



The importance of virtue in building the Common Good (or to hell and back with Dante and an economist with common sense)

Wayne Parsons

The *Divine Comedy* is truly a book for life. You never really stop reading it. Indeed, over the years, every time I pick it up to accompany my journey through Lent and Easter, I read it differently.

Dante took the poet Virgil as his guide. I have taken various guides over the years and this time I thought I might take an *economist* to help me explore the *Inferno*, *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*! So this year on my journey to Easter I will be accompanied by Philip H. Wicksteed (1844-1927).

George Bernard Shaw once quipped of him that 'economics was his hobby, and Dante was his job'. Wicksteed¹ was a Unitarian minister, and was an acknowledged authority on Dante long before he had discovered economics and became one of the foremost exponents of William Stanley Jevons's (1835-1882) approach to economics. And thus it was that when he studied economics he did so through the lens of his religious faith and his literary knowledge, and especially through Dante.

If Aquinas baptized Aristotle, then Dante could be said to have poetised Scholastic philosophy, theology and its political economy. Given this, there could be no better guide for anyone interested in the idea of the common good and Dante than Philip Wicksteed. As his biographer observed, he was a scholar and preacher whose literary, philosophical and theological interests were an integral part of his religious faith *and* his economics.

His work was all 'nourished by the same root' and subject to an 'inner synthesis'². And what Wicksteed said of Dante holds true for himself, for his work is 'the true reflection of his mind' for it is a 'compact and rounded whole' in which 'all the parts are mutually interdependent'³. Wicksteed found in Jevons's mathematics a way of understanding human economic behaviour that was wholly compatible with both his religious faith and his reading of Aristotle, Aquinas and Dante.

'Marginalist' economics showed (using differential calculus) that human beings make choices by coming to a judgement about how they should distribute their resources between available alternatives. He believed that it provided a method by which we could understand the real world in which people arrive at a scale of preferences and distribute their choices.

Wicksteed did not think that Jevons and other 'marginalists' of the day had discovered any new laws about human behavior, *per se*. On the contrary, he concluded that their approach only served to confirm what had long been understood by Aristotle and Aquinas and the 'Schoolmen'. So, what he saw in mathematics he also recognised in Dante's poetry! Marginalism only confirmed for him a more general proposition that:

the inner core of our life problems and the gratification of all our ultimate desires (which are indeed inextricably interlaced with our command of exchangeable things, but are the ends to which the others are but means) obey the same all-permeating law.

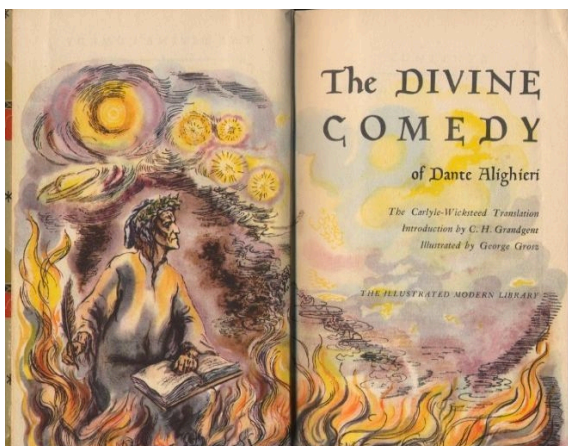


Wicksteed (1844 – 1927)

And what is that 'all-permeating law'? Well, we find that the *Ethics* of Aristotle:

*Virtue, wisdom, sagacity, prudence, success, imply different schemes of values, but they all submit to the law formulated by Aristotle with reference to virtue, and analysed by modern writers with reference to business, for they all consist in combining factors in the right proportion as fixed by that distribution of resources which establishes the equilibrium of their differential significances in securing the object contemplated, whether that object be tranquility of mind, the indulgence of an overmastering passion or affection, the command of things and services in the circle of exchange, or a combination of all these, or of any other conceivable factors of life.*⁴

It is this 'all permeating law' that was baptized by Aquinas that is given a powerful poetic voice by Dante. It was, he passionately believed, a voice that had a vital and continuing relevance to the modern world because Dante had 'touched the very rock' upon which this all permeating moral law rested and had 'pierced [its] very heart...revealing their deepest foundations'.⁵



For Wicksteed, Dante's *Divine Comedy* expressed universal truths that transcended time and space. In Dante the Unitarian minister found the *poet of common sense*. Later on, G.K. Chesterton (who in his autobiography acknowledged that he owed more to Wicksteed than to most other people!) was also to regard St Thomas as the '*philosopher of common sense*'.



The 'Wheel of the Five Senses' - an 'icon of common sense' (see p 11)

It is Chesterton (as always) who sums up what Thomas (and Wicksteed) understood by the notion of common sense when he described it as being: 'a central sense that is nourished by the five senses'.⁶ Wicksteed's *magnum opus* is significantly entitled *The Common Sense of Political Economy*. The idea of 'common sense' he uses, of course, is of the kind discussed by Chesterton in his book on Aquinas and in many other places. In his translation of *The Physics* of Aristotle, Wicksteed devotes several pages to the concept, which he calls the 'synthetic sense'. It is that sense which integrates or synthesises the data that is received from the other senses. Common sense is that capacity to 'receive', 'assimilate' and 'combine' into a general understanding of reality.⁷

When he talks about the need for common sense in economics - as in life as a whole - he is arguing for an economics which has a *realistic* and wholistic understanding of human beings, not a simplistic and one dimensional and unrealistic concept of 'homo economicus' or is possessed by a crude Gradgrindian utilitarianism. He would have despaired at what passes for the kind of mainstream economics that now dominates academia. Advancing the common good requires common sense, and the ability to synthesise knowledge, and not a narrow abstract view of humanity. As an economist he believed that, ultimately, ethical and many other considerations shape the scale and distribution of preferences and choices as to means and ends. And thus (as Dante had shown in his poetry) the:

.. sanity of men's desires matters more than the abundance of their means of accomplishing them; that the chief dangers of poverty and wealth alike are to be found in degeneracy of desire..

And it follows, of course, that the goal of policy making and legislation:

must be to thwart corrupt and degrading ends, to stimulate worthy desires, to infect the mind with a wholesome scheme of values, and to direct means into the channels where they are likeliest to conduce to worthy ends. (in Robbins edition, 1933: 783)

As we make our descent through hell, and climb the mount of purgatory, and ascend to paradise, Wicksteed tells us to be mindful of 'the sanity' of human desire in what we encounter, and how the choices made between vice and virtue, or pride and humility, and between love of self and love of neighbour, and between the private and the common good, are to be found in the 'degeneracy of desire'. At the outset Wicksteed would advise us to remember to use our common sense if we are to understand the relationship between divine justice and the common good!

With Philip in Hell

As we descend through the inferno, therefore, Wicksteed would remind us that we can make (common) sense of what we experience in ethical, poetical and theological terms, and that we might better understand all three approaches by doing a little differential calculus. So it might be idea to bring a notebook, ruler and a pencil and pencil sharpener to develop our 'synthetic sense'.

From an Aristotelean point of view we see people who have chosen unwisely and lived their lives by choosing vice over virtue and not the 'middle way'. They knew that what they were doing was indeed wrong, and that what they were doing was harming others. They knew it was undermining rather than helping to build the common good, but they suffered from *akrasia* (κρασία). They knew the good, but they lacked the self-command or the will power to make virtuous choices.

From Aquinas's standpoint, of course, human beings are given free will by God, so they are free to sin. In the end we will be judged by how we have chosen to exercise our God-given free will. Hell is where you chose to be because you have, of your God-given free will, chosen to be in hell.

Dante's Hell is structured by the 'deadly sins' in all their forms and varieties. God is love, and as we discover it is this love which moves all creation. So Dante shows us where (what Aquinas termed) a disordered love of the self takes us. The residents of hell just loved themselves, and that love of self has inevitable *social* consequences. All disordered love

hurts other people, and the deeper we go into the very centre of Hell, where proud Satan is frozen solid in an icy block, the more do we find the disordered forms of self-love which *intentionally* seeks to destroy the common good. In the deepest parts of hell we find usurers, and all manner of fraudsters, political crooks, thieves, fraudulent advisors, sowers of scandal and division, counterfeiters, perjurers and worst of all, traitors.

That explained, Wicksteed would take out his notebook and start to draw a few diagrams to explain the economics which pretty much says the same thing, but using the mathematics of Jevons. What we have observed are people with a very distinctive 'scale of preferences'. They all had a demand curve along which they chose (unwisely) increasing increments of vice over virtue, and disordered over ordered love. They chose to maximize their own good over the common good.

Full of pride and hubris, they were unable to exercise their reason to order their preferences and govern their passions and desires. We find no sign of humility in hell. Hence, where they are in their final distribution is exactly where they wanted to be. Hell is their point of equilibrium in the economics of eternity.

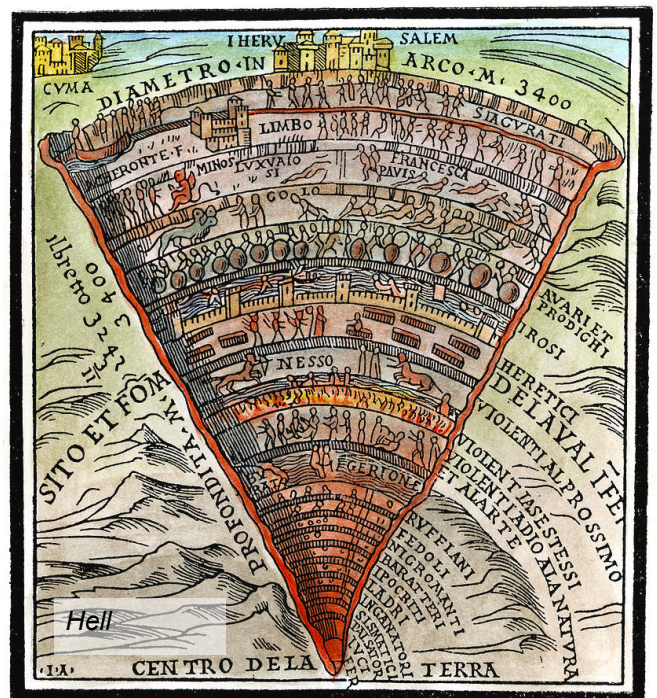
Furthermore, we also see that, rather than their utility derived from their choices diminishing over time with every additional unit, it actually increased. Their demand curve kept shifting to the right. They could never meet the point at which their demand could be satisfied, and even price was no deterrent.

And, he points out, all those choices which are the product of a 'degeneracy of desire' give rise to negative externalities for their neighbours. The social costs of their personal scale of preferences had terrible consequences for their fellow citizens.

And so, whether we look at hell as about vices and virtue, or sin and disordered love, or in terms of the distribution of preferences, the residents are enslaved in hell because that is what they chose. God does not 'send' you to hell, you have chosen to go there. God gave you freedom, but you chose slavery.

Human beings are given freedom to choose how they plot the curve of their own utility. That is, Wicksteed might say, divine justice is expressed as a function of the final distribution of your utility preferences. Such, of course, was the theme of many of the Reverend Wicksteed's sermons. He would show them:

..Dante struggling to gain the Sunlit Hill of good government and well regulated life on earth, thwarted by lust, pride, and greed, and urged by his guide and master, while never relinquishing his hopes of reform, also to seek another way to peace.. I led them, with Dante, to seek the permanent conditions of fruitful reform in a knowledge of the roots of moral good and evil..⁸



Climbing the mount of purgatory

It is unlikely that Wicksteed would bother to try and give a few university extension lectures on marginalist economics in hell. But on our arrival in purgatory, I have a feeling that he would not be averse to the odd sermon and a couple of lectures on mathematics and the diagrammatic method. Purgatory is a place of penitence, and I would imagine that a couple of lectures on Jevons would be a real penance for the residents.

Wicksteed would, I am sure, once again point out what is happening in Aristotelian terms. In purgatory we encounter people whose lack of virtue has meant that they have not 'flourished'. They have failed to achieve *eudemonia*⁹ and become the person they had the potential to become. Wicksteed would point out that from Aristotle's perspective, purgatory was full of people who really failed to govern themselves. They were slaves to their passions and urges, and thus not truly free.

Purgatory is a school for those who are deficient in virtue, but who are rational enough to appreciate that they know the good, and that they have, with the Grace of God, the strength of will to actually flourish and realize their potential. For Aquinas purgatory is where human beings learn penitence, humility and peace.

Aristotle, of course, did not consider humility a virtue, but for Aquinas humility is the cardinal virtue to be learnt in purgatory. As pride is the source of all sin, being the great sin of Satan, and of Adam and Eve, residents of purgatory have to learn how to be humble if they are to be truly penitent and know the peace of God.

Purgatory is a place where humanity learns virtue, and overcomes the pride which is the dark heart of all the deadly sins. So, it is the place in which people learn about the relationship between their sinfulness and the consequences sin has on the community as a whole. They learn about private vice and public squalor and disorder.

In purgatory these holy souls finally grasp that the scale and distribution of their preferences was all wrong. In life they did not quite manage to achieve an optimal distribution of preferences. They loved wealth and power too much. They gave way to lusts and had little love for their neighbour. They never managed to free themselves from bad choices. In purgatory we see human beings who were unable to govern themselves. They needed law, the state and the church to regulate their vices and promote the virtues necessary to advance the common good.

As we climb up through the terraces wherein pride, envy, wrath, and sloth are purged, we arrive at the fifth terrace which is very much Wicksteed's territory: avarice. In hell we would have encountered greed in its various forms, and the sin of usury, but there would be little to say to the avaricious hoarders and prodigal wasters. But in purgatory, those on the 5th



terrace might appreciate a good lecture from Wicksteed on the economics of avarice and prodigality.

Those who eventually make it to the earthly paradise from which Adam and Eve were expelled are, like Dante, crowned and mitred to show that, free from sin, they have no need of princes and popes. Those who enter into paradise have become truly self-governing. Love has set them free.

Wicksteed might also draw our attention to the way in which the souls in purgatory are learning all about the relationship between securing communal ends and their own salvation and (in Aristotle's terms) flourishing. As we climb ever upwards, Wicksteed would be sure to remind us that purgatory is a place wherein we can learn about the problematics of building the kingdom of God on earth. In purgatory we see people who are struggling to get their lives into a more balanced equilibrium by the practice of virtue and learning to love their neighbour as themselves. In other words, purgatory is where souls learn how appreciating the *fact* that their own wellbeing is actually a function of and is dependent upon variables such as community, cooperation, mutual aid, and reciprocity.

He might offer a few extension lectures based on *The Commonsense of Political Economy*¹⁰ to make it clear that mathematics and the 'diagrammatic method' could have helped them to better understand the social, economic and political ramifications of their scale and distribution of preferences. He would aim to show them that this kind of knowledge would have assisted them to make more rational and ethical choices based on an understanding of 'the interdependence of economic, social, and moral' factors which shaped their scale of preferences.

And in so doing, it could have led them to a fuller understanding of the relationship between our individual preferences and the good of the community as a whole. Such knowledge, he would tell them, can direct our thoughts to consider the 'many possibilities of.. [extending] .. our communal as distinct from our private opportunities' and help us to see happiness as less about 'exclusive possession and command'¹¹ than about the good of the community as a whole.

Paradise as a paradigm

Wicksteed's aim is to show us that the main feature of *common sense political economy*, is that it is mindful of the 'all permeating laws' which are expounded by Aristotle and Aquinas and illustrated in Dante's *Divine Comedy*. As we entered into Hell we were informed that our journey will be one in which we see the justice of God. And hell, purgatory and paradise illuminate what justice means in relation to these all permeating universal laws.

Wicksteed, I'm sure, would suggest that we might see virtue and vice as choices along a curve, and that in making our choices along this curve we choose where we want to be. Justice *per se* will be a function of our scale of preferences and how we have distributed those preferences along our curve. Purgatory gives us the opportunity to reorder those preferences.

The common good, by definition, can only be realised in a form of social, economic and political order whose scale of preferences seeks to maximise the practice of virtue and minimise the practice of vice. Illustrating this in his notebook we can imagine him plotting his curve on an x/y axis, and then pointing to the heavenly spheres above us.

Look, he says to us:

Here too the deserts of the soul are the gauge of its condition, For.. in the very blessedness of Heaven there are grades, and the soul which has once been stained with sin or tainted with selfish and worldly passion, can never be as though it had always been pure. Yet the torturing sense of unworthiness is gone..the souls have cast off the burden of sin, and are at perfect peace with God and with themselves. Sin, repentance, holiness, confronted with the Eternal Justice - what they are and what they deserve - such is the subject of Dante Alighieri's Comedy.¹²

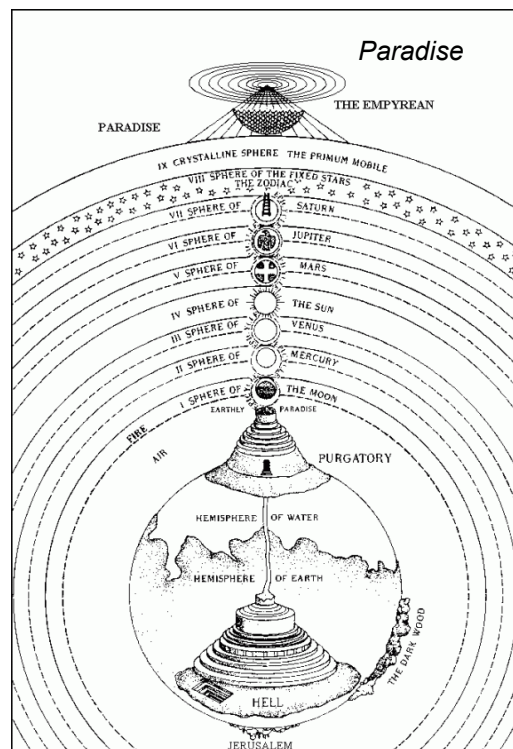
Yes, even here in the 9 heavenly spheres we find that God's justice follows the same calculus. Where we are located in heaven will be a function of our scale of preferences and their distribution. Those who were deficient in fortitude may be found in the sphere of the Moon; those who are deficient in justice are in the sphere of Mercury; those who were a bit short in temperance are to be found in Venus.

But we also encounter examples of people who chose a more optimal distribution. In the sphere of the Sun we find those who exemplify wisdom: people like Aquinas, Dominic and Bonaventure whose lives were lived with prudence, justice, temperance and fortitude. In the sphere of Mars we see examples of great fortitude. In the sphere of Jupiter we meet rulers who exemplify justice. In Saturn's sphere, paragons of temperance. And then, in the eighth sphere we see amid the 'fixed stars' all those saints whose lives show us a scale of preferences in which the theological virtues of faith, hope and charity were ranked highest!

Thereafter we are with the angels, and finally the empyrean. And there we see Dante's vision of the Trinity and the great rose of God's love which is the final and common home of all the saints who fly in and out with the angels distributing love and peace. Wicksteed, in preacher mode, now reminds us that Christians pray that God's Kingdom may come, and that God's will may be done on earth as it is in heaven.

So, as we look around we might reflect on what is the take home message from paradise? Well, first that talking about the common good involves talking about virtue and vice. Wicksteed believed that economics could inform that conversation, but only if it uses a common sense approach. An economics that chooses to be detached from ethics and theology and the insights of the arts and other social sciences is an obstacle in the way of building the common good and establishing the Kingdom of God on earth.

Wicksteed would also tell us, before we leave his company, to keep our eyes on heaven and learn what the common good looks like in its ideal, perfected, state. Building the common good that we see perfected in paradise is dependent on human beings exercising a form of reason that has been purified by love. In the spheres of heaven all the saints manifest the virtue of humility. In loving God and their neighbour they had come to a full knowledge of themselves.





Dante Alighieri (c.1265 – 1321)

The common good

Perhaps this is also a significant take home message. In Dante's poem, love and humility perfects reason just as pride and the disordered love of the self ultimately infects and corrupts reason. Humility in the *Divine Comedy* is a spiritual or theological virtue, but it is also an intellectual, social and civic virtue. Only when human beings are able to exercise humility can we advance the common good and build the kingdom of God.

In hell humans share the loneliness and cold dark isolation of Satan, whereas in heaven we see people living in a *community*. The divine love itself is a community - a trinity! In paradise, therefore, we have a paradigm or vision of the ideal society. In paradise we see a community in which all lives are ordered by justice and the common good.

And yet, and this a is defining quality of the common good, the harmony we experience in paradise is not (as Wickstead observes) characterized by uniformity. A society ordered by justice and the common good is about diversity! As we are creatures endowed with free will, paradise is a place in which the individual remains a *distinct person*. God delights in diversity. Remember, says Wickstead:

one of the marvels of this marvelous poem is the extreme variety of character and even of incident which we find in Heaven as well as in Hell and Purgatory. In each of the three poems there is one key-note to which we are ever brought back, but in each there is infinite variety and delicacy of individual delineation too. The saints are no more uniform and characterless in their blessedness than are the unrepentant sinners in their tortures or the repentant in their contented pain.¹³

Paradise shows us that the common good is about harmony in and through diversity. The saints retain their free will, but they choose to find that freedom by doing *God's* will. If heaven is a community of communities in which unity is to be found *in diversity* then Dante's translation of Aristotle and Aquinas into poetry gives us a powerful vision of the common good as involving a just order which gives rise to a unity in diversity.

For Wicksteed economics - as the application of *common sense* - could express in mathematical terms what Dante had expressed in poetical terms. Human beings were rational, loving creatures who could, through the exercise of free will, flourish and live a good and happy life.

In the *Divine Comedy* we are given a vision of how human beings could fail to realise their freedom from their passions and desires and become imprisoned by their self-love. But we are also shown how human beings have it in their will power to chose to love their neighbour as themselves, and that the love of God and neighbour serves ultimately to purify and refine human reason.

Thus at the close of *The Common Sense of Political Economy*, Wicksteed hopes that, by using our (God given) common sense we may comprehend the 'interdependence of economic, social and moral questions'¹⁴ and use his book (and Dante, of course) to 'prepare for the Kingdom', by:

*.. learning to find our chief delights in the things which all may share and which are the solace, not of our class, but of our humanity. By learning to rejoice in the common weal, and to respect and enjoy the communal property.*¹⁵

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Professor Wayne Parsons works as an independent scholar and formerly held the chair in public policy at Queen Mary, University of London. He has also held visiting professorial appointments including at Vienna University and most recently Cardiff University.

For notes and references please see over page

Notes and references

Header image: Domenico di Michelino [Public domain] from *La commedia illumina Firenze* on the wall of Florence Cathedral, [Santa Maria del Fiore](#)

¹ You can read all about Wicksteed online [here](#)

² Herford, 1931

³ Wicksteed, 1879: 109

⁴ Wicksteed, in Robbins, edition, 1933: 776

⁵ Wicksteed, 1879:109

⁶ Chesterton, 1933: 32

⁷Wicksteed, *The Physics*, xxxiii

⁸ cited in Herford, 1931: 224

⁹ eudemonia (Greek: εὐδαιμονία [eudaimonía:]), Happiness, well-being. A person's state of excellence characterised by objective flourishing across a lifetime, and brought about through the exercise of moral virtue, practical wisdom, and rationality.

¹⁰ <https://www.econlib.org/library/Wicksteed/wkCS.html>

¹¹ Wicksteed, 1933 : 658

¹² Wicksteed, 1879: 116

¹³ Wicksteed, 1879: 97

¹⁴ 628

¹⁵ Wicksteed, 1933: 701-2

Reading

There are plenty of editions of Dante's *Divine Comedy* to choose from. You pay your money. Wicksteed's *Six Sermons on Dante* (1879) are available [online here](#). Also, you can find his *The Common Sense of Political Economy* [online here](#).

The edition I use is Robbin's (1933) edition. C.H Herford's biography, Philip Henry Wickstead, J.M. Dent and Sons, 1931 is rather more difficult to locate.

If you are interested in 'common sense' I can think of no better commentary than G.K Chesterton's (1933) book on Aquinas. I use the Doubleday edition (1956), but is also [online here](#). Wicksteed's translation of Aristotle is still used and is in print and is also [online here](#).

The Wheel of the Five Senses

The Wheel of the Five Senses is a rare 14th century wall painting on the east wall of Longthorpe Tower, Peterborough, Cambridgeshire.

It was painted, it is believed, only few decades after the death of Dante.

The cock represents sight; the boar hearing; the monkey, taste; the vulture, smell; and, the spider, touch.

But of course, as an allegory it is open to different readings. The king in the middle would, in accordance to the theory of the five senses, represent the Aristotelian idea of the common sense - or Wicksteed's 'synthetic sense' - which enables the rational person to understand reality.