

GAUDIUM ET SPES AND CATHOLIC ETHICS IN POST-INDUSTRIAL ECONOMICS: INDIRECT EMPLOYERS AND GLOBALIZATION

Albino Barrera, O.P.
Providence College
abarrera@providence.edu

Abstract

The concept of the indirect employer applies to anyone who sustains the relationship between the direct employer and workers, for good or for ill, and who therefore shares in the responsibility of ensuring the proper treatment of such laborers. Unfortunately, establishing material and formal cooperation in market exchange is a difficult task, especially in an era of globalization. This paper argues that the Second Vatican Council's (1) exposition on the inseparability of personal good and the good of the community and (2) its understanding of the human community as familial add much to the notion of the indirect employer by defining the addressees, scope, and strength of its concomitant duties. *Gaudium et spes* has much to contribute in formulating an appropriate economic ethics in a postindustrial ethos that attends to the adverse unintended consequences of market operations.

I. Introduction

Globalization has highlighted a well-known unaddressed problem in economic life: What do we do with the unintended consequences of market operations? This is not even to mention the even more intractable question of who has responsibility for rectifying the ill effects of market exchange. Pope John Paul II's notion of the indirect employer in *Laborem exercens* is an important conceptual tool in this regard. Unfortunately, this 1981 social encyclical does not develop in greater depth who precisely is an indirect employer and why. All it does is to define the indirect employer as anyone who is in any way responsible for sustaining or enabling the relationship between the direct employer and the employees (John Paul II 1981, #77-81). John Paul II's concern is, of course, neither original nor unique. In appealing to the First World to be more solicitous of the welfare of the poor countries in his 1967 encyclical *Populorum progressio*, Paul VI (1967, #47) had already alluded to the wealthy nations' duty of providing a fair, if higher, price for the exports of the Third World nations. In effect, First World consumers are indirect employers of workers in developing countries.

The notion of the indirect employer goes beyond religious social thought. Recall Cesar Chavez's call for the boycott of grapes in his fight for better working conditions for migrant agricultural workers. Or remember the worldwide grassroots consumer movement to curtail the consumption of Nestle products until the company changed its marketing practices of infant formula in poor countries. More recently, college students succeeded in improving the working conditions of overseas sub-contracting manufacturers of college and brand-name apparel and souvenir

products. The same is true for the “fair price” campaign that has sought to pay coffee farmers a living wage for their crops.¹ The common point in these examples is consumers’ acknowledgment of their responsibility in ensuring that they are not party to sustaining morally reprehensible working arrangements no matter how remote their material cooperation may be. While these moral sensibilities are not the norm in the larger culture, they are nonetheless heartening because they are evidence of our ability to see and recognize ourselves in each other and to see in others a brother or a sister eking out a living and pursuing similar hopes and aspirations for a better life.

II. Globalization

Global economic integration poses an unusual challenge to the notion of the indirect employer. Globalization greatly strengthens the economic ties (and therefore the attendant obligations) that bind people together even as it (globalization) makes the satisfaction of these duties that much more difficult. Let us examine both of these developments.

A. Ever tighter web of indirect employer relationships

Globalization strengthens indirect employer relationships because (1) we have become more interdependent, (2) we have the benefit of superior access to more complete information, and (3) we are in a better position to provide real assistance to others.

First, global economic integration magnifies the process of socialization that John XXIII (1961, #59-60) had described in *Mater et magistra* over forty years ago. People have become much more interdependent especially when it comes to economic affairs. The whole world has become a single workshop in which parts for many essential products (such as airplanes, cars, computers, and other electronic goods) come from all over the world. The same phenomenon is true for services given the increased reliance on offshore outsourcing for back-office operations, software programming, product design, and other routine operations. Economists have described this as the slicing up of goods and services into ever more refined divisions of labor in an effort to squeeze every ounce of efficiency and cost savings. The immediate benefit of such international vertical specialization is the increase in real incomes enjoyed by consumers worldwide given the decline in the cost of goods and services. This is not even to mention the much-needed employment opportunities created in emerging nations. The moral implication of this is that we have truly become each other’s indirect employers because we are in effect consumers of each other’s work effort and output.

Second, an essential feature of globalization is technological change, in particular, information and communication technologies. It has been said that all the current fuss about globalization is much ado about nothing because we already had an integrated global economy in the quarter century leading up to the First World War (Hirst and Thompson 1999). However, one must remember that twentieth-century globalization is distinctive because of its accompanying “death of distance” (Cairncross 1997). Not only have we continued to enjoy great strides in bringing down transportation costs, but we have also achieved unimaginable cost reductions in information processing-storage and communications. In other words, the death of distance in the twentieth century is not so much due to cheap transportation as it is because of the widespread

availability of low-cost information and communication. The moral significance of this development is that we can no longer plead ignorance to the plight and the dismal working conditions of workers overseas. We have the means to keep ourselves informed of the lives of people halfway across the globe.

Third, globalization has empowered people worldwide to come to each other's assistance wherever they may be or however great the physical distance that may separate them. Better communications, enhanced information sharing, improved transportation, and higher real per capita incomes mutually reinforce each other in imbuing people with real and viable capabilities in extending aid to each other. We have seen this new-found capacity at work in times of natural and man-made disasters as in the December 2004 Asian tsunami tragedy.

In summary, global economic integration has greatly strengthened our mutual obligations as each other's indirect employers given our extensive economic interdependence, our greater awareness of one another's living conditions, and our enhanced capacity to come to each other's assistance. Globalization has made us even more responsible for our mutual well-being.

B. More difficult obligations to fill

Even as it further reinforces the web of indirect employer relationships in the postindustrial economy, globalization ironically also makes it that much more difficult to fulfill these attendant duties because of the increased complexity in assigning responsibility. The market's much-touted allocative efficiency is effected through a continuous process of price adjustments that shape the subsequent behavior and decisions of economic agents. (Thus, excess demand is eliminated by a rise in prices that increase supply and decrease demand). Unfortunately, there are collateral effects to these price changes including those that inflict harm on unsuspecting and unprepared market participants. These requisite localized price and quantity adjustments precipitate wide ripple effects on the rest of the economy.

Even the most ardent proponents of globalization acknowledge the need to mitigate the harmful unintended consequences of market operations. However, the difficulty lies in identifying who has responsibility for these corrective measures, to what degree, and why. *An accurate assignation of responsibilities requires an explicit identification and validation of liabilities. This is not an easy task because market operations and outcomes do not, as a general rule, readily lend themselves to measurements of formal and material cooperation (both proximate and remote) for the harms done.*

This dilemma is best illustrated by pointing to some of the more contentious economic debates of our day. To what extent are US consumers (greatly benefitting from inexpensive cheap imports) liable for the plight of laid-off US manufacturing workers? And how about the fresh college graduates who are just entering the labor market and are unable to secure jobs because of international outsourcing and the transfer of capital to low-cost manufacturing sites in Asia and Latin America? Is there any obligation to provide them relief? If so, whose duty is it to provide such aid?

The quotas of the Multifiber Agreement that had been in force since 1974 ended on January 1,

2005, and it is feared that China will dominate the worldwide textile and apparel industries to the detriment of poor countries like Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. It is feared that over a million jobs will be lost in Bangladesh alone where apparel goods constitute 80 % of this poor country's exports. Who has responsibility for those who will be adversely affected by such liberalization: the Bangladeshi, Chinese, EU, or US governments? Is there any residual obligation at all for providing adjustment assistance considering that this liberalization had been planned well ahead of time since 1994, and even had a phased-in period of increasingly free markets? Is this looming major disruption in the Bangladeshi labor markets the fault of its own government for not having done enough in the past ten years to take the necessary preemptive economic reforms to remain competitive in international markets even without having to hide behind protective quotas?

The rapid and unusual spike in oil prices in 2004 wreaked enormous damage in non-oil producing Third World economies and spawned suffering among its citizens, a vast number of whom are already living below \$1 a day. These emerging nations had to expend much more of their scarce foreign exchange reserves for oil imports. Who has responsibility for providing relief for this economic shock: the Chinese for the large jump in their oil consumption given their white-hot economic growth or Americans driving gas-guzzling SUVs?

The decline in the value of the dollar has inflicted economic hardship on many EU exporters. Who has responsibility for providing assistance to those who have been unfavorably affected by a weakening dollar: the Chinese for undervaluing their currency relative to the US dollar, the US government for its uncontrolled budget deficit, the US consumers for accumulating such record trade deficits, or the OECD countries who have simply relied on the US economy to provide the necessary consumption demand to prevent the world from sliding into recession? In a similar vein, who is culpable for the numerous international financial contagions of the last decade: currency speculators, emerging market governments, the IMF, or the global commercial banking sector?

Many more examples could be cited. These cases all illustrate a feature of the market: It is subject to Newton's law where a change in one sector occasions a corresponding reaction somewhere else in the economy. Every element of the economy is somehow related to everything else in the market. These examples also highlight an important downside of globalization: Market participants should expect to endure economic disruptions that are much more damaging in their impact, that are generated from even the remote corners of the global market, and that occur with much greater frequency and with little warning. And because there are often multiple shocks and erroneous economic decisions that mutually compound each other, it is often difficult to track causation and to identify who are ultimately responsible for rectifying adverse economic changes. This is not even to mention having to distinguish the strength of obligations between proximate and remote indirect employers. Establishing accountability for market processes and outcomes is an unmanageable task. Globalization makes it even more difficult to assign precise obligations because of the increased speed and complexity of market transactions.

III. Indeterminate Philosophical and Political Liabilities

Outside of theological circles, there are few conceptual and practical aids to resolving the problem of the indirect employer in a globalized economy. One of these is the United Nations' Declaration of Human Rights and its list of social and economic rights. These human rights are important in identifying that all-important economic baseline beneath which no human being will be allowed to sink. Unfortunately, economic rights are not universally accepted because of its yet unresolved conceptual difficulties.² Unlike civil and political rights that can be satisfied through noninterference (negative rights/freedoms), economic rights often require an interpersonal transfer of real resources (positive rights/freedoms). This means that we must resolve questions, such as, to what extent do we furnish such ameliorative transfers, what do we provide, to whom, and, most important, who is the holder of such an obligation. This indeterminacy limits the utility of economic rights in resolving the issue of the indirect employer. Some would even go so far as to argue that it makes no sense to speak of human rights at all if they are unenforceable.³

The question of the indirect employer's culpability in economic exchange has also been examined in the philosophical literature. Zanardi (1990) deals with the problem head-on and provides an excellent exposition on the formidable philosophical hurdles that must be surmounted in order to make the notion of the indirect employer work. In the first place, one must remember that the indirect employer is only one economic agent in a vast and complex system characterized by a recurring dynamic. To establish blameworthiness for the ripple effects of an economic decision, it is important to be able to establish the link and the impact of a *particular* economic agent's actions on a *particular* market outcome. This is not an easy undertaking in an often frenetic and highly fluid market. Second, one must remember that the economic agent is only a small part of a much broader context and wields absolutely little control, if any, over the economy's unending circular flow of goods and services. These "sequence of events" will flow uninterrupted with or without this or that particular economic agent. Consequently, it is very difficult to hold *particular* market participants accountable for *particular* market outcomes. Indeed, there is much philosophical work that must be done before we can make the notion of the indirect employer meaningful and useful.

We could compensate for these conceptual deficiencies through mutual accord. Unfortunately, we are also wanting in this regard. The evolution of a globalized economy has simply outstripped the ability of the international community of nations to set up multilateral institutions that rectify some of the more disagreeable features of market operations. While the World Trade Organization (WTO) is an important first step in providing a forum where competing claims can be adjudicated peaceably and where nations voluntarily surrender part of their sovereignty for the sake of the global common good, there are many other areas in need of international agreement and action if we are to curb the excesses of the market.

Take the case of foreign exchange speculation. The daily turnover as of 1995 is \$1.2 trillion, and it is estimated that only a small fraction of this volume is directly related to facilitating the trade of goods and services in the global economy.⁴ The rest is trading for profit-making. It is widely acknowledged that such speculative trading in foreign currencies has been responsible for the self-fulfilling currency crises endured by many emerging nations. The poor in these countries bear the brunt of the cost of such currency disruptions because of the resultant cuts in social spending to restore macroeconomic balances. A possible solution to such a problem has been

long known—the Tobin Tax in which short-term currency traders are assessed a surcharge to curtail their speculative transactions. An added advantage to such a tax is that its enormous revenues can be used for development assistance. The problem with this proposal is that making the Tobin tax feasible requires the unanimous consent and cooperation of all nations in not providing tax havens. No serious efforts are currently underway to establish an international mechanism for this corrective tax. The same deficiency is true when it comes to establishing a global body to deal with sovereign bankruptcies.

Beyond finance, there are no multilateral institutions to handle the concerns of people who believe that globalization is a race to the bottom. In particular, we have yet to address (1) the problem of the commons in the case of over-fishing and global climate change, (2) tax competition, and (3) the erosion of labor and environmental standards. In addition, we should also remember the continuing damage wrought on poor nations by the OECD agricultural subsidies. In all these cases, there is need for global extra-market interventions that are possible only at a supranational level. The problem of living up to the duties of indirect employer relationships in the globalized economy cannot be resolved in the absence of a credible and effective multilateral capacity to rectify deficient market outcomes and processes.

IV. Contributions from *Gaudium et spes*

I claim that *Gaudium et spes* has much to contribute in operationalizing the notion of indirect employers in the face of such philosophical and practical limitations in ameliorating the unintended consequences of market operations. In particular, this pastoral constitution's teachings on the nature of the community and on the inseparability of the personal and common good provide the foundational warrants and the means with which to dispel the indeterminacy of obligations in indirect employer relationships.

The first part of this pastoral constitution is a theological reflection on the nature of the person and the human community. In contrast to secular notions of the community as a contractual arrangement, *Gaudium et spes* views the human community as familial in nature. Recall that in the former, people are bound to each other by a social contract in which personal freedoms are voluntarily surrendered to an overarching authority that prevents people from preying on each other in a state of nature in which everyone is at war with everybody else. The community is a human creation, the product of a rationality that contains the problem of selfish and predatory behavior through self-interested mutual accommodation and compromise.

The Second Vatican Council holds to a much more optimistic anthropology and believes in the fundamental goodness of people. Instead of being undergirded by a rational social contract, the human community comes with personhood itself. It is a constitutive part of human nature. In other words, humanity is one family bound together by a common filial relationship to God.

These two opposing conceptions of the human community have different ramifications for the nature of obligations. First, under *Gaudium et spes*, we simply cannot walk away from our duties toward each other, nor can we pick and choose whichever responsibilities we want to accept or not. The bonds that tie us together are anchored deeply in human nature; they are the unchangeable parameters of life that we simply have to accept as givens as we strive to flourish.

We cannot absolve ourselves of what we owe to each other by simply choosing to withdraw from the social contract. Natural obligations are permanent in a familial view of the community.

Second, a community based on a social contract is animated principally by justice. As a result, it seeks to give every person numbered in its ranks his or her respective due based on the strict measures defined by the law. In contrast, a community that is viewed as a family is enlivened by charity. Its overriding concern is that of self-giving and the possibilities of working toward the fullness of the good of the other. Friendship, rather than the rule of law, governs interpersonal relationships; it is unmeasured in what it imparts.

Third, the goal of a contractual community is the maintenance of the public, juridic order. Tolerance is the primary virtue it seeks to instill in its membership. In contrast, a familial community seeks nothing less than the common good in which there is a union of hearts and minds in their quest to reach their shared end in God. As a result, far from being in conflict with each other, the good of the individual and the community are necessary conditions to each other. Neither can attain their fullness without the other. Personal good and the good of the community are distinct but inseparable. The human person instantiates the common good.

Given these foundational warrants for the mutual obligations we owe each other, *Gaudium et spes* dispels the ambiguities of indirect employer relationships, even with the complexities occasioned by global economic integration. Recall that the difficulty of validating these dues stems primarily from the failure to come up with precise measures in the assignation of duties in terms of their addressees, content, and strength. Less precision is called for under a familial view of community because we are all responsible for each other as brothers and sisters, regardless of whatever place or role we may fill in the common economic life. This clears away the ambiguity when it comes to identifying the addresses of economic obligations. Moreover, since friendship is never measured in its self-giving, the inability to parcel out people's dues in their exact proportion fades as a problem. Indeterminacy is not an insurmountable problem for *Gaudium et spes* in living up to the obligations we owe each other in indirect employer relationships.

It is best to end this exposition with an example of why *Gaudium et spes* is distinctive in its contribution when it comes to actualizing our economic obligations as each other's indirect employers. Matusz and Tarr (1999) examine the cost and the benefits of trade liberalization by comparing the stream of future benefits enjoyed with the adjustment costs incurred in the short run. The principal adjustment cost is, of course, the disruption in the livelihoods of displaced workers. The economy is efficient and is deemed to be operating properly if social costs (benefits) equal private costs (benefits). Policy interventions and corrective remedies are called for only in cases of market failures, that is, when private and social costs (benefits) are not equal to each other. Observe how worker dislocation is treated in neoclassical economic reasoning:

[A] worker who experiences a reduction in his wage because his skills are no longer in demand bears a private cost. However, this is not a social loss if his wage is a true reflection of how society values his skills (Matusz and Tarr 1999, n. 20, 37).

[L]iberalization of the trading regime might induce changes in the values that an economy places on various forms of human capital. Workers who have accumulated significant amounts of firm-specific or sector-specific human capital may suggest a substantial (private) loss as the demand for their skills declines. In any event, this is no more a social cost than is the change in *any* price that is induced by changing market conditions (Matusz and Tarr 1999, 21, original emphasis).

In effect, the loss of a livelihood due to skill obsolescence or redundancy in the course of market operations is counted as a private and not a social cost. It is deemed to be part of the necessary and constant price and quantity adjustments in the marketplace (a pecuniary externality). Since the goal of mainstream (neoclassical) economic thinking is merely allocative efficiency, it would not call for ameliorative extra-market intervention on the part of the community.

Two passages from *Gaudium et spes* highlight the distinctive and the more demanding nature of its position. First, recall that Leo XIII discussed the notion of the superfluous income criterion as part of the just-use obligation. He followed Thomas Aquinas in defining superfluous income as that part of one's income that is not needed to sustain one's social standing and that of his/her family in the community.⁵ The Second Vatican Council revisits this criterion and changes its definition by adopting John XXIII's view:

As for the determination of what is superfluous in our day and age, cf. John XXIII, radio-television message of Sept. 11, 1962: AAS 54 (1962) p. 682: "The obligation of every man, the urgent obligation of the Christian man, is to reckon what is superfluous by the measure of the needs of others, and to see to it that the administration and the distribution of created goods serve the common good." (Vatican Council II 1965, II:3, n. 10)

The difference between Leo XIII's and John XXIII's approach to superfluity is the outward orientation of the latter. The point of reference is not ourselves but the plight of our neighbors and reflects a lively sense of responsibility for the welfare of others, especially of those who are marginalized and in distress.

Second, this keen concern for our neighbors is succinctly and eloquently expressed in the opening lines of *Gaudium et spes*:

The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men and women of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ. Indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts (Vatican Council II 1965, #1).

The unique strength and contribution of *Gaudium et spes* in dissipating the indeterminacy of indirect employer relationships can be found in the familial spirit that characterizes Christian discipleship. We care for one another because we see in each other ourselves and another child of God.

V. Summary and Conclusions

The theological and philosophical reflections of *Gaudium et spes* on the nature of the person and the human community can be used effectively to resolve the problems of tracing and assigning economic responsibility for market processes and outcomes, especially in a globalized economy. In particular, this pastoral constitution offers two specific conceptual warrants for implementing the notion of indirect employers.

First, contrary to social contract theories, the human community is familial rather than contractual in nature. Second, a key contribution of *Gaudium et spes* to social ethics is its articulation of how personal good and the good of the community are not mutually exclusive but are necessary conditions to each other. Far from being inherently in conflict with each other, personal freedom and the interests of the community are in fact inseparable, even as they are necessarily distinct from each other. The common good is instantiated in personal integral human development, while individual human flourishing can only be actualized within community.

These two fundamental tenets in *Gaudium et spes*' understanding of the nature of the human person and the human community assert that there is a strong web of natural obligations that bind people together. Moreover, because they are natural liabilities, people cannot simply walk away from them or absolve themselves of their attendant duties as is possible in a purely contractual view of society.

This means that, for purposes of attending to the harmful effects of market operations, the economic obligations we owe each other are primarily and principally moral rather than merely legal. Thus, providing relief to those who have been adversely affected by globalization is not the exclusive responsibility of government but is in fact the shared obligation of everyone who has reaped handsome gains from expanded global trade. The greater the benefits received, the more significant are the duties owed to those who have to bear a disproportionate share of the burdens. Moreover, the assistance that beneficiaries of trade extend to those who have lost much in the process is not supererogatory in nature but is a demand of general, commutative, and distributive justice. A collateral implication of these duties is the role and the genuine service that non-governmental organizations (NGOs) can play in facilitating such private interpersonal ameliorative action.

These exacting economic duties should not come as a surprise. After all, moral imperatives are founded on higher standards compared to legal liabilities. Thus, as indirect employers, consumers in the major industrialized nations are accountable for the externalities (unintended consequences inflicted on third parties) of their personal lifestyles and consumption habits. Market widening as part of globalization only serves to expand the scope and the potency of such obligations. Note, for example, the relevance of the notion of indirect employers in the case of OECD oil consumption, environmental damage, and excessive fiscal deficits that crowd out less developed countries from the global savings pool.

In summary, the Second Vatican Council's (1) exposition on the inseparability of personal good and the good of the community and (2) its understanding of the human community as familial add much to the notion of the indirect employer by defining the addressees, scope, and strength of its concomitant duties. Attending to the adverse unintended consequences of market operations is everyone's moral obligation and cannot be left simply to governmental action. After all, as the opening lines of *Gaudium et spes* so eloquently and unforgettably affirms, the joys and the griefs, the hopes and the dreams of the distressed and marginalized cannot fail to raise an echo in the hearts of the followers of Christ. For these become are our own joys and griefs, our own hopes and dreams. Indeed, *Gaudium et spes* has much to contribute in formulating an appropriate economic ethics in a postindustrial ethos that has come to be marked by an inordinate desire for private gain and consumption to the exclusion of conscientious social responsibility for each other.

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¹ See Seth (1994), Starnes (2002), Benjamin (2000), and Featherstone and United Students Against Sweatshops (2002).

² For example, see Trimiew (1997) for a survey of the debate surrounding economic rights.

³ See, for example, Cranston (1967).

⁴ Data is from International Monetary Fund (1997, Table 15, 64).

⁵ See Leo XIII (1891, #36). See also Aquinas (1947/8, II-II, q. 32, a. 6, reply).