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# Justice and charity: the role of Aristotelianism and Anglicanism in Edmund Burke's *Thoughts and Details on Scarcity*

Ioannes P. Chountis 

## ABSTRACT

Despite the resurgence of academic interest on Edmund Burke's economic ideas, there seems to be room for further research on how his economic ideas were connected to his political and religious thought. Here the purpose is to examine how Anglicanism and Aristotelianism informed Burke's economics. Through his tract *Thoughts and Details on Scarcity*, it is attempted to answer what role Christian charity played in his thought and how Burke's concept of Aristotelian justice informed his economic ideas. Overall, the goal is to provide for a case study on connecting economic to political and religious thought in the 18th-century.

## KEYWORDS

Edmund Burke; history of economic thought; Anglicanism; Aristotelianism; theory of wages

## JEL CODES

B11; B12; B31; N01

## 1. Introduction: a novel approach to Burke's sources

Edmund Burke wrote a handful of texts respecting subjects of trade and reform of public finances in addition to his works on politics and aesthetics. Whereas today the importance of economic questions in Burke's overall thinking and work is accepted by most scholars, it was largely neglected in the 19th- and 20th centuries.<sup>1</sup> Characteristically, before the turn of the 21st century, the only substantive account of Burke's economic opinions was to be found in Francis P. Canavan's relevant monograph (Canavan 1994). Canavan's main argument may be summarised in that prescription and 18th-century Whig thinking were paramount to Burke's notion of property and economics in general. J.G.A. Pocock on his part shared this approach and attempted to analyse Burke's economic arguments in his reaction to the French Revolution (Pocock 1985, 193–212). Of course, these accounts dealt only with a part of Burke's economic ideas and inescapably left too much out. At the same time, Burke's economic proposals were also heavily misinterpreted. A typical example of this is C.B. Macpherson's attempt to reconcile Burke's alleged advocacy of pure free-market

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<sup>1</sup> Emily Jones has carried out an important survey of the influence and presence of Burke's thought in the centuries after his death, see Jones (2017). Another interesting account of Burke's economic thought can be found in Petrella (1961). It appears that there were a few nineteenth-century authors who credited Burke with having sound opinions in economic matters, such as Erskine May (1912, i, 270) and Stephen (1876, ii, 223).

economics to his support for hierarchy and the old order of a society dominated by the landed aristocracy (Macpherson 1980). Donald Winch has criticised Macpherson's work on the ground that it is unhistorical (Winch 1996). It seems that the main weakness of Macpherson's *ratio* was linked to its anachronistic spirit and ascription of 19th-century notions to Burke's 18th-century thinking, for example labelling Burke a "bourgeois" and a supporter of "capitalism" (*sic*) (Macpherson 1980).

The academic understanding of how Burke's economic ideas are connected to his overall thought started to change in the 21st century. A breakthrough came some years ago when Gregory M. Collins (2020) offered a comprehensive monograph of the whole of Burke's economic thinking. Collins explored many themes and aspects of Burke's economic ideas and *inter alia* established convincingly that Burke cannot properly fall under a strict economic category or school of thought, like mercantilism or Adam Smith's emergent political economy.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, Collins provided new information on Burke's relation to other contemporary economic thinkers and his ideas on trade and economic reform.

Nevertheless, the discussion of Burke's economic ideas is not definite and further research can be carried out, enlarging the scope of the examination, and building on previous works. More concretely, there appears to be room for further research on how Burke's economic ideas were connected to his political and religious thought. It is true that Canavan's, Collins's and other accounts provided novel insights on Burke's economic worldview and his stance on a series of questions, like the reform of the Civil List or his ideas on trade. Nevertheless, what seems to be missing from the discussion provided in the aforementioned studies are some concrete ideas and examples of how Burke's political and religious ideas were connected or even reconciled to his economic propositions on a wide array of subjects. It is supported here that further research on this point may help forward our understanding of Burke's use of his sources, Ancient, Medieval, and contemporary and how his political and religious opinions, actually, informed parts of his political economy. In this context, Paul Oslington recently tried to identify the links between Burke's religion and economics (Oslington 2017). More specifically, Oslington published an interesting, albeit short, account of how Anglican theology-broadly conceived- influenced the development of the economic thinking of five important 18th-century writers, amongst them Burke. Refreshingly, Oslington moved beyond the discussion of the relationship between Adam Smith and Burke that had been analysed extensively in other studies (e.g., see Rothchild 1992; Sato 2022). Since it is by now well-established that Burke had developed his economic ideas independently of Smith and before reading the latter's works, Oslington searched elsewhere for crucial influences and sources. Oslington noted tensions and divergences between Burke's thinking and that of his contemporaries. For example, the author noted that "Burke's version of the harmony of interests is extreme and over-theologized compared to Adam Smith. It was almost as if for Burke the only disharmony came from those who complained about the providential harmony of interests" (Oslington 2017, 39). Oslington concluded that when it comes to Burke's thinking it is methodologically imprudent to drive "a wedge between the providential institutions of market and government" and

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<sup>2</sup> Interestingly, a similar conclusion has been reached by Richard Bourke and other scholars who have examined Burke's political thinking, cf. Bourke (2015).

that there is “a theological framework and the idea of a providential harmony of self-interest and the general good” that dominated his thought (Oslington 2017, 39). Indeed, the theme of providential harmony between self-interest and the common or general good manifested itself in many works of Burke and not least in the economic tract that will be discussed below.<sup>3</sup> Although Oslington identified a crucial theme in Burke’s economic thinking that has been overlooked or rejected by other scholars, the limited space he invested in the development of his arguments – just three pages – and the lack of specific focus on the primary sources did not serve to showcase with lucidity the link between Burke’s Anglicanism and his economic propositions. Furthermore, Oslington did not provide any information on the more ancient sources that were perhaps used by Burke, such as the presence of Aristotelianism in his economic understanding, a subject that shall be also discussed below. John Grove on his part published an article on how Burke’s Anglican worldview influenced his conception of the formation, role, and mission of the state in 18th-century Britain (Grove 2021). Overall, it appears interestingly that there is a modern and very recent trend to establish a connection between Burke’s Anglican ideas and his position on economic affairs.

It follows from the above that modern scholarship on Burke’s economic thought has not yet sufficiently emphasised or has underappreciated the role of Aristotelianism and Anglican political theology in informing his ideas and views on economic issues, such as commerce and the operation of market. In this paper it is maintained that Burke’s economic thought was influenced by Aristotelian and Christian notions and concepts, more than it is accepted by some scholars. Building on previous works but also diverging from certain of their arguments, the main aim here is to contribute to the field of studying Burke’s economic ideas and the wider economic historiography by presenting examples of the subtle relation and interplay between his moral and political convictions and economic thinking. More specifically, Burke’s work *Thoughts and Details on Scarcity* will be revisited and thoroughly examined here.<sup>4</sup> Through the examination of this *opus minor* it is endeavoured to provide answers to three principal questions: First, under which conditions and criteria did Burke approve state intervention in the free market? Second, what was the role he reserved for charity and how this places his thought under a more religious light? Finally, and most critically, to which extent did Aristotelianism and Anglican theology inform his political economy? All in all, these three questions serve a main purpose: to provide for a concrete connection of Burke’s economic and political ideas and showcase that Anglicanism and Aristotelian philosophy were primary influences for *Thoughts and Details*, an important work for Burke’s economic thinking.

A final word on methodology and Burke’s religion. It should be noted that Burke’s religious background was rather complex; his mother was a practicing Catholic, and Burke lived for a time in his youth with his Catholic relations in Ballyduff where attended a “hedge school”. In later life he attended a Quaker school run by Abraham

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<sup>3</sup> For example, Burke’s conception of reconciliation and general good dominated his *American Speeches* and his political tract *On the Causes of the Present Discontents*. It is also present in the *Reflections on the Revolution in France*.

<sup>4</sup> Burke’s economic tract was considered an *opus minor* and was not usually included in the abridged editions of his selected works (Jones 2017, 12).

Shackleton before joining the overly Protestant and conformist Trinity College in Dublin. Furthermore, we are in a position to know from Burke's youthful correspondence with his friend Richard Shackleton that Trinity College's curriculum exposed him to a series of classical and religious sources during his undergraduate years.<sup>5</sup> The works of Cicero and Aristotle informed much of his classical readings while the Anglican-Protestant theological and political works of Richard Hooker, Robert Sanderson, and Sir Edward Coke also featured high on Trinity College's contemporary curriculum.<sup>6</sup> As a result of these complexities, the subject of Burke's religious and moral thought has received much attention by scholars in the previous century. More specifically, during the 1950s and 1960s in the United States sprang an interpretation of Burke as an adherent to the scholastic tradition of the Natural Law.<sup>7</sup> Other have argued that Burke was an Anglican, a latitudinarian Christian, and a crypto-Catholic.<sup>8</sup> J. C. D. Clark – as most 18th century historians focussing on social, political, and religious history – placed Burke in an orthodox Anglican context and maintained that in his later works Burke gave an “eloquent but unoriginal expression to a theoretical position largely devised by Anglican churchmen” (Clark 1985, 249). In addition, Clark showcased how Burke's understanding of the role of the church informed his ideas on a series of important political and philosophical questions, such as the social contract and the role of the state (Clark 1985, 249). Clark is right to suggest that Burke's ideas were not “sprang, fully armed, from his unaided imagination” and that his historical place and time influenced the formation of certain of his ideas (Clark 1985, 249). Furthermore, in his examination of Burke's English identity, Michael Brown referred to Burke's relation to the established Church (Brown 2014). Brown concluded that when in England Burke was happily to reside in the Church of England and when in Ireland within the Church of Ireland. Brown added that the Church of Ireland although remaining an autonomous province of the Anglican faith, “shared with its sibling much of its ecclesiology” (Brown 2014, 49) In conclusion, in this paper a historical analysis is adopted that recognises the importance of Burke's Anglican context. This does not carry the implication that Burke shared no interest in general theoretical understanding and that he was only bound by historical particularity. Burke was not a theologian or a churchman and did not simply parrot religious and moral ideas. Rather, he used moral and religious ancient theories and incorporated them in his thought regarding political and economic matters. This is the reason why in the present study it is not attempted to precisely place Burke's churchmanship in the Anglican denominations of the 18th-century. It should also not be overlooked that Burke's made positive comments about other religions, such as Hinduism or Islam. Burke was an inheritor of the early Christian tradition which allowed Christians to submit peacefully to “Roman government which fulfilled its duty to maintain peace and order despite its false religion”

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<sup>5</sup> Burke's youthful correspondence with Shackleton may be found in the first volume of his complete correspondence, Burke (1958).

<sup>6</sup> F.P. Canavan has offered a very interesting appendix of the modules, works, and authors Burke would have studied as part of his undergraduate curriculum at Trinity College, Canavan (1960, 197–211).

<sup>7</sup> Indicative works of this tradition are Stanlis (1958) and Pappin (1993).

<sup>8</sup> A summary of the different interpretations of Burke's religion can be found in Grove (2021, 7). F.P. Lock in his recent comprehensive biography of Burke concludes that he was an Anglican (Lock 2006, 303–304). R. Bourke has also the importance of Anglican influences on Burke, although this is not a central theme of his monograph (Bourke 2015, 717–727).

(Grove 2021, 17).<sup>9</sup> As such, it is not surprising that Burke was able to praise laws and customs based on ancient religious traditions, even if he thought the latter to be false. Overall, the focus of the methodology adopted here is on how religious and classical ideas served as a starting point from which Burke developed certain economic conclusions.

## 2. Intellectual framework: Burke's knowledge and understanding of economics

A close reading of Burke's thought uncovers a solid understanding of how contemporary economy worked. It is not known precisely when Burke started studying matters of economics and trade.<sup>10</sup> Some scholars have argued in favour of his student years at Trinity College. Others believed Burke had first engaged himself with economics during 1759–1765, when he was employed as private secretary by William Gerald Hamilton the then Chief Secretary for Ireland (Newman 1927; Barrington 1954, 253).<sup>11</sup> In the *Reformer* one can read several commentaries on economic subjects, like the adverse living conditions of Irish farmers. Collins noted that many of the subjects Burke and his friends discussed during the debates in their rhetoric club were related to the economy. For instance, they *inter alia* discussed the role of trade in the promotion of wealth, the connection between trade and virtue, the taxation of Irish absentee landlords, and the interplay between wealth and power (Collins 2020, 20). Amongst these diverse subjects, the negative effect of *luxuritas* in the decline and fall of the Roman Empire is of particular interest (Collins 2020, 20). This is because the general idea that the consumption of luxury commodities constituted a morally indefensible stance was espoused by mercantilist thinkers in Burke's time. In lieu of that, it seems that Burke, unlike David Ricardo and others later, did not reject luxury goods because they lead to decreases in investment for capital goods nor did he argue from a commercial point of view where it was necessary to export luxury goods to improve the balance of trade. Crucially, Burke's objection to luxury was based on moral grounds. This conviction may be observed not only in his later works but also in the debates of his rhetorical club and the *Reformer* (Hiss and Budd 1997).<sup>12</sup> As a result, it can be maintained that this moral approach manifested very early in Burke's engagement with economic questions.

By the year 1766 Burke, now a Member of Parliament, was known amongst his peers for his excellent knowledge and command of economic questions (Barrington 1954, 253). Burke acknowledged the importance of trade in the Empire's prosperity, as indicated in his *Speech to the Sheriffs of Bristol* (Burke 1899, vol. 2, 87). It should also be underlined that Burke's opinion regarding internal trade with Ireland and the

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<sup>9</sup> More in Burke's *Writing and Speeches*, 6: 304–305, 353.

<sup>10</sup> What is of additional interest is Burke's library and the works it included of authors preoccupied with economic questions, more in Cone (1950).

<sup>11</sup> It is widely maintained that Burke started writing his work *Tracts relating to the Popery Laws in Ireland* during his stay there in 1762 (Collins 2020, 21).

<sup>12</sup> The issues of the *Reformer* may be found in the first volume of Burke's complete works. Also, cf. Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France, passim*, “yoke of luxury”, “in the painted booths and sordid sties of vice and luxury”, “all the disorders arising from idleness, luxury, dissipation, and insubordination”, “a tax by which luxury, avarice, and selfishness were screened”.

American colonies often brought him at loggerheads with the mercantile interest of his voters in Bristol, which eventually led in him losing his seat (Collins 2020, 26; Barrington 1954, 257).<sup>13</sup> A superficial reading of his position might result into the erroneous assumption that Burke was an advocate of complete *laissez faire*, when, in fact, it appears that his own opinion was more nuanced and subtle as indicated in a series of works relating to economics and trade.<sup>14</sup> It is true that Burke shared many critical insights on political economy with some important contemporary writers but also crucially diverged from them on certain subjects. On the complex relationship between Burke and Smith what could be closer to the truth is Donald Barrington's and Paul Oslington's estimations that Burke had autonomously developed his own theory on trade and the economy (Barrington 1954, 256; Oslington 2017, 37). James Conniff argued that what Burke and Smith had in common was their shared belief in prudential judgement and practical reasoning in economic matters and matters of trade (Conniff 1987). Oslington considered Burke as an "alternative" conduit to Adam Smith (Oslington 2017, 37). The major point of differentiation between Burke's approach and Smith's is the reserved role of Divine Providence and religion in general in their discussions of economic subjects (Oslington 2017, 36). For example, a clear manifestation of the critical influence of Providence in economy affairs is Burke's reference to the role of charity and justice in *Thoughts and Details*. This brings us to the crucial question of religion in the formation of Burke's economic ideas, a subject expanded in the next section.

### 3. The rate of wages, justice, and the role of charity

Burke's tract on *Scarcity* is an eclectic work that blends elements of contemporary mercantilism and the emerging political economy with classical philosophy and Christian notions. Here Burke's idea of the workings of the rates of wages will be briefly examined.<sup>15</sup> Then, in the main part of this section, a summary of Aristotelian notions of justice will be offered in order to illustrate how Burke's economic thought was influenced by these notions. Finally, a re-evaluation of Burke's reserved role for charity for the poor will serve to reconcile his thought, and most importantly its theological aspect, to his economic ideas.

#### 3.1. Unintended consequences and the importance of information in the thoughts and details

*Thoughts and Details* was written as a memorandum to the then First Lord of the Treasury, William Pitt the Younger and remained unpublished during Burke's life. Collins has noted that the text was, also, composed in response to the price controls imposed by the French Revolution.<sup>16</sup> In this *quasi*-policy brief Burke's wide-ranging

<sup>13</sup> It should be noted that it is not entirely clear whether Burke's loss of support during his re-election campaign can be attributed solely to his free trade stance, see Christie (1955, 153–170).

<sup>14</sup> For instance, the *Observations on the Present State of the Nation* (1769), his *Speech on Economical Reform* (1780), the *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), the *Thoughts and Details on Scarcity* written in 1795 and published after his death and his final work, and the *Letter to a Noble Lord* (1796).

<sup>15</sup> Robin Corey (2013) has provided useful information on Burke's understanding of wages.

<sup>16</sup> For the historical context see Collins (2020, 37–44).

knowledge of agricultural affairs is revealed, as his arguments appear to be both practical/empirical and theoretical (Alcin 2020, 32). All in all, Burke's main argument was formulated against state intervention in the market and governmental support to farmers after a bad harvest. He, also, rejected the price controls that were being imposed in France.

Early on in the tract Burke started from the position that the living standards of farming workers had not only improved in the last decades of the 18th-century but also that the harvest of the previous year (1794–1795) had not been as catastrophic as it was claimed by those advocating for government intervention. From there Burke proceeded to two important observations that are pertinent to the present analysis. First, that redistribution of wealth from the rich to the poor was not only futile and impractical, as the smaller numbers of the wealthy persons in the country would not suffice for the betterment of the living standards of the less well-off, but that it was also unethical and arbitrary, contrary to the laws of justice. Second and on a more practical level, Burke reminded the reader that for technical reasons compensations could not be estimated correctly and justly (Alcin 2020, 32). This unveils the importance of information or the lack of it in Burke's notion of state intervention, a point to which we shall revert below.

Although Burke calculated that the rate of wages had increased with the nominal price of provisions, he also accepted that there was no exact correlation between wage and price changes (Burke 1999, 63). Burke believed that the rate of wages had no direct relation to the price (Burke 1999, 63). That is because he held the conviction that “labour is a commodity like any other”, which eventually fluctuates upward or downward according to demand (Burke 1999, 64). Since the rate of wages operated according to the laws of supply and demand, Burke argued that an attempt to force these rates beyond the market position would result in either a diminished demand or an increased price of all products (Burke 1999, 64). Burke's objection to raising minimum wages was based on the fact that such raise above a certain threshold would result not only in decreased demand for labour but also to inflation through an eventual steep increase in food prices. Burke, indeed, appears well versed in the notion of “inverse proportionality in price theory”, which meant that raising the value of a commodity above the market price would result in decreased demand. Overall, these arguments are linked to another of Burke's favourite subjects, to that of unintended consequences arising from government action and intervention. In turn, this idea of unintended consequences is linked to Burke's Aristotelian understanding of justice respecting wealth redistribution and proportional equality – more on this to follow below. As a result, Burke believed that even if the government had the best intentions to assist the poor, in the end, its actions would lead to the opposite, a violent equalisation of the rich and the poor downwards and not upwards.

Discussing the technical mechanisms that determined the rates of wages, Burke first referred to an “implied contract” between the labourer and their employer, much stronger than any instrument or article of agreement’ (Burke 1999, 64).<sup>17</sup> The utmost

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<sup>17</sup> An informative history of the term “implied contract” independent of Burke can be found in Birks and McLeod (1981). William Blackstone referred to the implied contract in *Commentaries on the Laws of England*, Book II, chapter 30.



goal of this implied contract was to provide for the labourer's needs while producing a profit on capital and a compensation for the risk of the employer. Burke's theory of the implied contract brings us closer to the core of the argument of this paper. In his analysis of *Thoughts and Details* Collins appears more sceptical on the influence of theological thought and even classical political philosophy (mainly Aristotelianism) on Burke's economic tracts. For instance, Collins supported that "Burke's endorsement of supply and demand principles and the competitive prices system in the provisions market indicates key tensions with traditional conventional classical and Christian critiques of market activity [...] his economic thinking in *Thoughts and Details* does not directly tap into the vast repository of classical and Christian thought to inform his views on supply and demand laws, wages [...]" (Collins 2020, 76). Collins understood the nature of this "implied contract" as "a mutually beneficial relationship in the agricultural economy [...] driven largely by the hidden incentive structure of supply and demand laws" (Collins 2020, 123). He further argued that "in *Thoughts and Details*, [Burke] reframes the feudal understanding of mutual interest grounded in explicit moral duty into a market understanding of reciprocal benefits based on commercial virtue and implicit moral duty" (Collins 2020, 123). Finally, Collins reached the conclusion that a modification of classical and Christian notions of virtue and justice took place in Burke's thought, putting aside unconditional acts of charity (Collins 2020, 126). This view will be challenged below when the paramount role of charity in Burke's proposition will be analysed. Furthermore, following Oslington's observations, it appears that Collins did not focus enough on the providential harmony that Burke is trying to illustrate between healthy self-interest and the common or general good through his reference to the "implied contract" between the employer and the labourer. This "implied contract" is not only a practical arrangement for Burke, "like any other instrument of trade." On the contrary, it touches upon the providential harmony of the different interests in the state, a view much different from Smith's. This is the principal reason why the contract is referred to as implied and not a written, technical documentation safeguarding the rights of both sides. All in all, while Collins has offered a rather convincing account of many aspects of Burke's economic thought, he seems to have underestimated or overlooked the importance of theological and classical influence in Burke's work. Two further observations can be made on this point. It is important to recall that Burke's style was at times rhetorical and subtle.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, as with many 18th-century writers, authors that were utilised as sources and/or influences were seldom referred to explicitly. Based on these two characteristics of Burke's prose, it is safe to assume that Burke could have been influenced by theological and classical philosophy and not refer to his sources directly or by name, like it is the case with Aristotle.

Now reverting to the importance of knowledge or the lack of it for government intervention. Burke proceeded to a fundamental question respecting the "implied contract" underpinning the relationship between the employer and the labourer. The major problem identified by Burke for the participation of a third party in the proceedings of the contract was that it would not possess any interest or actual knowledge

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<sup>18</sup> For more on this see Bullard (2011, *passim*).

about the contract (Burke 1999, 64). He asserted that “legislative acts, attempting to regulate this part of economy, required the exactest detail of circumstances” while “guided by the surest general principles” in order for the experiment to be fruitful and not harmful for those involved (Burke 1999, 66). This is the question of information or the lack of it for state intervention. Of course, this is linked to Burke’s prudential judgement manifesting his rejection of general principles on the one hand and direct legislative action on the other (Burke 1999, 66). Such proceedings were to be left only to those directly involved as in any other case the two parties “were not free, and therefore their contracts [were] void” (Burke 1999, 65). Finally, Burke allowed for the intervention of the judicial system only after the two parties had agreed their contract (Burke 1999, 64–65).

It follows from the above that one of the main reasons Burke rejected government intervention in those kinds of commercial circumstances was related to the lack of exact knowledge on the conditions, parameters, and details that influenced the decisions of the employers and the labourers. The contract cannot be put in the hands of “those, who can have none, or a very remote interest in it, and little or no knowledge of the subject” (Burke 1999, 65).<sup>19</sup> This is, also, the reason why he permits for the judiciary to be involved, when the terms and conditions of the contract are clearly laid out, accessible to all parties involved in the case. That means for Burke no one should not meddle in the voluntary exchanges between the farmer and the labourer. A pertinent point about information is raised elsewhere in the tract. More specifically, Burke objected to regulators’ proposals for increased rate of wages because their needs were not coherent, as labour was not “one thing and of one value” (Burke 1999, 67). Burke provided examples of different kind of workers, based on skills, age, sex and physical strength; all these different people did not share the same needs, could not facilitate their divergent necessities with a single wage rate and were not in position to be equally productive (Burke 1999, 67–68). More concretely, he divided labour into three categories: The husbandry of able-bodied men between the age of twenty-one to fifty, the husbandry of those who could not perform the same as the able-bodied men, and the children (Burke 1999, 67–68). And for Burke, universal regulations applied to such diverse groups were nothing else but a “stiff, and often inapplicable rule” never providing for just proportions between salary and nutriment (Burke 1999, 69; Collins 2020, 94). All in all, what differentiates Burke’s notion from advocates of state regulation is his belief that the interests of the employer and the labourer were always the same and that a conciliation between their needs could be facilitated.

### 3.2. Aristotelian justice

Burke’s comments in *Thoughts and Details* are inextricably connected to his understanding of justice. Burke appears to have been not only concerned with which is the just price for labour and other commodities but also to have shown great interest in

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<sup>19</sup> It is useful to recall that a pertinent discussion had taken place on Burke’s earlier work, the *Thoughts on the Cause of the Present Discontents*. There Burke discussed the alleged influence of the Court and of the Earl of Bute on the handling of political affairs in the 1770s. Whatever the merit of Burke’s accusations against the Monarch and his Prime Minister, it is evident from the pamphlet, that in rejecting the *double cabinet* system Burke also raised concerns about information or the lack of it.

how justice may pertain in relations between the rich and the poor. Burke's position on the matter may be further illuminated with reference to his broader ontological and political convictions. It is here suggested that Burke read justice and its function within civil society in subtly Aristotelian terms, rejecting complete and/or perfect equality and the redistribution of wealth from the rich to the poor. Burke referred to Aristotle explicitly nine times in his *corpus*.<sup>20</sup> Regarding the broader theme of the connection between Burke's and Aristotle's thought scholarship is not much extended. Canavan and Gerald W. Chapman were the only scholars who attempted to construe an intellectual liaison between Aristotle's thought and Burke's political and moral understanding. More concretely, Canavan established that Burke had drew heavily from Aristotle in regard to his idea of practical reasoning and prudential judgement (Canavan 1994). As it will be attempted to show below, Aristotle's influence on Burke's thought did not stop here but also pretrained to moral and theoretical questions. Overall, it is important to underline that here an intellectual influence and affinity between Aristotelianism and Burke is proposed rather than a dependence of the latter to the former.

In the present analysis it is attempted to provide an answer to a theoretical question, namely how Burke's notion of justice reflected the Aristotelian theory. At this point Aristotle's theory of justice must be presented in brief in order to serve as an interpretative and hermeneutical framework. The topic is vast but given space constraints only certain well-established facts (for example, see Nielsen 2013, 67–91; Miller 1995; Kraut 2002; Broadie 1991; Alesse 2018). As of such, only certain well-established facts about Aristotle's ideas and comments on justice need to be presented here to draw a parallel with Burke and see how the latter's comments were based on Aristotelian principles.

Aristotle (2014) mostly elaborated on justice in *Nicomachean Ethics*. There he distinguished between two kinds of justice, *universal* and *particular*.<sup>21</sup> *Lawfulness* is, then, connected to universal justice and *equality* to particular justice. In this context the equal (*isos*) and unequal (*anisos*) carry the connotation of the just and the unjust. What constitutes someone as an unfair or unjust individual is a greedy tendency to own more than their fair share of the goods of fortune. What is more, lawfulness is identified with universal justice in a teleological manner: the just as the lawful serves the happiness (*eudaimonia*) and the common good (*koinon agathon*) of the political community. In turn, particular justice is divided into three sub-categories, namely *distributive* justice, *corrective* justice, and *reciprocal* or *commutative* justice.<sup>22</sup> Distributive justice is related to the just distribution of a shared asset, like property, between those who participate in the political community or civil society. Corrective justice is concerned with rectifying probable unfair exchanges between those members of the political community. And reciprocal justice dictates the transactions of communities of exchange. Of all these three forms of justice, distributive justice is cardinal to Burke's

<sup>20</sup> Direct quotations to Aristotle in Burke's corpus as well as indirect references can be found in Breglia (1997). Furthermore, as mentioned above the scarcity of direct references to a specific author in eighteenth-century texts does not carry the implication that the said author did not constitute an intellectual influence. For example, reasons of style and prose compelled Burke to refer to Thomas Hobbes or John Locke, known English philosophers, only few times in his works. Moreover, Aquinas is not referred to in Burke's entire corpus but an important interpretative tradition in favour of Christian Natural Law was formed in the United States during the previous century.

<sup>21</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1129a26–b11.

<sup>22</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, V 3–5.

conception in the *Thoughts and Details*. In addition, distributive justice is linked to another important concept that will be presented briefly below, proportional equality.

Distributive justice, as was mentioned above, is related to the assignment to specific persons of a just or equal share of a common asset (Miller 1995, 70). According to Aristotle's theory of the mean presented earlier in *Nicomachean Ethics*, a fair share is a medium between one that is too large and another that is too small:

Therefore, the just must be a mean and equal and relative to something (that is, for some persons); and in so far as it is a mean it is between things (that is, greater and less), in so far as it is equal, it is of two things, and in so far as it is just, it is for some people. Therefore, the just must involve four things at least; the persons for whom it is just are two, and the things which it involves are two.<sup>23</sup>

What follows from the above is that for Aristotle the equality between two individuals is identical to the equality of the assets.<sup>24</sup> This means that X and Y will share equal assets if, and only if, these two individuals are equal themselves. As a result, injustice occurs when unequal assets are distributed to equal persons or equal things are granted to individuals who are unequal. This is Aristotle's notion of geometrical proportion.<sup>25</sup> The comparative value between two persons is their merit or worth (*axia*) and between assets their value.<sup>26</sup>

Turning to the subject of equality in his *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle argued that there were two kinds of equality, *numerical* equality and *proportional* equality.<sup>27</sup> Numerical equality consists of treating all persons as equal or distributing the same quantity of a good amongst them. For Aristotle this operation was not always in accord with the rules of justice as outlined above. On the contrary, proportional equality is related to the concept of distributing wealth and goods to persons based on their due and merit. Connected inextricably with his idea of justice, this is for Aristotle the concept by which adequate equality is produced and true justice is served. The idea of proportional equality and distributive justice is also paramount to properly understanding Burke's comments on this part of his tract.

These Aristotelian notions of proportional equality and distributive justice become apparent in Burke's reading of the farmers' situation and form a major part of his arguments against state intervention. More specifically, Burke explicitly stated that perfect equality amounted to "equal want, equal wretchedness, equal beggary" (Burke 1999, 69). In this context Burke's "perfect equality" does not connote an ideal concept of equality. Instead, it signifies more an act of injustice that echoes Aristotle's theory of distributive justice. For Burke "equal want, equal wretchedness, equal beggary" were the inevitable result of all "compulsory equalizations" as they "pull down what is above and never raise what is below" (Burke 1999, 69). This would result into a mutual depression of the high and the low "beneath the level of what was originally the lowest" (Burke 1999, 69). This idea was related to Burke's wider -Aristotelian- anthropological and political conception that men were not and could never be absolute and perfect

<sup>23</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1131a 15–20, translated from Miller (1995, 70).

<sup>24</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1131a 20–21.

<sup>25</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1131b 12–13.

<sup>26</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1131a 25–26, b19–23.

<sup>27</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1130b–1132b

equals within civil society.<sup>28</sup> Rather, only their merit, the Aristotelian *axia* and contribution to the common good of the political community renders them capable of receiving a certain share of the common assets. It is thus evident that Burke's arguments here cannot be read as being strictly technical. He formulated a moral prong in his argument to reject state intervention. What is more, it appears that he expanded his reasoning to subjects that were not limited to the economy and as a result connected his economics to his overall thought. Examined under this light it can be suggested that the Aristotelian concept of justice and equality played a major role in Burke's arguments against the intervention of the state in economic affairs. Burke's and Aristotle's conceptions of distributive justice and proportional equality are thus constituted harmonious, sharing the same principles. Overall, in addition to the importance of exact information and the role of unintended consequences, Burke's understanding of justice and equality in Aristotelian terms was the third element that induced him to reject government intervention in the "implied contract" between the employer and the labourer.

What is more, Burke's economic thought appears to have been influenced by Aristotle in another way, that is in the presence of certain ideas of scholastic economics. The medieval Schoolmen understood political economy not as an independent discipline but "as appendix to ethics and law" (De Roover 1955, 161–190). For them economics entailed the application of ethical and legal subjects, such as the application of natural law to contracts and commercial exchanges. These authors, such as Aquinas, were moralists and their cardinal preoccupation was related to justice and the pursuit of the common good. As De Roover has observed the Schoolmen investigated a host of questions such as the "just wage, debasement (inflation), justice in taxation, public debts, monopoly, foreign exchange, partnerships and usury" (De Roover 1955, 163). More specifically, when it came to the just price, the Schoolmen maintained that it is determined by the "estimation made in common by all the citizens of a community" (De Roover 1955, 166). Furthermore, the medieval Doctors understood the main economic questions as connected to the phenomenon of scarcity. As De Roover has noted "for them economics was a branch of ethics which determined the rules of justice that ought to preside over the distribution and the exchange of scarce goods" (De Roover 1955, 185). Finally, they stressed that any commercial transaction or voluntary exchange was dominated by the principle of mutual advantage (De Roover 1955, 186).<sup>29</sup> As such it can be argued that Burke was influenced by the Aristotelian Schoolmen in a twofold way: First he understood economic questions not only as technical matters but interconnected with ethics. Second, that in the "implied contract" between two parties the principle of mutual advantage was always present. Again, as above, it is important to distinguish between the theoretical and philosophical questions at hand. It is not possible to determine if Burke had read the works of the Schoolmen, although the undergraduate curriculum at Trinity College included many works belonging to this broader tradition. Nevertheless, this does not exclude the theoretical compatibility of these different intellectual traditions observed in this case. Furthermore, that does not mean that Burke always followed the economic ideas of the

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<sup>28</sup> Similar ideas had been expressed by Burke in his youth satirical treatise, *A Vindication of Natural Society*.

<sup>29</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II, ii, qu. 77, art. 1.

Schoolmen. One major point of divergence is that whereas the Schoolmen had identified a series of reasons allowing state intervention in the economy, Burke was not prepared to offer such *a priori* criteria.

A final point that is worth considering is whether Burke's understanding of market exchanges was characterised by a teleological perspective. In Aristotelian philosophy it is well established that everything serves a goal (*telos*) that either serves the common good or the private interest. It is not clear if Burke adopts a consciously teleological approach on human activities. In other words, is there a definable *telos* for market operation? It is a question that is certainly open for further interpretation, but an initial reply may be given here. It appears from the above that Burke considered the "implied contract" as a mean that serves a goal and that is the harmony of interests and the common good within civil society. To put it in Aristotelian terms market exchanges do not exist to serve themselves *per se* but operate within a certain framework that brings about results for those involved (the private interest) and civil society at large (the common good). Overall, Burke is not explicitly clear if he allows for a teleological perspective to dictate his reasoning on an issue such as the rates of wages.

### **3.3. Burke's Anglicanism and the role of Christian charity**

When discussing the complex relationship and the social and economic divergences between the rich and the poor, Burke argued that the former were the "trustees for those who labour, and their hoards are the banking-houses of these latter" (Burke 1999, 62). Moreover, for Burke the rich execute their trust as a "duty" to the poor (Burke 1999, 62). It is crucial to note that Burke understood the function of the rich as trustees of the poor based on a sense of duty on the former's behalf. Then a question follows naturally: what is it that dictates the rich's duty to the less well-off members of society? In other words, where exactly is this duty grounded upon? Collins, indeed, has identified the concept of the rich as the trustees of the poor and attempted to link it with Burke's idea of representation (Collins 2020, *passim* and esp. 92–109). Although Collins's interpretation has its merits, it is possible that the truth lies elsewhere. That for Burke there are ethical and, in fact, religious reasons that dictate this charity duty to the rich (Collins 2020, 97–98). Burke's immediately following comments vindicate this point and further elucidate his motives. More specifically, Burke wrote that "compassion" must be shown "in action, the more the better, according to every man's ability" (Burke 1999, 62). This is how charity comes to the fore and partakes a crucial position in Burke's understanding of the function of the rich in civil society and their "duty" to the poor. Then, Charity is mentioned twice in the next page: "It arises [the neglect of the poor] from a total want of charity" and "the labouring people did [...] from charity (which it seems is now an insult to them) in fact, fare better than they did [...] 50 or 60 years ago;" (Burke 1999, 63). Burke's comments are also a lamentation of the state of charity in contemporary affairs. It can be argued that the recession of the position of charity from the fore of moral activities in civil society is here referred to by Burke in the wider context of his objection to the French Revolution and its impact on social manners.

To provide a definitive catalogue of the principles of Anglican political theology is a task beyond the scope of the present paper. However, certain remarks should be offered so that an intellectual context is provided pertinent to Burke's thought.<sup>30</sup> This is also the orthodox Anglican theology on the state, and it should be noted that there were variations and divergences between thinkers. For Richard Hooker and other English reformers, the state is divinely ordained but there are certain modifications for the English circumstances. As such in a civil society dominated by Christians, the temporal church and the civil realm are not distinct but overlap. This overlapping of the state and church was not necessarily linked to the divine right of kings but more on a belief of the Divine Providence and how this manifests itself through history. This worldview is well elaborated by Samuel Horsley, Bishop of Rochester and one of the leading figures of the Oxford High Church movement with whom Burke casually corresponded. Horsley underlined the providential character of government claiming that only belief in Divine Providence can serve as the "solid foundation of civil society" (Horsley 1813, 37). Burke (1990) shared this belief: "We know, and what is better we feel inwardly, that religion is the basis of civil society, and the source of all good and comfort."<sup>31</sup>

In the following pages of his tract Burke discussed charity and its role in detail. He ascertained that when a person can "claim nothing according to the rules of commerce, and the principles of justice" they "come within the jurisdiction of mercy" (Burke 1999, 72). Quite interestingly Burke used the word "mercy" which has undoubted religious and ethical connotations. Next to the rules of commerce, Burke places the concept of Aristotelian distributive justice according to which everybody receives a share of the common assets based on their merit (*axia*). But there is a third level, that of charity. Crucially charity is a function outside the "rules of commerce" and "justice" and subsequently the realm of the economy. Then the duty of the rich towards the poor is lucidly explained as based on religious and moral and not on practical grounds: "Without all doubt, charity to the poor is a direct and obligatory duty upon all Christians, next in order after the payment of debts, full as strong, and by nature made infinitely more delightful to us" (Burke 1999, 72). Not only charity is a duty bestowed upon all Christians, but it is also rather delightful when performed. In this Burke departed from Pufendorf's and other casuists' notion of charity as "a duty of imperfect obligation."<sup>32</sup> This is important because imperfect obligations are connected with things which are of lesser importance for the common good. Burke argued that charity is, on the contrary, a perfect obligation, linked to fundamental importance for the general happiness. This carries the implication that the harmony of interests and common good are served by the exercise of charity for the poor. This is natural in Burke's context because it is an obligation that all Christians must uphold, since it comes from Divine Providence. Understood under this light the importance of charity becomes paramount in Burke's economic thinking. In addition, the satisfaction is derived by private discretion of choosing "the manner, mode, time, choice of objects, and proportion" (Burke 1999, 72). Furthermore, Burke linked charity to religious duty of

<sup>30</sup> The information provided below may be found in Clark 1985 (216–235).

<sup>31</sup> E. Burke, *Reflections*, 320–321.

<sup>32</sup> More on perfect and imperfect obligations in Rainbolt 2000 (233–256).

Christians: “recommending us besides very specially to the divine favour, as the exercise of a virtue most suitable to a being sensible of its own infirmity” (Burke 1999, 72). Furthermore, it is the “Divine Providence” that has allowed the rich to “with-hold” the necessities from the poor (Burke 1999, 81). And this notion is based on a wider context where for Burke the economy, “the laws of commerce” are the “laws of nature” and by consequence “the laws of God” (Burke 1999, 81).

Two further questions arise from Burke’s remarks: First, why Burke accepted that Divine Providence allowed the rich to withhold the necessities from the poor and second how he understood the laws of commerce as the laws of nature and hence the laws of God? It should be noted *ab initio* and *in principio* that Burke’s motives for this position may not seem acceptable for a modern audience, but they were justifiable in his contemporary context. More concretely, these comments reveal the enhanced role of religion, through the reference to Divine Providence, in Burke’s conception of economic issues. Grove maintained that the Anglican aspect of Burke’s thought “emphasised the mysterious nature of divine justice” and “the inability of the individual to fully comprehend it” (Grove 2021, 11). Peter Stanlis argued that “God’s reason and will, which Burke called ‘the law of laws and the sovereign of sovereigns,’ applies in economics as in everything, and Burke believed that man’s part in fulfilling a sound economy was clearly subordinated to the Natural Law” (Stanlis 1958, 58).<sup>33</sup> Again, this lies in broader ontological and epistemological convictions of Burke for whom the revelations of history and historical continuity were a human form of Providence, Divine Revelation and “the known march of the ordinary providence of God” (Stanlis 1958, 162). Burke’s belief in Divine Providence is well documented in many of his works and subsequent bibliography but in *Thoughts and Details* it is used in order to prohibit government intervention in economic affairs: “resist the very first idea, speculative or practical, that it is within the competence of Government, taken as Government, or even of the rich, as rich, to supply to the poor, those necessities which it has pleased the Divine Providence for a while to with-hold from them.” In one word, government cannot overthrow what was decided by the Divine Providence. Nevertheless, Burke also explicitly refers to the duty of Christians to show mercy and charity to the poor. As a result, relating to the statement above, it should be noted that Burke’s thought in this point becomes somewhat contradictory.

In this context, Burke’s economic thought and his plan for alleviating the hardships of the poor partakes a rather religious spirit, very uncommon to many of his contemporaries, like Smith. This is linked to Oslington’s observation that Burke’s understanding of the balance of interests in civil society is more extreme and over-theologised than Smith’s. It follows from the above that the rich have a religious duty to show mercy and charity to the poor in their capacity as Christians. Consequently, the role Burke reserved for charity in *Thoughts and Details* can be connected to his broader theological convictions, overlooked, or missed until now in scholarly discussion. Put in Aristotelian terms charity in Burke’s understanding served as a kind of corrective justice, rectifying whatever unfairness manifested in economic transactions because of a certain development but without allowing the intervention of government.

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<sup>33</sup> Cf. Burke’s statement on the Divine Providence in the Reflections: “I do not like to compliment the contrivances of men with what is due in a great degree to the bounty of Providence.”



Furthermore, Burke appears conscious that if the situation of the poor were to worsen to a great extent, tensions and divisions would arise in society. In addition, in his work he understands the catastrophic consequences and the causes of the French Revolution, as Pocock has shown (Pocock 1985, 90–91). Burke here, as elsewhere, has a strong interest in maintaining the social consensus and civil concord between the different social groups in Britain. Through his reserved role for Christian charity, he acknowledges that this social consensus is maintained with acts of religious benevolence. This is an additional reason why his notion of the balance of interests can be read in religious and not in practical terms. Furthermore, this is pertinent to his discussion of the “implied contract” and the harmony of interests it serves between employers and labourers. Following Grove’s line of argument, religion becomes a central part not only of government but also of society and economy in Burke’s thinking. Christian charity then becomes instrumental in avoiding social tensions. Furthermore, for Burke emphasising the social benefits of Christianity is not a rejection of its spiritual importance. As Grove argued “even in confessional states where church and state were considered integrated parts of a whole, there was still a division in terms of their purpose” (Grove 2021, 24). In this context, the state promotes civil peace and outward virtue. It follows from the above that the social benefit of Christianity and its truth are not placed in contradistinction in Burke’s mind. Because Christianity’s truth is what Burke believed to be of great social utility (Grove 2021, 24). Finally, Burke knew that if religion were to be utilised to only serve worldly goals, as a mere appendix of the state, then it would lose the intended effect. In other words, “as a side effect of faith which points men’s eyes upward, religion serves a useful political purpose. To focus exclusively on that side effect, however, undermines it by again turning eyes downward” (Grove 2021, 25). As a result of all the above, religion and classical philosophy emerge as much more important driving forces and inspirations to Burke’s argument than it has been observed until now.

#### 4. Conclusions

It was attempted here to read Burke’s statements on economic affairs in accordance with his overall thinking. As mentioned in the introduction most scholars either focused on Burke’s political ideas or his economic opinions solely. Nevertheless, Burke’s stance on wages is intricately linked to his method of theorising. It is generally agreed amongst scholars that Burke (1981) held the belief that history and tradition ought to determine the actions of the politicians, who are the “philosophers in action.”<sup>34</sup> As Gerald Chapman and Canavan *inter alios* have proven in their studies this process is determined by the function of prudence and practical political reason. The cardinal place of prudential judgement in Burke’s thought encouraged him to reject metaphysical thinking, abstractions, and speculation in favour of empirical judgement (Chapman 1967, *passim*; Canavan 1994, esp. ch. 2 and 3). Above it was argued that Burke followed the same reasoning on matters concerning the economy and more specifically the rate of wages and the role of charity. He was shown to be

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<sup>34</sup> Edmund Burke, “Thoughts on the Cause of the Present Discontents.” In *Works & Speeches*, II, 237.

very reluctant to resolve into abstract reasoning before practical political problems, a profoundly Aristotelian stance of argumentation. As a result, one must consider Burke's economic opinions under the light of his overall thinking and methodological approach, if they are to grasp the true essence of his thought on various economic affairs. This carries the implication that Burke, rejecting general principles and abstract reasoning, could have never accepted a specific level of wages at all cases, that is *a priori*. Burke chose to examine each case within its particulars and then reach a practical judgement about what should be done. Overall, when it comes to Burke and his economic thought, a theory on wages cannot be properly established, because of his selected method. This is linked to the first question raised in the introduction of this paper. Concerning the two other questions it is equally important a fact that Burke's economic arguments are buttressed by religious and classical notions, such as Christian charity and Aristotelian justice.

It was noted in the introduction that there are two schools of thought on interpreting and understanding Burke's economic ideas: one focusing, mainly, on economic and technical arguments and terms and another which seeks to reconcile or link Burke's economic to political and/or religious thought. The argumentation of the present paper, as shown above, follows more the second interpretative tradition. In order to showcase that Burke's economic ideas were inextricably relinked to his overall thought a technical tract was chosen as the focus of our research. Whereas *Thoughts and Details* is, undoubtedly, an economic tract and its focus falls on many specifics of how the market operates, it is nevertheless heavily influenced by Burke's Anglicanism and classical philosophy, as showcased in the main section. As a result, it is maintained that a clear line cannot be drawn between "Burke the political economist" and "Burke the political thinker". On the contrary, Burke's thought is integrated to a coherent whole and his economic ideas cannot be understood without reference to religion or politics. The interplay between Christian charity, Aristotelian concepts of justice and the mechanisms that determined the rate of wages in *Thoughts and Details* proves this point. Understood like this, Burke's technical arguments about wages cannot be complete without the Christian and classical sources; and this in turn constitutes Burke a very different economic thinker on this point than Smith, for instance. These distinctive theological and moral frameworks specifically have been underappreciated in the literature and current scholarship on Burke's economic thought. Burke did not only integrate his conception of political economy into wider religious, political and moral structures. Rather, instead of attempting to identify the influence of contemporary thinkers such as Smith or David Hume on Burke's political economy, sharper emphasis should be placed on older and deeper religious and moral authorities, in particular, Aristotelianism and Anglican political theology. These may, in turn, serve as intellectual resources in better understanding Burke's economic thought.

Overall, the methodology adopted here can serve as a template for further research into the interesting subject of Burke's economic ideas and how these were linked to his political thought. More specifically, it is suggested that a closer reading of his works be followed alongside a linguistic analysis and a focus on how terms are used and how rhetorical style influence the product of Burke's arguments. Furthermore, the Anglican/Aristotelian interpretation could push the scholarly discussion of Burke's

economic thought even further. In conclusion, it was endeavoured to provide an example of how Burke's Anglicanism and broader political convictions informed concrete propositions on economic matters, like the rate of wages. The Anglican political theology is an immediate source from which to enhance our appreciation and understanding of Burke's economic ideas. Abridging Burke's moral and religious ideas with his economic propositions will, also, illuminate the complexities and subtleties of economic thought in the long 18th-century.

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