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Why Should We Want to Drive the Economy?

And What is “Success” Anyway?

A Philosopher’s Perspective.

Every American, every person wants to be “a success”. When we speak of “success” nowadays, we usually have in mind *financial* success, a degree of personal wealth. Yet we would all agree that we want more from life than having achieved a relatively high income tax bracket. The ancient Greek philosophers urged that all of us, as we go through our lives making countless choices, are ultimately aiming to thrive, to live well, to have a truly good life. So, it is important to think carefully about what it is for a human being to thrive, to flourish. We want, in this rich sense, to do well in life, and we also want to avoid poverty, to enjoy at least a decent level of financial prosperity. But how do the two relate?

At this conference, we’re examining the ways our great SUNY system can contribute to the economic success of New York State, leading to better quality of life for New Yorkers. I will argue that economic success is indeed an important goal, and that the great Greek philosopher Aristotle can help us to see how it fits into a whole life well lived.

In philosophers' lingo, a "good" is something we should seek. But as Aristotle (384-322 BCE) and his teacher Plato noted, we seek some goods for their own sake, and we seek others for what they lead to. Further, we seek some goods for both for their own sake, and for what comes from them.

Suppose space aliens visited our planet, and observed that a lot of what we do, we do to obtain some pleasure. For example, we spend countless hours preparing gourmet foods. They might ask, "Why did you just spend two hours putting together and baking that pie?"

We'd say: "Because it is delicious!"

The aliens would then ask, "Why do you seek what is delicious?"

We would say that delicious things afford us unique, intense pleasures.

"But *why*," the aliens would persist, "do you seek pleasures?"

We would say: because they are *pleasures*! Pleasures are sought for their own sake. They are, in later terminology, intrinsic goods.

Contrast this with a woman who gets a nose job. The aliens, seeking to understand human behavior, would ask why she goes under the knife. We would reply that she gets the operation not for its own sake, but only for the sake of a good (a more proportionate nose) which comes from the operation. The operation is a merely instrumental good – a good sought only for the sake of what it leads to.

Finally, a good may be both intrinsic and instrumental. Consider the good of having a healthy body. This, arguably, we seek for its own sake (it is

intrinsically good to be wholly functional) as well as for the sake of what it leads to (it makes possible an active lifestyle, complete with work, friendship, etc.)

Where does having money fit in? Suppose you couldn't spend any of our money. Would you want it? It seems not. Having money is a merely instrumental good. We seek it so that we can spend it on goods such as family life, work, recreation, and health.

Aristotle thought of human flourishing, having a good life, as a complex state in which one has a fullness of goods, in which one isn't lacking in major sort of good. But what goods does it take to flourish?

More precisely, what are the necessary and sufficient conditions for human flourishing? A condition is necessary for some good just in case one can't have that good without that condition being in place. Having healthy lungs is necessary for having a completely healthy body. But it is clearly not sufficient; you might have healthy lungs, but be dying of a brain tumor. A condition is sufficient for a good just in case that condition by itself guarantees that you have that good. If you can run a four-minute mile, that is sufficient for your enjoying the good of mobility, being able to move oneself.

Is having enough money either necessary or sufficient for human flourishing, for living well? People are tempted to extremes when it comes to thinking about money. On the one hand, some people, such as idealistic hippies, believe (or at least, say) that money is neither necessary nor sufficient for human flourishing. On the other hand, call them the Gordon Gekkos of the world, some

wealth worshipers consider wealth to be necessary and sufficient for human thriving.

But plainly, both extremists are mistaken. No one holds up the miser, the Scrooge, as a paradigm of human flourishing. Greed is *not* good; it is a vice, a malfunctioning of the human heart and mind. Money is for spending, and the virtuous person puts her money to the right uses. But Aristotle would also refute the hippie; we *do* need a degree of prosperity to thrive – it is a necessary condition for human flourishing. It affords us a degree of independence and dignity, a quality of family life, an ability to contribute to good causes, and leisure time for fulfilling pursuits. Really, most hippies would agree; the Grateful Dead, as is well known, were tireless entrepreneurs and ingenious marketers of their music.

Speaking of extreme views, Pink Floyd (it pains me to say this) have misled us; in their famous song “Money”, they misquote the Bible: “Money, so they say, is the root of all evil today.” But what the Bible really says is that “*the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil*”. (1 Timothy 6:10) In other words, greed is bad – both intrinsically and instrumentally.

That enough money is an instrumental good, and a necessary condition for human thriving, are pieces of common sense. But if you hang out with enough professors, however, you’ll meet a few who have left these elements of common sense behind, holding instead that wealth is intrinsically bad, and poverty an intrinsic good. Poverty is so authentic, they think, so uncorrupted, so simple, so

sustainable. In short, they are romantics about poverty.

No doubt, most have never been poor, and have hardly known a poor person. There is no reason to consider poverty an intrinsic good – something to be sought for its own sake. But there are plenty of reasons to consider it an instrumental evil as it tends to promote crime, damage family life, and a shortened lifespan. Who is more likely to succumb to a lifestyle of heroin addiction, burglary, or spousal abuse – the poor man, or someone who is not poor? None of us *really* wants to be poor, nor do we wish poverty upon others whom we love. Thus, poverty isn't any sort of good, whether intrinsic or instrumental. Nor is it intrinsically bad to have money – we don't think that having money is to be avoided for its own sake.

But the hippies and dreamers are right about something – in principle, we *can* imagine a world of flourishing people in which no one is wealthy, indeed which is devoid of money and has no money economy. If what John Lennon imagined comes true, or if we enter a Messianic age, this dream could be realized. For all we know, Jesus, the Madhi imam, or the future Buddha Maitreya may bring about some such new order, in which all may thrive without a single dollar in circulation.

But *as things are*, money is a central instrumental good. Many other things which we consider necessary for human flourishing can't be had without a decent amount of money – family life, health, knowledge, the ability to help others in need.

While it is a central instrumental good for us, our desire for money can of course conflict with our other desires, such as those for justice, or for the flourishing of our natural environment. Financial prosperity isn't *the only* good, but it is *a* good, and an important one. We just need to keep it in perspective alongside the other goods we can seek. We need a broad awareness of the many kinds of goods and how they relate to one another, if we're to intelligently promote human flourishing.

Thus, it is worth saying that we should lay aside politics and ideology, and agree together that prosperity is an important instrumental good. This means that we should actively seek it (while not neglecting other goods), and that those governing us should enact policies which promote it in our cities, counties, states, countries. We ought not belittle its importance, and we should pursue it, along with other important goods, insofar as we value human flourishing. We should drive the economy *because it is good for people*. Given how the world works now, it is *inconsistent* to value human flourishing, and to not value and seek economic prosperity!

We should not despise the talented businessperson, the one with a Midas touch, for these serve society in irreplaceable ways. Like all of us, rich or poor, they are tempted by greed, but their smug (and typically, well off) despisers succumb to a ridiculous self-righteousness and hypocrisy about the importance of money to human wellbeing.

All of this is common sense. This is no accident, for Aristotle's philosophy is

deliberately built on a foundation of common sense. If not money, then what does Aristotle say is sufficient for human flourishing? What does it take to be truly well off, to have a good life?

Aristotle would first correct some wrongheaded ideas about human flourishing which are current in contemporary American culture. He would argue that fame is neither necessary nor sufficient for flourishing, contrary to what so many in our culture assume. And against the hedonists, the pleasure-lovers of the world, he argues that a life of pleasure isn't necessarily a good life. He says:

“The many, the most vulgar, would seem to conceive of the good and happiness [= flourishing, having a good life] as pleasure... In this, they appear completely slavish, since the life they decide on is a life for grazing animals.” (*Nicomachean Ethics* I.5)

Who has fewer worries, or more pleasure than a grazing cow in a field of fresh, green, yummy grass? Yet, if we could enjoy a carefree and pleasure-soaked life like this, we wouldn't thereby be using our higher, most distinctively human powers. The band Boston sings, “All I want is to have my peace of mind.” Well, that may be all you want, but you should want more, if you want to truly thrive. You're a human, and thriving means realizing your distinctively human potentialities. Thus, human flourishing requires more than pleasure and peace of

mind.

But how much more? As I understand him, Aristotle's answer amounts to this (my paraphrase):

A good life is a life of intelligent and virtuous action, while having a sufficient degree of "external" goods – including peace, family life, prosperity, friendship, and leisure.

A "external" good here is just one that is external to a human, to her body and her mind. Human thriving, if Aristotle is right, requires many things, for we are complicated creatures. As we are rational and moral beings, central to our living well is thinking well and having the right sort of moral character. But these are not enough. We must be active, and this must be in the right context or setting. So many factors external to us can prevent us from having the sort of life we really want – things like war, poverty, and social isolation.

What does this have to do with the State University of New York? SUNY is a public institution, created and sustained to help New Yorkers and others obtain a wide range of goods. The disciplines of business and economics aim at the central instrumental good of having enough money. The hard sciences promote the good of economic development too, but also other goods such as knowledge, health, and leisure. The social sciences promote goods such as healthy relationships, peace of mind, justice, and understanding of the vastly complicated human

species, individually and collectively. Our teaching hospitals promote the intrinsic and instrumental goods of physical and mental health.

The humanities promote the things which most concerned Aristotle – our abilities to act rightly and think clearly – he would say, the moral and intellectual virtues. The philosopher models and teaches critical thinking and the art of constructing and evaluating arguments and explanations. The English professor teaches great literature, old and new, which provides insight into the moral life, and into the perspectives of all sorts of people in the midst of all sorts of challenges. The historian extends our experience to times long ago, giving us a sort of God-eye perspective on the wisdom and follies of the human race. The French instructor provides important instrumental goods - the abilities to hear, speak, write, and think in another tongue, a tongue which has been and is the mother tongue to millions, and which is a key to their souls.

In sum, both the humanities and the more immediately practical disciplines are promoting goods each of which are necessary for human thriving. And they are not always promoting different goods – creativity, and the powers of clear thinking, speaking and writing – these essential business leadership qualities are nurtured by the humanities. The ones in the economic driver's seats – they must be clear-eyed and clear-headed, and they must be able to find the way.

Precisely because we care about the wellbeing of humanity, we should pursue all of these goods without shame, and without holding back, knowing that

we are striving for the good of humankind. We are aiming, ultimately, to promote true success, in the fullest sense of the term – lives lived up to the greatness of human potential. The Power of SUNY is, in part, its breadth, its ability to wage war simultaneously on so many fronts, against the enemies of human flourishing. And SUNY accomplishes this just in virtue of its core function of educating students, empowering them to do what they could not do before. If we add in innovations in economic development such as business incubators and public-private partnerships, there's no telling how much good we may accomplish.