

Chapter 9: From Renaissance to Early Enlightenment

I. Setting the Stage: A Short History of the Loss and Recovery of Greek Philosophy

Athens during the time of Aristotle was an unusually tolerant, creative, and prosperous place. It was a major center of commerce with trading posts scattered around the Mediterranean Sea. It was also a significant regional naval power during that period. It lost its independence late in Aristotle's life as Macedonia conquered Greece. A century and a half later, the Romans conquered Macedonia, and Greece remained part of that empire for many centuries. Athens remained a center of learning for much of that period. Many Roman leaders, for example, sent their children to Athenian schools. Aristotle's own school, the Lyceum, survived for nearly two centuries.

Aristotle's writings were initially housed in the Lyceum's library and subsequently parts and copies were shifted to other libraries in Rome and Egypt. After the Christianization of the Roman Empire and disintegration of the western part of the empire in the fifth century, interest in the writings of Greek and Roman scholars largely disappeared from

Western Europe. Although hand-written copies of their works remained in medieval libraries, they were rarely studied during the next thousand years.¹

There were several reasons for this. The end of the western Roman Empire ended a large relatively free trade zone with a common legal system. The ensuing patchwork of governments and wars in the West reduced trade flows, specialization, commerce, and income. The decline in real incomes reduced demand for most goods and services, including those of philosophers and educators. Christian theology during this time tended to focus on the afterlife, spiritual development, and faith, rather than human development, reason, and life on earth. Catholic normative theory stressed prayer and good works for the Church, and its emphasis on the afterlife tended to redirect time and energy away from market and other secular activities toward religious activities, both among devout believers and those wishing to appear devout. Christian scholarship focused on textual interpretation, rituals, and prayer, about which little could be learned from Greek and Roman secular writings. Appropriate ethical and economic practices were grounded in divine texts, rather than reason, alt-

¹The western empire had included present-day Italy, Belgium, England, France, Portugal, Spain, Switzerland and Southern Germany. The eastern part, included the territories along the Mediterranean Sea from the east of Italy to Morocco. The government of the eastern empire was based in present day Istanbul (previously Byzantium and Constantinople). The territory governed shrank during the next thousand years, especially with the rise of Islam in the seventh century, but

its center of government continued until 1453. The domain of Roman Christendom spread north and West to include the Netherlands, Ireland, the rest of Germany, Scandinavia, and subsequently the European colonies in the New World.

Ethics and Prosperity: Chapter 9

From Renaissance to Enlightenment

hough interpretations and applications continued to occupy both scholars and Catholic courts in the period after the Western Roman Empire disappeared, where facts and arguments as well as faith mattered.²

The result was a lower standard of living for most in the period that later scholars sometimes referred to as the Dark Ages. Such economic effects would not have concerned those advocating a religious life, because their aim was salvation, rather than a satisfying life on earth.³

Western copies of classical Greek and Roman manuscripts were not destroyed but retired to little used archives of monastic libraries in western Europe. Indeed, the spread of monasteries throughout Europe, the Middle East, and northern Africa provided a robust form of “knowledge storage” that could be tapped when interests expanded to include natural laws—laws that were presumed to have divine origins. Classical Greek and Roman scholarship continued to be of interest in the Eastern Roman Empire (sometimes called the Byzantine Empire) and subsequently in the Islamic empires of the Middle East and northern Africa, where trade continued much as before the disintegration of the Western Roman Empire.

Religious ideas and culture proved to be more robust than state authority in this period of Western European history. Rome lost its secular authority, but remained the capital of western Europe’s new religion. Latin remained the main language of literate persons and scholars in the West, as well as the language of formal church rituals.

II. Renewed Interest in the Classics

Around 1200, the West began to rediscover the ancient scholars, partly because of the Crusades, which brought Western Europe in closer contact with what remained of the Roman and Greek thought in Constantinople. Translations into Latin were undertaken from Greek sources in Constantinople and also from Islamic sources in Toledo, Spain, which at the time was an important center of Islamic and classical study. Many classical scholars subsequently relocated to Italy, which became a center for innovation in architecture, art, and philosophy.⁴ Latin was still the language of educated persons in Europe, which created a broad readership for the new Latin translations.

Renewed interest in the works of Aristotle and other Greek scholars occurred at about the same time that new universities were being

²For an accessible overview of medieval Christian philosophy and the classics see <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/medieval-philosophy>.

³Maddison’s (2007) estimates of per capita GDP in Europe for the years 1 and 1000 AD show a 25% decline in average income—from 576 to 427.

⁴The European boundaries of the Eastern empire and subsequent Arab empires extended from somewhat east of present-day Turkey along the southern Mediterranean coast through Spain. Between the seventh and tenth centuries, this

territory was conquered by Islamic armies and Islam largely replaced Catholicism as the dominant religion. (Some Jews and Christians continued living in these territories but paid a special tax.) Spanish kings gradually pushed Muslims out of present-day Spain, ruling all of it by about 1492. The territory’s new Catholic rulers adopted laws that forced conversion or emigration by Jews and Muslims. Rather than convert, Jewish scholars migrated to Italy and Byzantium, taking many of their books and notes with them.

Ethics and Prosperity: Chapter 9

From Renaissance to Enlightenment

founded throughout Europe. Universities were established in Bologna, Italy, in about 1088; Paris, France, and Oxford, England, in about 1170; Cambridge, England, in about 1200; Heidelberg, Germany [Palatinate], in about 1386; and in several other less famous places during the same period. The new universities were places of scholarship and teaching focused for the most part on educating priests and lawyers.

A subset of university scholars (who were normally Catholic monks or priests) had a broader interest in knowledge, which they regarded to shed light on the nature of divine will, although it did not necessarily increase prospects for salvation, produce better legal analysis, or improve military strategies. A subset of the new scholarship attempted to enrich medieval theories by taking account of the work of classical scholars. This process in turn created its own issues and led to significant extensions of Catholic ethical, economic, political, and astronomical theories. It is likely that renewed interest in classic Greek and Roman scholarship induced medieval scholars to undertake a broader range of study and speculation than imagined by those that first undertook those studies. There was much about the divine will that could be better understood by a deeper understanding of ethical and scientific principles.

The rediscovery of Aristotle was especially important. He was the most studied secular scholar in this period because of his breadth and depth, although universities were still mainly focused on Christian theology and legal training, and remained so for several centuries. Thomas

Aquinas (1225–74), an influential Catholic scholar from that period, referred to Aristotle as simply “the philosopher.” Others referred to him as “the teacher” as had been the case among Islamic scholars. Aristotle’s work on logic, science, and ethics was carefully studied and discussed. This was evident both in classroom curricula and new scholarship.⁵

The effect of the Renaissance can be easily observed in museum art collections. If one walks through a European or North American national art museum with collections that reach back into the twelfth century, one can see that statues and paintings of men and women in nonreligious settings become more commonplace as one looks at exhibits from 1200 to 1600. Before 1400, there is essentially only “flat” religious art. After 1400, religious art gradually becomes less commonplace, as paintings of aristocrats and ordinary people in both classical and common settings become the norm—at least for paintings and sculptures of museum quality.

That shift suggests that those purchasing art and perhaps the artists themselves had become relatively more concerned with life on earth and classical literature and somewhat less focused on religion or pleasing the Church, although the latter clearly remained important, indeed central to life. Nonetheless, tolerance somewhat increased, and a wider range of arguments and methods of disseminating them became legal or at least less actively prosecuted throughout much of Europe.

⁵In some places, as at the University of Paris, some parts of Aristotle’s work were banned from university lecture halls because they conflicted with Catholic doctrines of that time, although that censorship lasted only a half century or so.

See “The Twelfth Century and the Rise of Universities” (chapter 5) in <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/medieval-philosophy>.

Ethics and Prosperity: Chapter 9

From Renaissance to Enlightenment

Toward the end of this period, movable type printing was introduced to Europe by Gutenberg (circa 1450), which greatly facilitated dissemination of Aristotle and other authors by reducing copying costs. Subsequent improvements in printing, paper, and binding technologies further reduced book and pamphlet printing costs. Although the Bible was the first book printed with the Gutenberg's innovation, moveable type allowed new ideas to be disseminated at far lower cost than possible in previous times.

III. Four Great Shocks between 1500 and 1600 undermine the Medieval World View

The medieval order in Europe with its dominant Catholic church, its relatively small "duchies" and city states ruled by hereditary nobles and kings, and its associated views of miracles, class, ethics, and the after-life, had stood for centuries, but in the sixteenth century it was subjected to a variety of major shocks that undermined its foundations.

Discovery of a New World

In 1492 Columbus discovered formerly unknown lands and peoples. His voyage and the ones that followed implied that medieval geography and its associated history of mankind were incorrect; both the earth and human society were larger than previously believed. Subsequent exploration in the sixteenth century demonstrated that new places, peoples, plants, and animals had to be added to Europe's knowledge base. Existing theories and histories had to be adjusted to take account of new facts.

Acknowledging this great geographical lacuna undermined the meditative and scholastic approaches to knowledge. There were clearly many things previously unknown. What might be called the sophisticated armchair approach to understanding the physical world had proved to be inadequate. Exploration and other experiments could reveal important facts about the world that were unknown to even the most thoughtful and widely read scholars and map makers.

The subsequent conquest and settlement of South and Central America by Spain and Portugal also changed the balance of wealth and power in Europe.

The Protestant Reformation

At roughly the same time, an increasing number of religious scholars began criticizing a subset of the theological rituals and doctrines of the Catholic Church. Martin Luther (1483–1546) and John Calvin (1509–1564) were the most influential of the Church's many critics in this period. Their criticisms launched a great reform movement among Catholics in the sixteenth century that ultimately produced new churches rather than substantial reforms of the old one.

Of course, it was not simply debates about appropriate doctrine and rituals that produced the Protestant Reformation. The reformers were supported by local rulers in Germany and Switzerland, who were doubtless interested in religious doctrines (everyone was at this time); however, they also likely understood that the Protestant movement had political implications. In the territories of the Holy Roman Empire (essentially northern and central Europe), rulers would anticipate that a

Ethics and Prosperity: Chapter 9

From Renaissance to Enlightenment

more decentralized church would indirectly advance their efforts to resist centralization by the Habsburg government and by the Church itself.⁶ Together with the persuasiveness of Calvinist and Lutheran doctrines, their political and military support produced a new geopolitical and religious map for Northern Europe.⁷

Several new Lutheran- and Calvinist-based religious societies were founded that were entirely independent of the Church hierarchy of Rome. The new Christian sects were based on a narrower reading of the Bible and placed greater emphasis on predestination and rebirth than Catholic doctrine had. Among the new religious societies were precursors to the contemporary Baptist, Congregational, Lutheran, Methodist, and Presbyterian, and Reformed churches. No longer was there a single unified organization and theology whose claims of universality and accuracy would be taken for granted by Christians.

⁶The emperor of the Holy Roman Empire was an office of relatively little authority at that time, but substantial influence. It had been held by leaders of the Habsburg family for many years, who were the most important family in the German-speaking territories, and arguably the most important in Europe in the sixteenth century, during which time the family ruled Spain and its territories as well as Austria and many other duchies in Europe. They had often attempted to reduce the autonomy of other noble families, and they not been entirely unsuccessful. (The German-speaking territories of the Holy Roman Empire are sometimes referred to as the “first Reich.”)

⁷ Several wars were fought between Catholic and Protestant armies during the 16th century. These were finally ended by a series of Europe-wide treaties negotiated at or near Westphalia in 1648. The Peace of Westphalia formally ended several military conflicts and formally granted ruling nobles and kings the authority to determine the religion of their territories.

Max Weber, writing three and half centuries later, argued that several elements of Protestant theology encouraged new outlooks on life and work that made it possible for capitalism and the commercial society to emerge. These included new ideas about divine duties and the role of commerce in a good life and good society.⁸

The Copernican Revolution

At about the same time that the Protestant Reformation was gaining ground, innovative theories about man’s place in the physical universe itself were being worked out and read by other scholars. In 1543, Copernicus published a book in which he proposed an astronomy in which the Earth circled the sun, rather than the sun circled the earth, as had long been accepted. The new theory was consistent with hundreds of years of astronomical observation and provided a simpler explanation for

⁸See Weber (1905), *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Several of the authors used in this and the next chapters were used by Weber to demonstrate that shifts in norms generated by Protestantism tended to favor commerce. Weber argues that Protestant emphasis on predestination tends to make people more career oriented than Catholicism did. Under Calvinist predestination doctrine, it was not good works for the Church that mattered, but God’s long-standing decisions about a person’s salvation, which one could not influence by personal behavior. Whether one was “elected” or not, however, could be deduced by how people behaved and their success in life. Success in one’s earthly career provided evidence of God’s favor and the likelihood of having been chosen for elevation (for an afterlife). This naturally encouraged people to work hard in their daily lives and to adopt prudent lifestyles.

Ethics and Prosperity: Chapter 9

From Renaissance to Enlightenment

the motions of stars, planets, and the sun than alternative theories available at that time. His book, *The Revolutions*, was relatively little read but gradually rose to prominence during the next half century, after which it was banned by the Catholic church (in 1616), as were many other books including some parts of Aristotle's work.

Thomas Kuhn (1957, 1962) argues that the heliocentric astronomy introduced by Copernicus helped launch a series of paradigm shifts that are often referred to as the Scientific Revolution. Supporting data were provided by Galileo's (1609) astronomical research, and orbits themselves were explained by Newton's (1687) theory of gravity, momentum, and physical interaction.⁹ The gradual increase in the precision of astronomical measurements and predictions associated with this shift in paradigm within astronomy increased the aspirations and norms for precision in theory and measurement in other fields of study as well.

The Dutch Revolt

Later in the sixteenth century, and not entirely independent of the Protestant Reformation and discovery of the New World, a war of secession took place in the Rhine river's delta. The provinces and cities of the northern delta won their war of independence against the powerful Habsburgs of Spain and formed a new national government, the United

Provinces of the Netherlands. The Dutch government had a decentralized federal structure with seven sovereign provinces.¹⁰ This new form of government and its associated more open and commercial life undermined medieval theories of politics and economics.

The Netherlands was a relatively tolerant place in which there was freedom of religious conscience, although not always freedom of public worship. It was also a place that was more tolerant of new ideas than other European countries. The Netherlands attracted religious, economic, and intellectual emigrants from throughout Europe. Rival Protestant churches existed side by side in the Netherlands, and intellectuals from other countries in Europe often published their books there to avoid censorship in their home countries. Its relatively open markets and hardworking residents allowed the Netherlands to become the wealthiest country in Europe (based on per capita income) within a few decades. In many respects, the Netherlands could be thought of as the new Athens.

Its economic and political success, in turn, demonstrated that countries could succeed economically and politically without the traditional medieval template for governance and regulation. Hierarchical systems based on royal and noble families with a monopoly church and heavily regulated markets were evidently not the only systems of governance and life that could obtain divine blessings. The success of the Netherlands demonstrated that other systems could work as well or better.

⁹Aristotle was an early proponent of the geocentric universe. As the heliocentric theory replaced the long-standing geocentric one, a substantial part of Aristotle's physics was also overturned.

¹⁰ The republican form of government was adopted partly by accident. Leaders of the revolt solicited the protection of several kings, but none was willing to challenge the Hapsburg dynasty for authority over the northern half of the Rhine's delta. See Congleton (2011, ch. 15) for additional details and references.

Long-Term Consequences

Together, these four great shocks of the sixteenth centuries had undermined the medieval order, although this was not entirely obvious at the time. Medieval doctrines and patterns of life did not instantly disappear. Instead, the shocks induced gradual transformations of ideas and institutions in Western Europe and its colonies, which gradually replaced the medieval order with the modern one. The emergence of the commercial society is arguably one of the long-term consequences of these shocks; although, it was not entirely caused by the emergence of more open societies or the scientific and technological revolutions as is sometimes argued. The remainder of part III of this book focuses on subtle shifts in ethics and related norms that were at least partly induced by those shocks.

In societies with a relatively greater interest in natural laws and a greater emphasis on reason, science, and life on earth, secular principles for ethics and other norms are naturally of greater interest to scholars. The ethical theories that slowly emerged tended to reach more favorable conclusions about commerce itself and with respect to careers in commerce. These in turn tended to encourage private behavior and public

¹¹ During Europe's dark ages and early medieval periods, Constantinople, Alexandria, Cordoba, and cities in Asia such as Beijing and Tokyo were clearly more important and innovative places than any city in Western Europe. Nonetheless, the commercial society that emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were grounded in European ethical theories, science, and institutions, rather than those associated with such places. It is for this reason that this chapter and Part I in general focuses on West European developments, rather than ones in the Moslem world or in Asia.

policies that made broad trading networks and more roundabout methods of production easier to organize and less risky for those who chose to participate in them.

Together they tended to support the emergence of more open markets and political systems. That is to say, the enlightenment and post-enlightenment ethical theories provided the normative foundations for the ideology that in the nineteenth century would be referred to as liberalism.

IV. Two Late Renaissance Catholic Perspectives on Work, Property, and Commerce

Desiderius Erasmus (1466–1536)

The late medieval perspective on commerce can be illustrated with a few quotes from two widely read books from the early 1500s, Desiderius Erasmus's *Praise of Folly* and Thomas More's *Utopia*. Both were politically well-connected Catholic scholars in the early sixteenth century.¹¹ Erasmus was a full-time scholar with contacts throughout Western Europe, including Pope Leo X and several kings.¹² Sir Thomas More was

¹²The *Praise of Folly* was widely read and elicited significant acclaim from many, but not all, church authorities for its criticisms of medieval scholasticism, church wealth, and some of its ceremonies. Erasmus maintained good relations with many prominent Catholic scholars and officials. He opposed the reformation and many of Luther and Calvin's ideas. Nonetheless, the author of the Erasmus entry in the *Catholic (New Advent) Encyclopedia* (1914) considered the *Praise of Folly* to be "a cold-blooded, deliberate attempt to discredit the Church,

Ethics and Prosperity: Chapter 9

From Renaissance to Enlightenment

a lawyer by training and subsequently a Member of Parliament, diplomat, and advisor to Henry VIII.¹³

What is relevant for the purposes of this book is not these scholars' distinguished career paths, class, or genius, but that a subset of their writings were widely read throughout Western Europe and so provide evidence of common beliefs concerning economic activities, wealth, and property among literate persons in the late Renaissance. Both criticized mainstream institutions and behaviors that they regarded to be immoral or wasteful. Their views were not uncontroversial but were regarded to be among the more informed and thoughtful of that period. (Indeed, they are still widely read for the same reason.) Their books would not have been read unless their ideas resonated with those already in the minds of their readers.

Both writers are highly critical of commerce because it promotes excessive interest in money and attracts unethical people.¹⁴

But the most foolish and basest of all others are our merchants, to wit such as venture on everything be it never so dishonest, and manage it no better; who though they lie by no allowance, swear and forswear, steal, cozen, and cheat, yet shuffle themselves into the first rank, and all

and its satire and stinging comment on ecclesiastical conditions are not intended as a healing medicine but a deadly poison.”

¹³Thomas More's service to Henry VIII famously ended with his resignation in 1533 and beheading in 1535 for a charge of treason. More had opposed separation from the Catholic church, refused to accept Henry as the leader of the new church, and ultimately refused to take Henry's demanding oath of loyalty. For his opposition to the English church, writings, and sacrifice, he was beatified by

because they have gold rings on their fingers. Nor are they without their flattering friars that admire them **and give them openly the title of honorable, in hopes, no doubt, to get some small snip of it themselves.** (*The Praise of Folly*, KL 733–37).

This quote from Erasmus's *The Praise of Folly* (1511) suggests that the upward mobility sought by merchants is “foolish and base” and that the deference that churchman provided wealthy merchants is inappropriate. The quote suggests that a life in markets is improper because of the means through which wealth is acquired (“steal, cozen, and cheat”) and because trade itself is in some sense improper because it is motivated by wealth and status.

Thomas More (1478–1535)

A few years later, Thomas More (1516) characterized a good society, one which bears a closer relationship to that described in Plato's *Republic* than to the one characterized in Aristotle's *Politics*, although there are also echoes of Aristotle's reasoning. More goes beyond both these philosophers in his support for an egalitarian society without markets or

the Catholic church some three hundred fifty years later (1886, canonized in 1935), and thus contemporary Catholics refer to him as Saint Sir Thomas More.

¹⁴Excerpts are from the Radice translation of the 1532 version: *Praise of Folly and Letter to Maarten Van Dorp 1515*. New York: Penguin Press (1993). A digitized version (2012) is available from Amazon and is the version used here. *The Praise of Folly* was originally written in 1509, it is said, to amuse his good friend Thomas More after a trip to Rome. KL refers to kindle locations and bolding is again been added to direct readers to key parts of the quote.

Ethics and Prosperity: Chapter 9

From Renaissance to Enlightenment

private property. Happiness remains the chief good, but it is achieved through contemplation rather than an active life.¹⁵

His characterization of the ideal society implies that leisure is to be maximized and that common property is better than private. Similar ideas about utopia are still among those advocated by political philosophers who today would be called communitarians or idealists of “the left.”¹⁶

The magistrates never engage the people in unnecessary labor, since the chief end of the constitution is to regulate labor by the necessities of the public, and **to allow the people as much time as is necessary for the improvement of their minds, in which they think the happiness of life consists.** (*Utopia*, p. 50).

Every city is divided into four equal parts, and in the middle of each there is a **marketplace. What is brought thither, and manufactured by the several families, is carried from thence to houses appointed for that purpose, in which all things of a sort are laid by themselves; and thither every father goes, and takes whatsoever he or his family stand in need of, without either paying for it or leaving anything in exchange.** (*Utopia*, p. 52).

There is no market-based exchange of money for goods in *Utopia*. Necessities are produced in relatively short six-hour days and distributed according to needs, which are presumed to be simple, basic, and limited. In effect, More’s ideal community is a well-governed monastery.

It is important to recognize that More’s utopian society requires persons with particular internalized norms to function well. Individuals have to be willing to work hard without obvious return (no wages were paid). They had to have only limited desires for material comforts and none for decoration, ostentation, or status. They had to seek contemplative self-improvement—whether spiritual or secular is unclear, but likely both. The residents also had to be willing to defer to the authority of elders and leaders of their communities, who determined much about their daily lives, more or less as the head of a monastery would organize the lives of resident novices and monks.

Utopia is essentially self-sufficient and trades little with the outside world. In many respects, it is similar to Plato’s ideal republic, which was much criticized by Aristotle for its impracticality. There would be many free-rider problems to be addressed in such a society. The internalized ethical dispositions of the leadership and the community’s residents would have to be strong enough to overcome these problems, or magistrates would have to manage the community much more actively than implied by More’s discussion. As imagined, utopia was a comfortable world with benevolent leadership and regulation of life, and production for use, rather than exchange.

¹⁵Excerpts are from a digitized version of the 1901 edition of Thomas More’s *Utopia* published by Cassell and Co. and edited by David Price, which is available from Amazon.com.

¹⁶Before 1900 such persons were regarded as communalists or communists. The meaning of the word communism changed after the rise of the Soviet Union after which it was routinely used to describe its very centralized and regimented social system with geopolitical aspirations.

Ethics and Prosperity: Chapter 9

From Renaissance to Enlightenment

It is evident that both Erasmus and More believe that hard work, honesty, and integrity are important virtues. Their own hard work is evident in their distinguished careers and in their writings. They were both extraordinarily active men in their times. However, neither thought that participation in commerce could be a genuinely useful or noble activity. In this they shared Aristotle's concern that commerce was a dishonorable occupation. Farming and other productive activities were necessary, but was ennobling only to a very limited extent.¹⁷

If the ideas of Erasmus and More on the ethics of commerce were widely held among educated persons at the time they wrote, trade would tend to be a relatively risky and unrewarding activity. When only the relatively unethical participate in markets, every trade and trading network is risky for both buyers and sellers. Promises are not routinely kept, fraud and broken contracts are commonplace, and the quality of goods and services difficult to know with any certainty. The analysis of Part I of this book implies that only the largest and most obvious gains from comparative advantage and specialization would be realized in such a society. The result would be a society with relatively small and unproductive markets.

The latter, of course, would not be a concern to those who regard ascetic communal lives of religious and intellectual contemplation to be

the best ones, as a proper monk or university professor from this period would have. However, for persons who regard material comfort and an active life to be parts of a good life, life in More's utopia would be less than ideal, and utopia less than the best society possible.

V. The Early Enlightenment Perspective on Work, Property, and Markets

Erasmus was a Dutchman writing in the sixteenth century a half century or so before the Dutch Republic was formed. More was an Englishman writing in the same period before the English reformation occurred. The next section turns to seventeenth century writings by two Dutchmen writing after the republic was formed, Hugo Grotius and Pieter De La Court. The chapter concludes with short overviews of books by two English theologians and one philosopher: William Baxter, Robert Barclay, and Thomas Locke.

The seventeenth century is a period often referred to as "the Enlightenment." It accelerated trends already present in the Renaissance. Scholarly books were still written in Latin during the first half of the century, although publishing in the natural languages of Europe—Dutch, English, French, German, Italian, and Spanish—had become commonplace by its end. It was a period of many innovations in theology, ethics,

thereby renounce his argument that physical resources and life experiences are necessary to develop most virtues. The most consistent interpretation is that a good life includes substantial time for contemplation, although contemplation alone is insufficient to produce such a life.

¹⁷Toward the end of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle makes an argument that contemplation may be the best manner to achieve happiness. "And, in proportion as people have the act of contemplation, so far have they also the being happy, not incidentally, but in the way of Contemplative Speculation because it is in itself precious." (*Nicomachean Ethics*, p. 277). He goes on to suggest that a contemplative life has the most potential for happiness. However, he does not

Ethics and Prosperity: Chapter 9

From Renaissance to Enlightenment

epistemology, political theory, physics, and navigation. What is most relevant for this book is the conclusions that philosophy and theology reached about good character, the good life and the good society.

A small sample of remarks from serious, widely read works by influential persons is again used to provide evidence of ideas that captured the attention and imagination of literate persons in this period.

Hugo Grotius (1583–1645)

Hugo Grotius was trained as a lawyer and scholar and wrote his first book at the age of 16. He was successful within the Dutch politics of his day, becoming an important legal official in Holland, mayor of Rotterdam, and subsequently Swedish ambassador to France. His books were less widely read than those of Erasmus and More but were also influential during his time and after, especially his *Mare Liberum* (1609; the *Free Sea*).

Mare Liberum was written in large part to support the claim that Dutch merchants should have free access to all potential trading partners that could be reached by sailing ships. It develops very general arguments in support of that claim. These include theories of natural law, private and common property, and their relevance for international law and

commerce. He concludes that the sea is and should be common property and the use of it should be open to everyone. International law is the field in which Grotius' work is best known.¹⁸

Grotius' theory of natural law is grounded in a combination of moral intuition and reason, rather than religious texts, although he provides a supernatural basis for moral intuition. His interest is the law rather than ethics per se, but his arguments include several religious and moral justifications for commerce. He argues that natural law applies equally to all and that commerce is ultimately a blessed activity.¹⁹

And to this house or city built by him that great prince and householder **had written certain laws** of his, not in brass or tables, but **in the minds and senses of everyone**, where they shall offer themselves to be read of the unwilling and such as refuse. **By these laws both high and low are bound.** It is no more lawful for kings to transgress these than for the common people. (*The Free Sea*, p. 15).

But as in man himself **there are some things which are common with all, and other some whereby everyone is to be distinguished from other**, so of those things which nature had brought forth for the use of man she would that some of them should remain common and others through every one's labor and industry to become proper [private]. **But laws were set down for both**, that all surely might use common things without the damage of all and, for the rest, every man contented with his portion should abstain from another's. If

¹⁸Grotius also participated in several of the religious debates of his time but more as a legal, than religious, scholar and official. He suggested, for example, that different views about predestination could coexist, as with Luther and Erasmus. He was persecuted for those views and the view that the government should play a role in enforcing tolerance but also for being associated with Oldenbarnevelt, who had opposed the *stadthouder* of that time (Willem II) on important matters of policy. Grotius is famous for escaping from prison in a large

book chest and fleeing to Paris in 1621. It was in France where he completed his most famous works.

¹⁹Excerpts are from the English translation from Latin by Richard Hakluyt (circa 1615) as edited by David Armitage (2004). The manuscript is available in hard copy and various digitized forms from Liberty Fund and in Kindle format from Amazon ([Evergreen Review] without introductory notes).

Ethics and Prosperity: Chapter 9

From Renaissance to Enlightenment

no one can be ignorant of these things, unless he cease to be a man... (*The Free Sea*, p. 15).

The sea therefore is in the number of those things which are not in merchandise and trading, that is to say, which cannot be made proper [private]. Whence it follows, if we speak properly, no part of the sea can be incorporated in the territory of any people. Which thing Placentius seems to have meant when he said, “That the sea was so common, that it may be in the dominion of none but God alone,” and Johannes Faber, “When the sea shall depart, left in his ancient right and being, wherein all things were common,” (*The Free Sea*, p. 31).

...that **it is lawful for any nation to go to any other and to trade with it.** God himself speaks of this in nature, seeing he will not have all those things, whereof the life of man stands in need, to be sufficiently ministered by nature in all places and also granted some nations to excel others in arts. **To what end are these things but that he would maintain human friendship by their mutual wants and plenty...** (*The Free Sea*, p. 19).

Eight steps in Grotius’s reasoning are revealed by these excerpts:

- (1) Knowledge of natural law (essential rights and rules of conduct) is an essential feature of human nature—written in the minds and senses of everyone.
- (2) Natural laws apply to all, to rulers as well as to the people ruled.
- (3) Natural law specifies that some things should be held in common and others private.
- (4) The sea, for example, is common to all, because it cannot be possessed.
- (5) Free passage over the seas and international trade is lawful (ethical) under natural law. Indeed, (6) that trade is intended by the divine is implied by the uneven distribution of raw materials and talent in and among societies.
- (7) Thus, no nation should interfere with it.
- (8) Moreover, trade is a source of amity among men.

Note the sharp contrast between More’s utopia and Grotius with respect to commerce. Grotius argues that free trade is a God-given or natural right. It is implied by natural law and the distribution of goods and services around the world. It is necessary to satisfy human wants and helps to assure extended networks of human friendship. There is no conflict between economic activity and ethical behavior. Moreover, because all human beings should follow natural law, it is immoral and should be illegal to interfere with or try to prevent free trade. The importance of trade in human affairs stands in sharp contrast with the perspective of Thomas More a century earlier who argued that trade is at best a necessary inconvenience that distracts one from the important activities of life.

In Grotius, as in Aristotle, there is a clear connection between private and civil ethics, what is right for individuals is also right for kings and other government leaders. However, in contrast to Aristotle, Grotius suggests that natural law is relatively easy to discern, because it is written in everyone’s mind. Grotius does not try to find secular foundations for natural laws, but takes them to be both God-given and obvious. This implies that everyone can and should follow natural law.

Pieter De La Court (1618–85)

Pieter De La Court wrote *The Interests of Holland* (1662) a half century after *Mare Liberum* was written. During this half century the Netherlands had risen to prominence as a major center of international commerce and attracted the emigration of protestants from around Europe. La Court was a second-generation immigrant to the Netherlands from present-day Belgium. His family ran a successful cloth manufacturing

Ethics and Prosperity: Chapter 9

From Renaissance to Enlightenment

business.²⁰ He was educated at Leiden University (which now has a building named after him) and was politically active in the Dutch Republic for much of his adult life, writing books and pamphlets in support of the republican form of government, free trade, and religious tolerance. The Netherlands was arguably the freest and most open country on earth during his lifetime. The prosperity associated with nearly a century of independence, republican governance, and relatively open markets was by La Court's time self-evident.

The *Interests of Holland* is not a book on ethics per se but about public policy. However, it indirectly sheds light on how private codes of conduct had evolved in Holland since the time of Erasmus. La Court regards virtue, hard work, and prosperity to be characteristics of both a good life and a good society. He argues that prosperity is a joint product of the dispositions of persons living in a society, its form of government, and the public policies adopted by it. These principles and hypotheses provide the basis for his normative analysis of markets and governments.²¹

²⁰Belgium and the Netherlands share the delta of the Rhine River, a major outlet for products from central Europe (Southern Germany, Northern France, and Switzerland). The provinces south of the Rhine remained under Hapsburg rule for the period of the Dutch Republic. This territory became known as Belgium and remained Catholic. Many Protestants left Belgium for the Netherlands in the early days of the republic to avoid discrimination and to be able to more freely practice their religion..

God can give **no greater temporal blessing to a country in our condition than to introduce and preserve a free commonwealth government.** (*The True Interest and Political Maxims of the Republic of Holland*, p. 38).

Next to a liberty of serving God [religious tolerance], follows the **liberty of gaining a livelihood** without any dear-bought city-freedom, but only by virtue of a fixed habitation to have the common right of other inhabitants. [Such liberties are] very necessary for keeping the people we have, and inviting strangers to come among us. (*The True Interest and Political Maxims of the Republic of Holland*, p. 74).

Notice that La Court does not think it necessary to justify prosperity as an aim in itself. Wealth is a blessing, rather than a sign of moral depravity. Because he expected his readers to agree, this allowed him to spend most of his time writing about where prosperity comes from, and how it can be sustained and extended. The contrast with Erasmus and More could not be greater. Markets and commerce are a natural (God-given) center of life for individuals. Prosperity is a consequence of the openness of Dutch society, the industry of its residents, and by the secure property rights and freedom associated with republican governance.

The inhabitants under this free government hope by lawful means to acquire estates,...and use their wealth as

²¹The 1746 Campbell translation from the original Dutch of La Court's *The True Interest and Political Maxims of the Republic of Holland* is used here. An early translation is used because it would not have been influenced by emergence of economics and before the philosophical and political developments of the eighteenth century. Various digitized versions are available at the Liberty Fund website. As in previous cases, the excerpts are slightly edited. Contemporary rules for punctuation and capitalization are used. A few words in brackets are added to help contemporary readers or provide context for the excerpt used.

Ethics and Prosperity: Chapter 9

From Renaissance to Enlightenment

they please, without dreading that any indigent or wasteful prince—or his courtiers and gentry, who are generally as prodigal, necessitous, and covetous as himself—should on any pretense whatever **seize the wealth of the subject**. Our inhabitants **are therefore much inclined to subsist by the forenamed and other like ways or means, and gain riches for their posterity by frugality and good husbandry**. (*The True Interest and Political Maxims of the Republic of Holland*, p. 56). **It is certainly known that this country cannot prosper, but by means of those that are most industrious and ingenious**, and that such patents or grants [monopolies and trade privileges] do not produce the ablest merchants. (*The True Interest and Political Maxims of the Republic of Holland*, p. 76). Moreover, it is apparent that **he who increases his estate by industrious and frugal living** is most burdened [by wealth taxes] and he that by laziness and prodigality diminishes his estate will be less taxed. So that **virtue is unjustly oppressed and vice favored**. Whereas on the contrary, the imposts on consumption fall heavy upon the riotous and indulge and encourage the virtuous. (*The True Interest and Political Maxims of the Republic of Holland*, p. 87).

Note the parallels with Aristotle's ideal state. The laws adopted by a good government provide incentives for people to develop virtuous dispositions. As far as La Court is concerned, such laws and institutions support both wealth accumulation and ethical behavior. They include the right to choose one's occupation and enter into businesses. They also encourage new residents to work hard and save. Poorly devised taxes, on

the other hand, can undermine the virtue of a citizenry by encouraging laziness and drunkenness, rather than encouraging hard work, prudence, and innovation.²²

La Court thanks God for providing the circumstances necessary for wealth creation. These are blessings rather than a temptation to avoid, in contrast with the arguments of More, Erasmus, and to a lesser extent of Aristotle. He also argues that a list of virtues should include hard work, frugality, honesty, integrity, and religiosity, and that these are necessary for prosperity. Note that this list of virtues differs from Aristotle's in that it includes "hard work," "frugality," and "religiosity."

His conception of good government nonetheless is very similar to that developed by Aristotle, although his list of virtues is a bit different. A good government simultaneously promotes virtuous behavior and prosperity. La Court sees little or no conflict between virtue and prosperity. He also argues that a republican form of government (a somewhat representative government without a king) is one of the preconditions for prosperity, because kings and other nobles are prone to vice and so tend to adopt poor public policies.²³

All in all, it is clear that the Netherlands during its first century of rapid growth experienced shifts in norms that promoted rather than discouraged commerce.

²²La Court worries that these beneficial policies were being undermined in the Netherlands, which he expected to reduce the Netherlands' prosperity in the long run.

²³La Court clearly agrees with Weber's argument about the productivity of a work ethic, although he provides greater credit to supporting public policies than Weber does writing more than two centuries later.

Ethics and Prosperity: Chapter 9

From Renaissance to Enlightenment

Richard Baxter (1615–91)

We now shift from two Dutch secular writers who occasionally wrote about religious matters to two British theologians who occasionally wrote about secular matters: Richard Baxter, a moderate Presbyterian, and Robert Barclay, the most important Quaker theorist of his period and governor of the East New Jersey colony in North America for eight years (1682–1690). Their works remained in print for more than two centuries, and both were widely read by Protestants in the decades after their publication. Insofar as persons of European decent continued to be influenced by religious arguments, it is likely that their writings and others similar to them were more influential than the secular ones focused on by most contemporary scholars. Such writings play a significant role in Max Weber's analysis of the Protestant work ethic and its significance for the rise of the commercial society.

Baxter's *A Christian Directory* (1673) is a book of recommended practices for all Christians. It is an accessible four-volume work that attempts to provide practical guidance for literate Christians and ministers, rather than theologians, whom he addressed in other work. It covers such topics as prayer, conversation, marriage, hiring of servants, performance of contracts, political obligations, and the appropriate time for games and recreation. As a theologian, he naturally relies extensively on religious arguments and motivations, but he argues that one's divine duties include a variety of secular ones.

His *Directory* includes the idea of "a calling," a task or job that

God calls on one to do and to do well. And, as true of Aristotle, he suggests that some careers are better than others.

VI. The first and principal thing to be intended in the **choice of a trade or calling for yourselves or children**, is the service of God and the public good; and therefore (*ceteris paribus*) that calling which most conduceth to the public good is to be preferred. **The callings most useful** to the public good are the **magistrates, the pastors, and teachers of the church, schoolmasters, physicians, lawyers, &c. husbandmen** (ploughmen, graziers, and shepherds); and next to them are mariners, clothiers, booksellers, tailors, and **such other that are employed about things most necessary to mankind**. (*A Christian Directory* KL 20570–74).

His discussion of the selection of careers does not stress wealth, but it is clear that most are ones that require some education and were, by the standards of his time, relatively well paid. Although, like Aristotle, he argues against the accumulation of wealth for its own sake, he goes on to argue that one has a divine duty to maximize profits, when this can be done in an ethical manner.

If God shows you a way in which you may lawfully get more than in another way (without wrong to your soul, or to any other) **if you refuse this**, and choose the less gainful way, you cross one of the ends of your calling, and you **refuse to be God's steward**, and to accept his gifts, and use them for him when he requireth it; **you may labor to be rich for God**, though not for the flesh and sin. (*A Christian Directory* KL 20600–602).

Ethics and Prosperity: Chapter 9

From Renaissance to Enlightenment

Baxter also strongly recommends that individuals develop a work ethic so that you avoid temptations to engage in vice.

Live not in idleness or sloth; but be laborious in your callings, that you may escape that need or poverty which is the temptation to this sin of theft. **Idleness is a crime** which is not to be tolerated in Christian societies. (*A Christian Directory* KL: 47241–42).

He argues that secular activities are important to God and will be taken into account, so one should behave ethically in all one's activities.

There is no way to avoid being punished for failing in one's duties.

VIII. Remember always that God is present, and none of your secrets can be hid from him. What the better are you to deceive your neighbor or your master, and to hide it from their knowledge, as long as **your Maker and Judge seeth all?** (*A Christian Directory* KL: 47255–57).

In contrast to More's *Utopia*, productive labor is not a task to be minimized, but rather is an important part of one's duty to God. Indeed, idleness is a sin. Moreover, profits per se are not themselves to be discouraged, as in Aristotle, but are also part of God's instruction, as long as one does not use immoral methods to realize them and refrains from using the fruits of one's labors for sinful activities. Indeed, failing to take advantage of profitable opportunities is itself a sin.

Baxter's ascetic view of the good life implies that most sensual pleasures are sins, including conspicuous consumption, overeating and drinking, gaming, etc. His perspective on these typifies what came to be known as the Puritanical perspective on life. In this he differs from Aristotle, who recommended moderate indulgence in such earthly pleasures, rather than the extremes of asceticism or hedonism. He is closer to Aristotle when he suggests that some types of work are more praiseworthy than others. In contrast to Aristotle, he is less concerned about how careers affect one's character than in whether they advance divine interests or the public good. Nonetheless, the occupations listed are nearly all secular ones and the ranking is broadly similar to that of Aristotle. Only two are religious.

High profits and a frugal, diligent, hardworking lifestyle naturally tend to lift one out of poverty (which was widespread in England as elsewhere at this time). For such persons, one's accumulated wealth provided evidence of industriousness and frugality, both praiseworthy dispositions having God's blessing. As noted in Chapter 3, such traits tend to make markets and team production more productive.²⁴

Robert Barclay (1648–90)

Robert Barclay wrote on Quaker theology and ethical theory. The latter had a significant influence on English political theory, which made

²⁴In Baxter's work, a strong work ethic and frugal lifestyle have biblical foundations that do not require the assumption of predestination, as Weber suggests. What is important for the emergence of a work ethic for Christians and other

theists is the relative importance of the religious norms, rather than fundamental assumptions about supernatural power, knowledge, and intent.

Ethics and Prosperity: Chapter 9

From Renaissance to Enlightenment

his work more consequential than might be suggested by the extent of his direct readership. His views were influential within Quaker circles and in the American colonies of New Jersey and Pennsylvania, where Quakers were often in government and wrote or contributed to constitutional documents (Congleton 2011, ch. 18).

Barclay's *An Apology for the True Christian Divinity* (1678) is largely a theological work, but the last two chapters cover topics relevant for everyday life and politics, on which there is much agreement with Baxter. Barclay's suggested code of conduct for life on earth includes pacifism (except for self-defense), simple dress, not bowing to any man, disuse of titles or other honorifics, and opposition to both laughter and swearing (ch. 15, part II). As in Baxter, property should not be used for merely superfluous purposes. His conception of the good life is one of hard work and divine duty. His vision of the good society includes central roles for property, voluntary relations, and virtuous behavior.²⁵

Our principle leaves **every man to enjoy that peaceably, which either his own industry or parents have purchased to him**—only he is thereby instructed to use it aright, **both for his own good and that of his brethren**, and all to the glory of God, in which also his **acts are to be voluntary and no ways constrained**. And further, we say not hereby that no man may use the creation more or less than another.

With respect to republican governance, commerce, and their relationship to vice, he points to the experience of the Netherlands.

God hath often a regard to magistrates and their state as a thing most acceptable to him. But if any can further doubt of this thing, to wit, if without confusion it can be practiced in the commonwealth, **let him consider the state of the United Netherlands, and he shall see the good effect of it**, for there, because of **the great number of merchants, more than in any other place, there is most frequent occasion for this thing** [honesty and promise keeping], and though the number of those that are of this mind be considerable, to whom the [Dutch] States these hundred years have condescended, and yet daily condescend, **yet nevertheless there has nothing of prejudice followed thereupon to the commonwealth, government, or good order, but rather great advantage to trade, and so to the commonwealth.** (*An Apology for the True Christian Divinity*, ch. 15, part VII).

Baxter clearly agrees with La Court when he suggests that the relatively tolerant and open institutions of the Netherlands have divine approval, as evidenced by their success. Moreover, he suggests that a commercial society tends to improve ethics and governance, rather than to degrade them.

Although Grotius, La Court, Barclay, and Baxter were all religious men, they all favored religious tolerance (freedom of conscience) for reasons similar to those that would be expressed by John Locke in 1689. Evidence of the breadth of support for religious tolerance among Quakers is provided by the East Jersey and West Jersey colonial charters. Barclay had some influence over the charter of East New Jersey (1680), which includes the following under title 16:

²⁵Available at Quaker Heritage Press (<http://www.qhpress.org/texts/barclay/apology/index.html>).

Ethics and Prosperity: Chapter 9

From Renaissance to Enlightenment

All persons living in the Province who confess and acknowledge the one Almighty and Eternal God, and holds themselves obliged in conscience to live peaceably and quietly in a civil society, **shall in no way be molested or prejudged for their religious persuasions and exercise in matters of faith and worship**; nor shall they be compelled to frequent and maintain any religious worship, place or ministry whatsoever:

There was no room for atheists, but in principle, all monotheists were welcome in East New Jersey. It should be kept in mind that most of Europe—including most Protestant domains—had state-supported monopoly religions at that time.

VI. John Locke (1632–1704) and the Division between Theological and Secular Law

We conclude chapter 9 with an overview of one of the most influential philosophers and political theorists of the seventeenth century. John Locke wrote about epistemology and ethics, developed a natural law–based contractarian theory of legitimate government, and also wrote about economics and education. Two of his works continue to attract

²⁶Locke's work is still widely cited today. His epistemology book, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, has more than 17,000 Google citations (as of June 2017). His books on political theory, *Two Treatises of Government*, also remains widely read and cited, with more than 16,000 Google citations (as of June 2017).

In his Essay Concerning Human Understanding, Locke argued that the human mind is essentially a blank slate at birth and that learning occurs through the development of ideas stimulated by the data provided the senses developed through reason and intuition. This challenged ideas of Grotius (whose work he was fa-

considerable attention: *Two Treatises on Government* (1689) and *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690). His political theory was sufficiently controversial at the time that he completed it that his *Two Treatises on Government* were initially published anonymously. Book sales, nonetheless, were sufficient for publishing multiple editions and translations in short order. His writings were consequential at the time he wrote them and continued to be so.²⁶

John Locke was trained as a physician at Oxford and accepted employment as Baron Anthony Ashley-Cooper's (the future Earl of Shaftesbury) personal physician in 1667. Cooper was a leading English politician and founder of the Whig (Liberal) Party in England. Cooper's involvement in high level and high stakes English politics naturally encouraged Locke to think and write about the grand issues of his day, although little of it was published until after Cooper's death in 1683. Locke was clearly more than Cooper's resident doctor, he was an assistant, advisor, and dinner companion. Locke helped out on Cooper's colonial Carolina project, coauthoring its colonial charter.

Locke spent the 1683–89 period in the Netherlands to avoid arrest by the British authorities. He used his time there to complete several

miliar with and cited) that God wrote natural law directly into the minds of individuals. Given this, education, experience, and one's nature become central to an individual's development. Locke's theory of government was a major contribution to contractarian theories of the state, which is taken up in Part III of this book. He also made contributions to economics. For example, he recognized the effects of supply and demand on prices in the short run, but he argued that labor is the ultimate foundation of both property and value. For a list of the many editions of his texts see <http://www.libraries.psu.edu/tas/locke/bib/early-wk.html>.

Ethics and Prosperity: Chapter 9

From Renaissance to Enlightenment

of his philosophical, political, and religious works. There he would also become more familiar with Dutch ideas about commerce, politics, and religious tolerance, which were very liberal by the standards of the world at that time.²⁷

For the purposes of this book, his work on ethics is of greatest interest. Locke regards ethics to be one of the three main areas of science, which for him encompasses the full range of that which humans can potentially understand.²⁸

Science may be divided into three sorts. All that can fall within the compass of human understanding, being either, **First, the nature of things**, as they are in themselves, their relations, and their manner of operation: or, **Secondly, that which man himself ought to do**, as a rational and voluntary agent, for the attainment of any end, especially happiness: or, **Thirdly, the ways and means whereby the knowledge of both the one and the other of these is attained** and communicated. (*An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, p. 538).

His assessment of the aim of ethics is similar to that developed by Aristotle; it concerns rules for life that lead to happiness.

[With regard to the second] **Praktike, the skill of right applying our own powers and actions, for the attainment of things good and useful.** The most considerable under this head is **ethics, which is the seeking out those rules and measures of human actions, which lead to happiness**, and

the means to practice them. The end of this is not bare speculation and the knowledge of truth; **but right, and a conduct suitable to it.** (*An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, p. 538).

Locke argues that happiness is partly a matter of character, and like Aristotle, that one's character is a consequence of one's judgement and experience. One's experience is, however, only partly a product of one's own making. What one learns from experience is partly determined by the range of opinions that one is exposed to, which is to say by one's formal and informal education.

But **examples of this kind** [truly self-made men] **are but few**; and I think I may say, that **of all the men we meet with, nine parts of ten are what they are, good or evil, useful or not, by their education.** (*Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, p. 540).

Locke also shared Aristotle's belief that ethical propositions are more difficult to characterize precisely than geometry or algebra.

Another thing that makes the greater difficulty in ethics is that moral ideas are commonly more complex than those of the figures ordinarily considered in mathematics. From whence these two inconveniences follow. First, that their names are of more uncertain signification, the precise collection of simple ideas they **stand for not being so easily**

²⁷ Cooper had orchestrated a national effort to block James' (the brother of Charles II) accession to the crown. When this failed, fearing for his life, he fled to the Netherlands in 1682, dying the following year. Locke left England 1683. James II became king in 1685, but was deposed by William and Mary in 1689

(with the support of Parliament and the Dutch army). Locke returned to England shortly afterwards.

²⁸Quotations are from a digitized collection of his works available from Amazon (John Locke, 2013, *The John Locke Collection: 6 Classic Works*).

Ethics and Prosperity: Chapter 9

From Renaissance to Enlightenment

agreed on; and so the sign that is used for them in communication always, and in thinking often, does not steadily carry with it the same idea. (*An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, p. 452).

Nonetheless, given clear definitions, he argues that the rules of logic apply to ethics as well as to other topics. For example, if injustice is taken to mean the violation of rights, then where there are no rights there can be no injustice.

“Where there is no property there is no injustice,” is a proposition as certain as any demonstration in Euclid: for the **idea of property being a right to anything**, and the **idea to which the name “injustice” is given being the invasion or violation of that right**, it is evident that these ideas, being thus established, and these names annexed to them, I can as certainly know this proposition to be true, as that a triangle has three angles equal to two right ones. (*An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, p. 452).

Locke does not argue in favor of a world without rights. This example simply demonstrates that logic can be applied to clear ethical propositions.²⁹ He regards the protection of property rights to be one of the core duties of legitimate government.

Locke goes on to characterize relationships between three general types of laws and associated ideas about good and evil in a community.

These three laws [determine] the rules of moral good and evil. These three then, **first**, the law of God; **secondly**, the

law of politic societies; **thirdly**, the law of fashion, or private censure, are those to which men variously compare their actions.

And, it is **by their conformity to one of these laws that they take their measures, when they would judge of their moral rectitude**, and denominate their actions good or bad. **Morality is the relation of voluntary actions to these rules.** (*An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, p. 452).

Locke’s characterization of moral choice is similar to Aristotle, but relies more heavily on moral maxims and principles (rules). Morally relevant choices have to be voluntary, but morality itself reflects assessments about how to follow the rules of one’s society. What is radical about his theory of ethics in this especially religious period of European history is his suggestion that not all ethical principles have religious foundations or purposes. Two of the three areas in which normative rules bind or should bind human behavior do not have such foundations.

There are separate religious and civil spheres of morality and law, because the interests advanced by religious and civil activities are distinct. The former concerns conduct that is likely secure an afterlife, whereas the latter concerns conduct that creates conditions for a good life on earth. These distinct interests are best advanced through different types of organizations.

A church, then, I take to be a voluntary society of men, joining themselves together of their own accord in order to the **public worshipping** of God in such manner as they judge

²⁹Two hundred years later, Pyotr Kropotkin would take this line of argument to heart. He opposed capitalism and favored systems similar to More’s Utopia, in part because he thought that property is unjust, for example, theft. This and

other critiques of capitalism are beyond the scope of this book, which is focused on the emergence of ethical support for capitalism rather than critiques.

Ethics and Prosperity: Chapter 9

From Renaissance to Enlightenment

acceptable to Him, and effectual to the salvation of their souls. **I say it is a free and voluntary society. ...No man by nature is bound unto any particular church or sect, but everyone joins himself voluntarily** to that society in which he believes he has found that profession and worship which is truly acceptable to God. **The hope of salvation, as it was the only cause of his entrance into that communion, so it can be the only reason of his stay there.** (*A Letter Concerning Toleration*, p. 18).

The purposes advanced by joining or creating a civil society are quite different.

The commonwealth seems to me to be a society of men constituted only for the procuring, preserving, and advancing their own civil interests. **Civil interests I call life, liberty, health, and indolency of body; and the possession of outward things**, such as money, lands, houses, furniture, and the like. **It is the duty of the civil magistrate, by the impartial execution of equal laws**, to secure unto all the people in general and to every one of his subjects **in particular the just possession of these things belonging to this life.** (*A Letter Concerning Toleration*, p. 17).

Locke argues that in areas where there is an overlap, the civil authority should make the relevant policy decisions because its charge involves everyone one, not just the members of a particular church.

The care of all things relating both to one and the other is committed by the society to the civil magistrate. This is the original, this is the use, and these are the bounds of the legislative (which is the supreme) power in every commonwealth. **I mean that provision may be made for the security of each man's private possessions; for the peace, riches, and public commodities of the whole people; and, as much as possible, for the increase of their inward**

strength against foreign invasions. (*A Letter Concerning Toleration*, p. 33).

Commerce is, of course, a voluntary activity within civil society and civil society exists to promote the “peace, riches, and public commodities” of its members. Increasing prosperity (riches), thus, is one of the main purposes of a civil society, which implies that the promotion of commerce one of the main duties of secular governments. It is one of the main reasons that individuals join civil societies. Avoiding trespass of those rights was among an individual's core civic duties and one of the original responsibilities of governments.

And thus the common-wealth comes by a power to set down what punishment shall belong to the several transgressions which they think worthy of it, committed amongst the members of that society, (which is the power of making laws) as well as it has the power to punish any injury done unto any of its members, by any one that is not of it, (which is the power of war and peace;) and **all this for the preservation of the property of all the members of that society, as far as is possible.** (*Two Treatises of Government*, p. 30).

Although his philosophical and political arguments were controversial at the time that he wrote, his book sales imply that a subset of literate persons in English society were sympathetic with his conclusions. That his impact was greater in the eighteenth than in the seventeenth century suggests that mainstream ethical beliefs were shifting in a direction that made his arguments more persuasive.

VII. Conclusion: the Enlightenment and the Moral Support for Commercial Activities

The above writings are not a complete catalog of thoughts on commercially relevant ethics from 1500 to 1700 but provide a useful sample of writing by widely read authors who wrote on both economic and ethical issues. Those selected are for the most part among those that might be regarded as the vanguard of the liberal movement. That is to say, they often reached conclusions that would be later regarded as “liberal” concerning political and economic matters. This point of view was becoming more commonplace during the seventeenth century but would not become the dominant one in the West until the middle to late nineteenth century.

There are common elements among all the authors. They are all theists. They all argue that at least a subset of the grounding principles of their theories are divine. All reach conclusions about the nature of a good life and good society. Nonetheless, the conclusions reached and arguments used to reach them vary. Their conclusions imply that a significant shift in norms occurred between 1500 and 1700.

Erasmus and More suggest that commerce is a corrupting influence to be minimized. More suggests that in an ideal society the labors required to produce life’s necessities be minimized to free time for contemplation. Leisure should be maximized. Their Protestant successors disagree with them about the effects of commerce, the importance of work, and the role of both work and commerce in a good society. Grotius and La Court regard trade to be both a divine right and a blessing.

Baxter regards well-chosen secular careers to be divine callings. Baxter and Barkley agree that hard work is itself a calling and leisure is a vice. Locke distinguishes between religious and secular activities, and regards hard work and the accumulation of property to have divine support—property rights themselves are natural, e.g. divine rights—although he also regards leisure to be important.

Commercial activities, upward mobility, and the accumulation of wealth clearly had become relatively more acceptable and praiseworthy during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. This is clear as one moves from More and Erasmus to Baxter and Locke. In More, the aim of work is simply to assure the necessities of life with as much time as possible for contemplation and meditation. In La Court, Baxter, and Locke, work and frugality generated wealth, which was a good thing, as were the activities that produced them whenever they were undertaken in an ethical manner.

Among religious scholars such as Baxter and Barclay, there is no separation of the religious and worldly spheres of life—but no necessary conflict. Commerce can reinforce rather than undermine ethical conduct and religiosity, as in the Netherlands. Locke re-establishes a distinction between these spheres of life, and suggests that life in a community has its own ethical behavior and good laws. Any conflict between divine interests and material interests were to be resolved by the civil government, which implies that Locke regarded civil interests to be paramount—partly because he believed that religious societies played a smaller role in securing an afterlife for their members than a civil society plays in securing life, liberty and property for its members. Praiseworthy goals in an

Ethics and Prosperity: Chapter 9
From Renaissance to Enlightenment

English life at that time clearly included leisure and wealth: “life, liberty, health, and indolency of body [leisure]; and the possession of outward things, such as money, lands, houses, furniture.” It did not include—at least in Locke’s assessment a moral duty to work and prosper, which may partly account for the greater average income of the Netherlands relative to England at this time.

Part I of this book suggests that such trends in a community’s ethical dispositions—its ethos—tend to increase the extent of market activity. Greater informal support for commercial activities and the rights that facilitate them would tend to do so. Diligence and honesty tend to make markets work better, by reducing risks from exchange and the need for monitoring in production. Frugality would tend to increase the supply of capital and increase the stock of equipment available for production, shipping, and storage. Norms and civil laws that increase certainty in contracts and property while reducing predation encourage longer-term planning and investments. Frugality would also provide funds for loans and a buffer against economic and other shocks. Indeed, simply shifting time and attention from narrow religious activities to ones associated with commerce would tend to do so.

Such effects are evident in data on the economic standard of living in the period from 1500 through 1800. For example, such a pattern can be found in the GDP calculations of Broadberry, Campbell, Klein, Overton, and Leeuwen (2015) for England from 1270 to 1730. Their figures 4 and 5 show a relatively flat output of agricultural and industrial production until 1500 and a clear acceleration after 1500.

[Insert figures if copyright law allows.]

Many of the ideas of the authors surveyed in this chapter were “in the air” during the time period in which they wrote. Support for hard work was widely shared among Puritans. Their colonies in North America often made idleness a crime subject to legal penalties. Separation of church and state and religious tolerance was evident in the Netherlands as well as in several towns and colonies in North America, prior to Locke’s paper on religious toleration. Social contracts had been proposed in England and had already been signed in several New English colonies in North America before Hobbes (1651) and Locke (1690) had worked out their theories of social contract. The *Mayflower Compact* of 1620 is among the most famous, but there were many others. What these venerated scholars contributed were fine-grained, consistent narratives that demonstrated to their readers that what might look like unrelated ideas and maxims were actually grounded in a few general principles and lines of reasoning.

Their main ethical innovations are found in the links in their analytical chains, rather than in entirely new maxims and norms—although few of these were also developed. Their arguments deepened understandings of commonplace ideas of their times and place. Their theories allowed new implications to be developed that might otherwise have passed unnoticed—as with Locke’s distinction between civil and religion-based morality. Such contributions added to our knowledge of existing norms within their anticipated readership, and their efforts to discern general principles that can account for particular ideas about proper

Ethics and Prosperity: Chapter 9

From Renaissance to Enlightenment

conduct, good life, and good government may have affected the course of their societies' future development. All the works reviewed in this chapter were widely read both at the time of their publication and by many future generations of scholars and students.

Ethics and Prosperity: Chapter 9

From Renaissance to Enlightenment

References

- Barclay, R. (1678) 2002. *An Apology for the True Christian Divinity*. Glenside, PA: Quaker Heritage Press.
- Baxter, R. (1673) 2014. *A Christian Directory: A Sum of Practical Theology and Cases of Conscience*. (Volumes 1–4). Amazon Kindle Edition.
- Broadberry, S., Campbell, B. M. S., Klein, A., Overton, M., and van Leeuwen, B. 2015. *British Economic Growth 1270–1870*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.
- Congleton, R. D. 2011. *Perfecting Parliament*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.
- Erasmus D. (1532) 1993. *Praise of Folly and Letter to Maarten Van Dorp 1515*. Translated by B. Radice, New York, NY: Penguin Press.
- Grotius, H. (1609) 2004. *The Free Sea, with William Welwood's Critique and Grotius's Reply*. Translated by R. Hakluyt. David Armitage (Ed.). Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund.
- Kuhn, T. (1962). *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Kuhn, T. (1957). *The Copernican Revolution: Planetary Astronomy in the Development of Western Thought*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- La Court, P. (1662) 1746. *The True Interest and Political Maxims of the Republic of Holland*. Translated by J. Campbell. London, England: J. Nourse.

- Locke, J. (2013). *The John Locke Collection: 6 Classic Works*. Waxkeep Publishing. Kindle Edition.
- Locke, J. (1690/1763). *Two Treatises of Government*. MacMay. Kindle Edition.
- Maddison, A. (2007). *The World Economy*. Washington, DC: OECD Publishing.
- More, T. (1516) 1901. *Utopia*. D. Price (Ed.). London, England: Cassell and Co.
- Weber, M. (1905) 1958. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Translated by R. Parsons. New York, NY: Scribner.