Part 2 of 2: How to Think About Work and Money
with Darrell Bock, Greg Forster
Release Date: August 2014
Darrell Bock: I’m going to move through four other names here, and we’re going to try to move through them a little more quickly just because I want to get to some other things as well, but the next name is probably going to put the brakes on us for here for a while. The next name is Karl Marx.

Greg Forster: Well I don't know how long we have to spend on Karl Marx, but I think you can summarize the problem in Marx this way that Marx took the materialism that was beginning to emerge in Adam Smith, and isolated it from the moral concerns that still had a strong presence in Smith. Smith is concerned about justice. Smith is concerned about treating people fairly, Marx just isn’t. All Marx wants to know is how can we get the most beads of sweat going, and so Marx’s economics is really based on a reductio ad absurdum of this materialistic view of the economy, that the economy is nothing but money and stuff moving around.

Darrell Bock: So it’s dualism on steroids.

Greg Forster: Yes I think that’s exactly right. In fact it’s dualism, and then it just denies the spiritual realm. It’s not a coincidence that Marx is an atheist. Marxist economics or Marx’s economics are really just what you get if you think that human beings are sacks of meat that just happened to have accidently gained the ability to move around and think, but if you think there’s no spiritual dimension to the universe something like Marx’s economics is ultimately what you’re going to get.

Darrell Bock: Now was Marx concerned about the class dimensions of economics very much, or was he concerned about class simply because it made for inefficiency in the economy?
Greg Forster  
Marx was definitely concerned about class distinctions at a core level, because he believed that because he thought of everything in terms of money and stuff, he believed that it was necessary that different economic classes would have to be in competition with each other. So there’s a capital class and a labor class, and Marx believes they always must be in competition. That whatever benefits capital hurts labor, whatever benefits labor hurts capital. There is no such thing as productive cooperation, and if you believe there is nothing but money and stuff that makes sense, because every dollar you have is a dollar I don’t have. The idea that human beings can be creative and work together in ways that benefit one another just doesn’t make sense in a sort of an unspiritual universe.

Darrell Bock  
I’m going to move on, the next thing is Keynes. How does he fit into this story line?

Greg Forster  
Well Keynes came along in the early 20th century at a time when the discipline of economics was very eager to separate itself from its moral foundations. Economics was not alone in that regard. All the social sciences were essentially looking around for a way they can do their research and activity without any moral presuppositions. They wanted a morally mutual, merely descriptive science, and there had been a bunch of economists talking about how to do this, but nobody really had a powerful vision for how to do it. Keynes came along and essentially provided what was to most people in the economics field, a very powerful vision of how we can do economics in a way that is merely descriptive of the world, and does not have moral presuppositions, or so he claimed. Now you know as Christians I think we know there is no such thing as any activity that doesn’t have moral presuppositions.

The whole idea of moral neutrality is a mythology, but Keynes’s whole system is built on this, and the core commitment of Keynes’s economics was to re-orient economic analysis away from production to consumption. That the earlier approach to economics had said the purpose of the economy is to produce things that people want and need. The purpose of economic activity is to produce the goods and services that human beings want and need. So there’s a focus on production as the end point, or purpose of economic activity. For Keynes, very, very strongly the end point is consumption rather than production, and his argument was what’s the point of producing it if we’re not going to consume it, and therefore, consumption is what we want, and we want is to maximize consumption.
So you have the economy you want, not when you are producing the most goods and services, and certainly not when you’re producing the most good, or worthy, or desirable goods and services, but rather when you are satisfying people’s desires. When people are using, consuming the stuff that’s being made. So there’s a focus on gratifying your desires, pleasing your desires, because that’s what consumption ultimately is in this conception. When you use economic stuff you do it in order to satisfy some desire that you have.

Darrell Bock: So you’re generating markets as opposed to thinking about how you produce in a way that meets a need.

Greg Forster: Yes, stimulating demand is a sort of talismanic phrase that emerges in the work of Keynes and in those that followed him that we really want to prompt people to want stuff so that we can then satisfy those desires. There’s a focus on teaching people to want more so that you can give them more, because the assumption is people want more and they’ll spend more to get what they want, and that’s what keeps the economy going in this view.

Darrell Bock: Okay, well the next name is Freidman, Milton Friedman. What does he add to the equation?
Well Milton Friedman was a libertarian economist who emerged in the 20th century as the key challenger to Keynesian economics, and what I really want to focus on in the paper that we’re reviewing is that Friedman bought into much of Keynes’s reorientation of the economic discipline away from moral foundations, and particularly accepted and championed the view that the purpose of economic activity is to satisfy our desire. So there is a utilitarian ethic that is introduced by Keynes, and is totally accepted by Friedman such that the debate between left and right in our economic discourse takes place within a world that is defined largely by this utilitarian ethic. So Friedman criticized many of Keynes’s particular policies for stimulating demand and managing the economy, and Friedman as the libertarian wanted to minimize government activity, but Friedman did that in the name of this utilitarian ethic. He did it in the name of satisfying the most desires of the most people, and he particularly subscribed to the view that we should have no preference between satisfying a desire that is morally good, or morally bad, because of course what you think is morally bad the person who is doing it thinks it’s morally good presumably. So what happens in the Keynes versus Friedman debate is a dialog between left and right where one side wants more government activity and one side wants less government activity, but both of them are operating within this utilitarian ethic that says the purpose of economic activity is to gratify desires.

It’s to generate more economic activity basically. So Keynes represents I take it, the more governmental oversight, and Friedman is the more hands off. Is that correct?

Yes Keen’s view is sometimes described as interventionist, and that’s to distinguish it from a more Marxist view that really wants government ownership, and direct control of the economy. Keynes’s view is that you should have private property, and market where people buy and sell, but then government should step in on a regular basis to intervene in the operation of those systems in order to produce the outcomes that Keynesian economics favors. Friedman largely advanced his critique not by challenging the idea that those goals should be accomplished, the sort of goals of gratifying the most desires of the most people, but rather by showing that government intervention is ineffective. He argued that these interventions that the Keynesians support actually do not accomplish the goal that Keynes set for them. Then if you simply allow people to buy and sell on their own, they’ll find a way to maximize their gratification of their desires on their own.
The Table Podcast  Learning from the History of Economic Philosophy

**Darrell Bock**
If I’m reading in between the lines right, and if I’m hearing you, and I’m not an economist so I may not be hearing you right. What I’m hearing is that the two predominate ways in which we tend to think about our economy in the public square, neither of them have a deeply rooted moral component to them. Am I hearing you correctly?

**Greg Forster**
Absolutely, and I think the metaphysics and ethics of Keynesian and neoclassical, or Milton Friedman’s economics is called neoclassical sometime or the Chicago school. I would say Keynesians economics and neoclassical economics are both operating out of the same metaphysic and the same sort of utilitarian ethical philosophy.

**Darrell Bock**
That brings last to the Austrian school, which sounds rather exotic coming from Europe. So what does the Austrian school, this is the last part of our history lesson everybody.

**Greg Forster**
The Austrians are the third major school of economics, and they do have a somewhat more robust metaphysical and ethical component. They argue that all human activity is purposive. That people have purposes for their activities, and thus we need to understand economics not in terms of the movement of money and stuff primarily, but rather primarily in terms of people making choices in order to accomplish their goals, and essentially Austrian economics also has a critique of government intervention in the economy not primarily on an effectiveness view, but primarily because their view is that takes away people’s freedom to pursue their own ends, that essentially the individual becomes used, sort of controlled and used by a power that doesn’t share his purposes.

Now I think that Austrian economics is somewhat better than the other two schools, because it has an avowed moral framework for understanding human action, and it goes beyond utilitarianism, but I still think we have a long way to go, and that Christina voices have to come in and critique all three of these schools, and return us to a much more robust understanding of the moral, spiritual, and cultural basis of economic activity, and look I think that economic growth is a great thing. I think it’s something that the church should be in favor of. I think that we do need limits on political authority, but I think those have to be pieces of a larger whole that we are still, I think, struggling to articulate in a way that has an impact in the public culture.
Darrell Bock

Someone might ask why go through this long history? Well I think part of the rational is to help us see that a lot of our public dialog about how we build our economic policy, and the way we think about economics. The way not only we think individually about our money, but collectively as a society about our money may actually have very little to do with thinking through the values that go into that process, that it’s largely become, no matter which side you fall, a very utilitarian kind of debate and discussion, which means that the dualism has fed a debate which edits in still doesn’t get us to the large moral questions that we should be asking about the function of work and money. Have I summarized your overall thesis well?

Greg Forster

Yes, I’d say that’s definitely what I’m saying. I think that it is a great service that Christians can perform in the coming generation to our culture to help our culture grapple with this enormous issue, and understand that the various schemes and gimmicks that we keep trying to fix our economic problems are failing, not because we have the wrong people in charge in Washington, but because we have the wrong people on the throne in our hearts, and we’ve got to get the right people on the throne in the throne room of our hearts, and that’s the fundamental problem we’re dealing with. What we want is money and stuff, rather than productive work that serves human needs and makes the world a better place. If we can get our culture to focus on serving human needs, and making the world a better place in our economic work, and to respect business as a place where that happens, and sort of treat business as a place where that happens, then I think we’re going to see a lot of our economic problems turning around regardless of what else we do.

Darrell Bock

So part of the point that you’re making now, and we’re shifting here, and I’m trying to help us get there, and that is that what we’re really talking about is thinking through why do people work. What should business be about, and how do people and business working together make for a more effective society that promotes what often times you hear the phrase human flourishing? Am I, again, going down the right track here?

Greg Forster

Absolutely, what is the contribution that work makes to human flourishing? What is the contribution that business as an intermediate institution between the individual in society? What is the contribution business makes to human flourishing, and what is the contribution economic systems themselves make to human flourishing? That’s the question I think we’re asking.
Darrell Bock

Now I will tell you that when I read this chapter, and was reading through it there was a discussion along with this, and obviously now we’re injecting the idea of religion and religious values, and the values of human worth, and service, and those kinds of ideas as the moral components that contribute to this development of this theology, but the curve ball that I saw in the chapter was the injection of the concept of religious freedom, and I have to tell you that when I approached the chapter coming into it, that was a topic I hadn’t anticipated being in the chapter. I hadn’t thought about how does religion and religious freedom play into all this, and what is it about an inner prized society, and a freedom to create. Free from persecution on the one side, or the state sponsorship of the church on the other, how does that play into this conversation as we’re reflecting on a moral dimension of our work?

Greg Forster

Well I think this goes back a little bit to the history that one of the most important developments in human history is the emergence of religious freedom in the modern world, and I think religious freedom is a phenomenal blessing for all kinds of reason, and we can go on. I can give you weeks and weeks of discussion why I love religious freedom, but I think a challenge that it creates, and we can never keep a blessing unless we can understand the challenge it creates, because all blessings create challenges for us, especially in a fallen world. The challenge that religious freedom creates is public institutions cannot give a complete metaphysical and spiritual account of why they exist, because if you gave a complete metaphysical and spiritual account of why this institution exists, than that institution would not be able to protect religious freedom for those who disagree with some aspect of its metaphysics, or its spirituality, or its theology. So government, the U.S. government can put in God we trust in the coins, and I’m all for that. I’m not against that, and I don’t think that violates religious freedom, but what do we mean by God? What do we mean by in God we trust?
Well if you gave a complete answer to that question you’d have no space left for religious freedom. So you need some ambiguity in order to maintain religious freedom you have to have some ambiguity in the public square, and that creates a realm of contested meaning where people will argue with each other over what these things mean, and have different viewpoints about it. The danger that creates is that public institutions and systems can drift from their moral purpose. People can get the idea that well, everything moral and spiritual is up for grabs, because it’s all contested. Maybe I think that serving human needs is more important than accumulating money and stuff, but you might have a sort of Ayn Rayndian philosophy that says no. Everyone has a moral responsibility to be selfish. So who’s to say that one is better than the other, and who’s to say that this view should prevail in public culture?

The fact is we need some shared moral commitments. We need some shared commitments that public institutions do in fact represent and affirm. Even if we cannot give a complete account of them, and the problem we’re encountering in the economic realm, and I would argue in many other realms of culture as well is that we’ve lost the ability to articulate the moral purpose of work, of economic activity, of businesses, and of the system itself in a way that represents a consensus value of society. That we need to have a moral consensus in society that transcends our divisions, at least transcends our major divisions. You’re never going to get everybody on board, but you got to be able to have some coherence as a culture, and our nation of religious freedom, and you referred to the phrase “enterprise society.”

I like to use this phrase “enterprise society” to describe America and the kind of culture that it represents where people are free to invent and create, and build, and to offer their ideas in the public square, and to offer their work, and their businesses in the public square in ways that make sense to them. That enterprise society is an incredibly precious thing, because it’s just part and partial of religious freedom, but in order to keep society together in that context we have to have some kind of coherence. We have to have some kind of integrity. I think the way you do that is not by charging into the political system, and imposing it through some political movement. I think the way you rebuild or create that integrity is by going into all areas of public life, like business, like all the things you do in your neighborhood, and offer our view of things to our culture in a way that’s contextualized, and win some, and that speaks again to the spiritual longings of people around us.
Darrell Bock  

So part of the point that I think you’re making here is that we could end up in a world where we have a battle between, if I can say it this way, producers and consumers. We could think about it that way with no moral base between it. They just duke it out for the power and control, which is if I’m hearing again between the lines, is sort of what I’m hearing you say our economic theories tend to push us towards, or we can begin to ask the questions what is it that business should be doing for people and for society, and when we ask that additional question on top of it we reframe the economic discussion, and it’s no longer produces versus consumers. It’s a different question, and it’s a different set of answers.

Greg Forster  

I think that’s a good summary. I guess the way I would put it is this. That rather than divide into a sort of productive upper class that has jobs, and gets married, and goes to church, and participates in civil society, and then a lower class that is disconnected from all those institutions, and if you’re following the data, I don't know if you saw the Pew research data that just came out two weeks ago, that division is unfortunately beginning to form.

Darrell Bock  

It’s growing.

Greg Forster  

Yeah, I think that’s just deadly territory, and again ultimately the classes will understand one another as competing unless we have something that brings people together, and says we can all win together. We can all win together, and I think the key to all winning together is to respect the dignity of all people, and as a result of respecting the dignity of all people say every human being can be a net producer with those very rare exceptions of people who cannot work, and we’re all for being generous and supporting those people, but everyone who has basic human functioning is able to be a net producer, and we can be a society of producers where everyone is a producer, and obviously we’re also all consuming, but if we produce more than we consume than everyone is a net producer, and then we’re all on the same team. It doesn’t matter if your net production is relatively small, and my net production is relatively larger, vice versa. The dignity of being a human being is expressed by the fact that all of us are contributing to the common good.
There is a quality of life taking place that allows people all across the spectrum to participate in it. There’s one other element that we haven’t put on the table that’s important to this conversation, and that is particularly if you see it as a competition between competing classes or something like that, sometimes the view exists that there’s only so much production available. So not only if I have the dollar and you don’t, but there’s only so many dollars around so the more dollar I have is not only less that you have, but the less you have even potential access to, and one of the things about economics that’s important that’s particularly been true of modern economies is that the amount of stuff that gets produced is not static. It grows, and it can expand, which means that there is more available for more people. That adds to this equation a whole other dimension of complexity, doesn’t it?

Yes, and I think it’s essential to affirm the goodness of economic growth if we are going to build this cultural reconciliation that says we can all win together, because if we believe that economic growth is bad, or that economic growth either can’t or shouldn’t happen, then we cannot create an environment where we all win together. The basic fact about human beings economically is that they’re creative. That we’re made in an image of a creating god, and we ourselves are creative. Not obviously in the same way as god, but in a way that is like God’s creativity, and if human beings are creative than the economy can and should grow, because we don’t just move stuff around.

We’re adding value. We’re producing value. When we produce value for other people when we create value through our work the economy can grow, and unfortunately in the Christian world there are ideologies circulating that basically say that economic growth only comes from this consumerist whipping up of desires. So economic growth is bad, and I think we need to identify the wrong turn that we took in the 20th century with people like Keynes and Friedman, and say in spite of what they claimed, economic growth does not come from whipping up people’s desires, and teaching them a consumerist view of human live so that we can affirm economic growth that comes from ethical wealth creation, while not signing onto a selfish view of human life.
Darrell Bock  
So we’re about out of time for this go around, but of course we’re in the process of pursuing a document that is developing this argument kind of a step at a time. So I kind of feel like I’m in a cliff hanger moment right now if this was a television show. So let me try and pull this together, what we’ve done today, and try to say it this way. As we look at the history of economics, and we think about the history of economics, economics in some degree has kind of lost way. That it started off as having a moral base, and asking moral, philosophical questions. It developed into its own discipline. It became very utilitarian in the way that it’s going about things. There now has been the beginning of an injection back to the moral question to pull us back to ask why we do what we do, not just that we do it, and how well do we do it, and how much can we produce.

In the midst of that, certain values seem to be in play. One is, and we haven’t talked too much about this, but I think it’s assumed in some of what we said, the avoiding of selfishness. That we don’t engage in the economy to simply satisfy our own desires, or simply for selfish reasons. That there is a desire to pursue a citizenship that is virtuous, that seeks to contribute to society, and to produce an environment that leads to human flourishing, and represents good stewardship of the creation that God created us to manage and be stewards over, and hopefully this leads to better models of community, and better models of conversation about how we do our work and our theology. So that’s what you’re kind of encouraging us to think about as Christians. Is that fair?

Greg Forster  
Amen to all that.

Darrell Bock  
Well what we’re doing, we’re in suspended animation now. This is part three of a six part series, and we’ve kind of taken you right to the edge with this one in terms of walking through what a theology of economics looks like, and how we think about our money in a collective scale, and we probably challenged the listeners at two levels that I just want to reinforce as we close. The first is that often times when we think about economics is we think about our own personal economics. We think about how money relates to me as an individual, and this conversation that we’re having is a collective discussion. It’s about corporate economics. It’s about how all of us when we handle our money impacts one another by how we do it, and how we view it. So I think that’s first.
The second point that I want to make is that cuts against the grain, because we have generally been taught, particularly in America to think about ourselves as individual activists, if I can say it that way. People who asses, and do what we do because of what it means for me or for my family, or maybe even my community, but we don’t think more globally about how we kind of put the whole package together. So we’ve challenged people today I think to think at a more global level about why they do what they do, and how their piece fits into the whole of it, right? Is that fair?

*Greg Forster*  
Absolutely, you’ve got me excited to do the next step of the process of the discussion.

*Darrell Bock*  
I have a feeling that this is a little bit of a cliff hanger at this point where we’ve left it, but this is where we’ve got to leave it for today. We’ll be back with you shortly. I guess the thing to say is stay tuned. There’s more to come. Same time same station. I just don’t know exactly what time, but down the road we’ll be coming with parts four, five, and six that will kind of hopefully wrap around what we’ve discussed today, and give some help and direction in thinking about. I want to thank you Greg for being with us on The Table Podcast today.

*Greg Forster*  
Thank you for having me.

*Darrell Bock*  
I want to thank you for taking the time to listen to the table podcast where we discuss issues of God and culture.