"The 'Middle A' (Augustine) and the Common Good"

John D. Mueller

Abstract

A proper understanding of "the common good," like many fundamental principles in modern neoclassical economics (including the theory of utility and the theory of public goods), depends on important distinctions first drawn by Augustine of Hippo (AD 354-430). If the common good is poorly understood today by modern economists, one important reason is general ignorance of Augustine's role in the history of economic thought.

This paper briefly summarizes those contributions, including Augustine's theory of the common good, and suggests how "neoscholastic economics"—an updated version of the original Scholastic economic theory—can contribute to understanding "the purpose and practice of business in an inclusive economy."

The paper summarizes Augustine's distinction of "goods" according to three different scales (being, persons and utility), love or hate as our choice of persons as ends, utility as our choice of non-persons as means, and the decisive importance in moral decision-making of the scarcity of means.

In the process, the paper notes Augustine's introduction of the distinctions among private, common, and public goods. It notes also that Augustine built on concepts used by Cicero, but shifting the focus from the natural virtue of justice to the supernatural virtue of charity. And it notes what may seem Augustine's surprising conclusion that God is the common good—the origin and end—of all created beings. He says that "the common good of all [creatures]" is "God Himself, and…His eternity, truth and love" (City of God, XII, 1) .

Finally, the paper briefly describes Augustine's importance for Thomas Aquinas's successful integration of Aristotle's with Augustine's contributions to scholastic moral philosophy and economic theory. Far from Aquinas's synthesis being "purely Aristotelian," as Joseph Schumpeter had called it, "What [Aquinas] did" as F. C. Copleston put it, "was to express Augustinianism in terms of Aristotelian philosophy."