadily been a demanding goal for most if not all cultures, but especially as increasing global population and diversity inspire increasing conflict in a post-modern realm of *decreasing* objectivity while we lurch into a “one world” culture. Perhaps you’ve had the experience of fundamentally disagreeing with someone else about an issue of justice.

We're coming into the Thanksgiving season, when at least some of us will likely have to mingle among relatives with whom we might not share common ethical ground on certain issues. So who gets to decide what's "just" and what isn't? This can matter in a living room of full bellies on Thanksgiving Day, and it certainly matters on larger playing fields.

Martin Luther King, Jr., offered this helpful definition: "Justice, at its best, is power correcting everything that stands against love" [[Where Do We Go From Here?](#) 1967]. So perhaps the most basic, most human of all measuring sticks, at every level, is love, which has resounded, in so much theory and practice, throughout the ages. Dr. King wisely inserted the element of power as a qualifier, though, since action is frequently determined by those who hold the power.

James Luther Adams also went this route: "Injustice in community," he wrote, "is a form of power, an abuse of power, and justice is an exercise of just and lawful institutional power" [*Prophethood*, p. 55]. Adams taught that justice is creatively enacted through compassion and caring, which draw on an ethic of love more than retribution [p. 6].

Social justice efforts might simply determine what is standing against love and then seek the power to correct it. Maybe it's more complicated than that, but maybe not. We are always judging and leaning toward what feels most just to us, perhaps even most loving. And when we feel a disconnect jarring our moral sentiments, and seek power to change it, we often turn to groups to muster enough thrust.

Social justice tries to consider the whole in relation to its parts, and was very visibly expressed by a broad movement called the [Social Gospel](#), an early 20<sup>th</sup> century branch of activist Christianity that was very interested in addressing immediate conditions of the day, such as poverty, alcoholism, crime, racial tensions, child labor, poor schools, the danger of war, etc.

They waved an avowed "Social Justice" banner and sought the equitable redistribution of social goods, affirming as their guiding ethic the importance of a Common Good or "the greatest good for the greatest number." They took seriously the Golden Rule: treat others as you would be treated.

Social Gospellers also aimed the accusation of sin directly at some less than beneficent institutions, even declaring that capitalism itself was too predatory to ever truly accommodate social justice [Dorrien, p. xi]. Theirs was an "applied Christianity" guided by the

ethic of love, especially as rendered in the Golden Rule, which, as ethics go, is a pretty darn good one, and rather universally affirmed.

The Social Gospellers did not sustain a full movement much past the distressing rigors of World War I, but their progressive ideas continued and continue to circulate, notably influencing the actions of both Martin Luther King, Jr., and Lyndon Baines Johnson in the 1960s.

One of the top theologian activists today, Gary Dorrien, has inherited the mantle of the Social Gospel anew. He's an impressive author, speaker and teacher at Union Seminary in NYC, and was the very stimulating guest lecturer at last month's fall gathering of our northwest regional UU ministers. Dorrien noted that in our time there is a significant struggle underway for the right to declare what it is that constitutes a "just society."

On the one hand are those who say that there should be unrestricted liberty to acquire private wealth, and they vigorously promote legislation accordingly or just do business ferociously as if that were the American Way. Standing directly against these interests are those who see collective self-government and the good of the whole as superior to property rights. They act to install democratic checks on unbridled wealth, or try to, anyway.

If I heard and read Dorrien correctly, he is suggesting that this struggle for the heart of American politics appears close to being over, thanks mostly to the onslaught of money into politics. Checks on unbridled wealth are either disappearing rapidly or being effectively thwarted at almost every turn. (He's certainly not the only one saying this, but he gives it a strong voice.)

Social Justice and the Common Good both pivot on building and sharing [social capital](#), which is the degree of trust and engagement people have in community, thus strengthening what is shared. But corporate capitalism pays notoriously little attention to community needs, let alone the environment.

By many measures, perhaps most obviously a stunning increase in the gap between rich and poor, our society is polarizing dangerously. Narrow, self-serving forces continue to profit from eroding our communities and our security from within. It has been called "the tragedy of the commons." No one speaks for or defends what belongs to everyone.

So where is there social justice these days, with such powerful elements seemingly aligned against the Common Good? What possible set of ethics might call us to counter-act the painful trends that seem to dominate the news? Well, I've already touched on the ethics of:

- democracy and love
- contributing more to solutions than to problems,
- building social capital, and
- The Golden Rule.

These are significant ethical guides, by which we can judge for ourselves what feels right, and then live and move and have our being in those directions.

One of our most noted contemporary UU activist ministers, Dick Gilbert, helps me add some more. In his influential little book, "[How Much Do We Deserve? An Inquiry into Distributive Justice](#)," he says social justice "is predicated on the inherent worth and dignity of every individual" (which you may recognize as our First UU Principle). He goes on to suggest that justice includes ethics such as:

- freedom and equity
- people treated as ends not means, and
- a reverence for life (most famously articulated by Unitarian Albert Schweitzer).

An assumption for abundance, as mentioned in the earlier reading, is also a key piece of such an ethics, and it breathes cogently through Charles Eisenstein's inspiring manifesto for a *Sacred Economics*. This book reminds me of my previous sermon on utopias, because it is quite visionary in its analysis and proposals. I think we desperately need such articulation, in the face of so much bad news, dystopian visions and depressing trends.

As just one aspect of the "Age of Transition" that Eisenstein suggests we are in, he promotes more of a gift economy, which he backs up with action: [all his books are available for free on the internet](#). I was also moved by his suggestion that we eagerly pay more for goods that are inherently more valuable, such as free-trade, solar, organic or local items that *do* cost more. The difference we pay is a gift to the world, to support values we want to prosper.

"After all," Eisenstein reminds us, "what you have taken in this world dies with you. Only your gifts live on" [p. 381]. Besides, giving creates relationships, builds community. Whereas just paying money for everything you need, without really giving or receiving, sustains the illusion of Separation [p. 359].

Even the giving and receiving of compliments factors into a healthy gift economy. He cautions against the common inclination to deflect compliments, a telling act which resists obligation and thereby rejects relationship. “The generous person gives and receives with an equally open hand” [p. 357] because both increase social capital and build community.

But a core premise of a “sacred economy” is to extend ecology into commerce, and not let our monetary system be an unreal exception to nature’s laws [p. 249]. This is akin, I think, to our emerging understanding of “[biomimicry](#),” where we seek to model aspects of our human civilization after proven natural principles that are evident and observable in the ecosystem around us.

Eisenstein also offers many specific and achievable (although still quite demanding) suggestions for transitioning toward a more sustainable and equitable economic model. And he’s now leading global workshops that are a deep immersion in the ideas and practices around creating what he calls, [“The More Beautiful World Our Hearts Know is Possible.”](#)

But undergirding Eisenstein’s comprehensive perspective and proposals, and what really got my attention, is an assumption for interdependence, which heartens me no end. This is indeed a guiding ethical lens, quite familiar to our UU eyes and lips. The Age of Transition that we are in now is replacing the Age of Separation, which he names as the dominant ethos of the dualistic, strip-mining, scarcity model that modernity taught us. Ahead is the Age of Reunion, grounded in the larger truths of abundance and interdependence.

From another metaphorical, big-picture angle, it could be that humanity first knew the abundance of life, then went on a natural expedition to the extreme of scarcity, but now, also naturally, seeks to reunite with abundance at a more complex level.

As we explore the terrain of a more complex but more sacred economy, where we might more deeply appreciate the Things that accompany us, Eisenstein suggests we ask about any of the objects around us, “Does this make me feel that my humanity is expanding or contracting?” [p. 431] and then make decisions to purchase, keep, trade, avoid, etc.

By extension, that kind of ethical lens can be applied to realms of social justice, by similarly asking oneself, “Does this activity build community and the Common Good or erode it? Contribute more to solutions than to problems? Support or conflict with my values?”

(This could be a fruitful meditation for the days ahead: pick a thing or an aspect of your world and inquire: *Does this make me feel that my humanity is expanding? Does it build community—or not?*)

Social *ethics* calls us to learn what is and advocate for what ought to be. Social *justice* is a vision of the world at peace at many levels, a world in which we

- promote the spirit of abundance, interdependence, democracy, love, freedom, equity;
- contribute more to solutions than to problems;
- build social capital among us;
- adhere to The Golden Rule,
- affirm the worth and dignity of every individual and reverence for life.

You can, of course, and should assemble your own set of ethical lenses through which you look to support the kind of world in which you want to live, move and have your being, in which you want to invest your precious life energy.

I never quite realized that the word “investment” obviously comes from the realm of clothing, especially vests. When clergy or other positions are officially recognized, it is often with *investiture* of authority and/or formal garments.

So we strive to invest our lives and resources in glorious attire befitting “The More Beautiful World Our Hearts Know is Possible.” Let threads of truth weave patterns of meaning to help us seek “understanding in the realm of moral action.”

Our world is one world; we are bound in love and unity; let us live in authenticity and seek justice. *Go in Peace, my friends. BE peace. Return in abundant love!*



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