

CHOICE, IDENTITY AND SALVATION IN CHRIST

Andrew Britton¹

1. Introduction

In a note for the ACE meeting in July of this year Donald Hay identified four research areas as having potential for the development of ‘Christian economics’. One of them was:

‘Economic analysis in the interpretation of biblical texts, elucidation of Christian doctrines and the development of new natural theology based on social rather than natural world.’

This paper is an attempt to make progress in this area, in the hope that ideas familiar to economists and other social scientists may help in the presentation of traditional Christian teaching about salvation to a contemporary audience. It expands on some ideas already presented in one chapter of a study with the title *Economic Theory and Christian Belief*, by the present author and a theologian, published in 2003².

One way of describing an exercise like this is to compare it with the use of contemporary natural science in presenting the doctrine of creation³. This may be over-ambitious, however, as the empirical knowledge derived from economics and the other social sciences is not nearly as securely based as our knowledge of astronomy or biological evolution. Another, more modest, claim would be that economic theory, whatever its value as a description of human behaviour, does provide stories or models which could throw light on theology. There are, indeed, many examples of parables drawn from economic life in the New Testament itself.

2. Choice and Identity

The starting point is the very familiar model of choice to be found in the first chapter of almost any textbook of economics. Rational decision-making is presented as the maximisation of an objective function (utility, welfare, profit etc.) subject to external constraints (income, technology, other agents’ reactions etc.)

The objective function is assumed to exist independently of the decision process – we know what we want even before we face a choice. In principle this function enables us to rank all possible states of the world, now and in the future. This assumption may be

¹ A paper presented at the 2007 Study Group Meeting of the Association of Christian Economists at Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge.

² Britton, A. and Sedgwick, P., *Economic Theory and Christian Belief*, Peter Lang, 2003, chapter XI. In a review of the book in *Faith and Economics*, Spring 2005, Victor Claar said that this chapter contained its ‘most rewarding content’.

³ For example see Polkinghorne, J., *Science and Creation*, SPCK, 1988.

criticised as unrealistic in many situations, but it is very helpful in the formalisation of the model.

If this is the model, then everything we could say about individual preferences, character, beliefs, motivations, moral values and even religious commitment, must somehow be summarised within that objective function. Indeed, we might say that it encapsulates an individual's identity.

Economics has relatively little to say about the origin of our preferences or our identities. They are influenced, no doubt, by our genetic and cultural inheritance, by education and advertising, by imitation of others and by our own experience of pleasure and pain. Generally it is assumed that our objective functions are given, that is to say they are not subject to our own control.

There has, however, in recent years been some interest amongst economists in the idea that we might deliberately choose to alter our own objectives – sometimes referred to as the theory of rational addiction⁴. This is not a new idea. Pascal, in his discussion of faith as a wager, suggested that the practice of piety would over time remove any intellectual doubts about the existence of God⁵. We may not be able to choose directly what we believe, but we can choose to behave in a way that we know will eventually change our beliefs. The parallel with addiction (or its cure) is clear enough.

The origin of preference changes, of conversion, or even of rebirth, is clearly of great importance to any use we might make of economic theory in relation to the Christian doctrine of salvation. Economists interested in the explanation of moral behaviour have used the concept of 'meta-preferences', that is preferences as to what our own preferences might be⁶. This seems a helpful idea. Admittedly one could then go on to question the origin of these 'meta-preferences'. Are they the result of our 'meta-meta-preferences'? If so, there must be the possibility of an infinite regress!

Philosophers draw a necessary distinction between the strong and the weak forms of free will. The strong form makes us responsible for our own characters and identities, saying that we are able to change ourselves. The weaker form, which is compatible with either scientific determinism or theological predestination, says that our characters and identities are given to us, either by nature or by God.

⁴ For example see Tommasi, M and Kathryn Ierulli: *The Economics of Human Behaviour*, Cambridge University Press, 1995.

⁵ Hacking, I: 'The Logic of Pascal's Wager', in Craig, W.L. (ed.), *Philosophy of Religion*, Edinburgh University Press, 2002.

⁶ Hausman, D and M McPherson, *Economic Analysis and Moral Philosophy*, Cambridge University Press, 1996.

3. Theism and Rationality

Revelation tells us that human beings are made in the image of God. Natural theology has to work the other way round, to imagine God by analogy with human nature. Thus our model of God's rational choices and actions is likely to adopt the same form as our model of human choice and identity. The 'God of the philosophers' is the great designer, planner and controller of the universe.

Thus we may attribute to God an objective function, a character or an identity. None of these words is entirely appropriate, but we can imagine that they point towards something which is not comprehensible, yet is analogous to what we call our own character or identity. Within this objective function, then, are expressed God's righteousness and also his love of his creation.

Even if God is understood to be omnipotent, his choices are not unconstrained. They must abide by the rules of logic, if nothing else. (It is arguable, for example, that it is impossible to create a universe in which evolution takes place by natural selection without permitting both suffering and death.) More specifically, if God allows human beings the freedom to make their own choices, then our expected behaviour will be represented amongst the constraints on his planning.

God is also understood to be omniscient. It may be, however, that God has created a stochastic world in which even he does not know in advance exactly how his plans will turn out. (The process of evolution by natural selection, for example, may be so difficult to predict that God has to create a very large universe indeed if he is to be confident that at least one example of intelligent life will emerge.)

4. Creation

The design and control of the physical world is a problem in engineering. It could be described using control theory models rather like those used by economists in the 1950s and 1960s to advise governments how they could manage demand. In the 'management' of the galaxies, the solar system, or the evolution of life, there are no created beings able to comprehend the method of control and react to it. There is therefore no strategic interaction to worry about. It may be sufficient for God, like an engineer, to build into the design of the universe certain feed-back mechanisms that will keep it evolving in the right direction.

It is clear that a world created in this way will be in need of salvation. The Fall and original sin are inherent in the design. Human beings, emerging from nature through a process of evolution are endowed with instincts, emotions and drives which have been selected to favour their survival and reproduction. These are now incorporated into our identities and influence all our choices. Our whole attitude, and hence often our choices, will be contrary to the aims and objectives of God in creation.

There are two, quite distinct, ways in which God might deal with sin, both familiar to economists in quite different contexts. The first is to create incentives, rewarding behaviour which is consistent with God's plan and punishing divergence from it. This method takes our preferences, characters and identities as given, changing the constraints we face so as to influence our choices in the desired direction. This is rather like taxing fuel consumption so as to reduce global warming.

The second method is to change our preferences, characters and identities to bring them more into line with the identity of God so that we will freely co-operate with his plan. This is rather like trying to reduce global warming by persuading the public to share that objective and hence to adopt a different lifestyle.

These two methods of intervention correspond, very broadly, to the two phases in the process of salvation: the Old Covenant and the New. (It is, incidentally, the first, rather than the second, approach which is generally followed by economists when they act as policy advisers!) Using another analogy from economic theory they could be described as two sequential policy regimes.

5. The Old Covenant

Once intelligent human beings have emerged from the process of evolution, God's care of creation can no longer be likened to engineering - it must become more like education. With the arrival of self-conscious, rational human beings, the relationship between creator and creatures must necessarily change quite fundamentally. There is now an interaction between the choices of God and those of humanity. We can think in terms of beliefs and incentives.

In the Old Testament God very explicitly offers his people a choice. It is a choice between life and death⁷. If they keep his commandments they will live and prosper; if they are disobedient they will all perish. Initially this refers to rewards and punishments in this life. By the end of Old Testament times, however, the consequences of individual righteousness or sin were believed by many to extend into a future life, following on from a divine last judgment.

A model of this kind is set out in a recent paper in this journal, Oslington (2005)⁸. Utility functions are attributed both to human individuals and to God. God seeks to influence human behaviour by offering a reward – described in the paper as 'salvation', although it is of only finite value. Some individuals accept the offer, whilst others do not. The suggestion is that for some individuals it is entirely rational to reject the offer. It is a choice they would not regret.

⁷ For example Deuteronomy, chapter 28.

⁸ Oslington, Paul: *A Rational Choice Model of Divine Action*, ACE Journal, No. 35, October 2005, pp.25-32.

This clearly does reproduce some features of the choice presented by God to his people in the Old Testament and even in some passages in the gospels. There is indeed an appeal to their rational self-interest. Incentives are created for them to behave in a way that is pleasing to God, even if this means giving up activities that are pleasing to them. But, as Pascal for example recognized, the penalties for disobedience may not be finite. Even in the Old Testament, they are so severe that it could never be rational to ignore them, unless, like the 'fool', one were to 'say in one's heart that there is no God'⁹.

The covenant on offer in the Old Testament exchanges present obedience for a future reward. Economic theory (and the experience of any parent!) recognises that there can be a fundamental problem with a regime of this kind. The behaviour of God will be interpreted by those it is intended to control; expectations will be created as to how he will act in the future. If that behaviour is rational, it will eventually be understood by rational individuals and correctly anticipated.

Suppose an individual intends to break the law. Before the event, the optimal policy for a divine disciplinarian is to threaten punishment. After the event, however, it is too late to deter, so there may be no merit in actually imposing the punishment at all. If God loves his people, he will want to forgive them. This would be especially relevant if punishment is due to take place 'at the end of time'. The individual, realising that this will happen, may not in fact be deterred by the threat. This is the problem of 'time inconsistency', familiar from many different contexts in economic theory.

Another recent article in this journal, Smith (2004)¹⁰, addresses a related problem. Is the promise of reward, or the threat of punishment, credible? Or is God 'an unfaithful, capricious, deceitful or vindictive type of deity'? As the Old Testament writers knew well, we do not always in fact see virtue rewarded or sin punished in this life. The suffering of the righteous is the theme of the book of Job, and the Psalmist also keeps calling on God to fulfill his side of the bargain. Moreover there are some people described in the Old Testament as taking God's favour and mercy for granted, offering prayer and sacrifice whilst not keeping the law.

In economic theory, the standard solution to this problem is for there to be an irrevocable, and therefore credible, commitment. (A pragmatic or weak elected government, for example, is advised to transfer the control of monetary policy to an independent and inflexible central bank.) The person making a commitment to punish or to reward must not only mean to keep it, but must actually be prevented from changing their mind. This could be because they really care that the rules should not be broken, or else because it really is against their nature to practice deceit. We might well suppose that both of these conditions apply to God. God is faithful and just, loving righteousness and hating iniquity.

⁹ Psalm 14.

¹⁰ Smith, Ian: *Modelling Faith*, ACE Journal, No. 34, October 2004, pp.1-15.

And yet, even this strategy may not be entirely successful. Experience suggests that some individuals will go astray even if threatened by a credible prospect of eternal damnation. This may be because of a residual doubt as to God's existence and character, or simply an element of irrationality and perversity in human decision making. The regime of rewards and punishments is a necessary educational stage in God's care of creation, but it has to be followed by a different approach altogether if the overall aim is to be achieved. So long as the objectives, values and preferences of human beings are different from those of God, the intention behind creation cannot be fulfilled.

6. The New Covenant

The prophet Jeremiah looks forward to a new covenant, which will be written, not on tablets of stone, but on the hearts of God's people¹¹. In other words, instead of a system of incentives to obey God, there will be an alignment of our identities (our wills) with his. According to the writer to the Hebrews amongst others, this is what was achieved by the incarnation, the death and resurrection of Jesus¹².

In the next stage of the overall strategy, God necessarily adopts a new way of relating to the world. He enters the world in the person of a particular human being - his Son. God identifies himself with this man, Jesus Christ, to the extent of sharing his human experience, even his suffering and death. This relationship has of course been described using many different models and metaphors. The concepts of contemporary social science suggest one way of viewing it - no doubt partial and provisional like all the rest.

The metaphors or models used by Christians to describe salvation have been summarised under three heads¹³:

- Release from guilt, from slavery, captivity or debt, or from the clutches of evil
- Transformation through healing, the work of the Spirit, glorification, and ultimately union with God in Christ
- Reconciliation through ritual cleansing, atonement, sanctification and being adopted as a child of God

In the language used in this paper the changes to which these metaphors point could be described as release from the terms of the old regime, the transformation of identity and the introduction of a new regime that would reconcile humanity with the design of the world.

¹¹ Jeremiah, chapter 31.

¹² Hebrews, chapter 9.

¹³ Adapted from Hart, T., 'Redemption and Fall' in Gunton C. (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Doctrine*, Cambridge University Press, 1997.

We might think of the Father and the Son as having the same identity, in that they have the same purpose, will and intention - and, we might add (using language from another context), the same preferences and values. That identity is then expressed in the choices that Jesus makes, especially his choice of the cross.

He has a task to perform. This is because the old regime cannot simply be forgotten. That regime required a commitment to justice and retribution, rewards and punishment, in order to make it credible. That commitment cannot just be broken, because that would make the old regime dishonest, and also because the punishment really was deserved. The logic of economic theory may actually help to explain why God's 'wrath' had to be 'satisfied'. There was no easy option for God to pretend that no penalty was due at all.

The new regime is based on love rather than the law, on emotion rather than on calculation. Love can succeed when the law has failed. To explain why this must be so, we can again draw on ideas used in social science, ideas that are relevant, not just to religion, but to all of life, for example to politics, economics and family life¹⁴.

Human beings are endowed with emotions as well as with reason. Indeed, it has been suggested that our unique self-consciousness depends on our feelings as much as on our intelligence¹⁵. Our relationships with one another depend, not only on the calculation of advantage, but also on such things as anger, hatred, fear, sympathy, admiration and love. This makes a fundamental difference to the relationships of co-operation, trust, caring and commitment. Paradoxically, 'irrational' behaviour, driven by sincere emotion, may achieve more than even the best rational strategy.

It should be no surprise, therefore, if the chosen means for our salvation depends on our emotional response rather than any calculation we might make of our own advantage. It has to engage our sympathy, to win our hearts as well as our minds. In loving response to the offer of salvation we seek unity with God through Christ.

It is in seeking such unity that our identity gets changed. Salvation becomes possible when we, in effect, appoint the representative of God to be our representative as well. We have to say, 'this person stands for me, his choices are my choices, what happens to him happens to me'. Those who believe in free will in the strong sense will say that we can do this because our identity is ours to surrender or to withhold. Those who believe only in the weaker sense of free will can say that God himself intervenes to change the identity of those he has predestined for salvation.

Salvation provides both a satisfactory conclusion of the old regime and an effective introduction of the new one. A regime of justice, in which a binding commitment to punish lawbreakers has been made, requires some form of retribution,

¹⁴ See for example Frank, R.H., *Passions within Reason*, WW Norton, 1988 and Ridley, M., *The Origins of Virtue*, Viking, 1996.

¹⁵ Damasio, A., *The Feeling for What Happens*, Heinemann, 2000.

whilst a regime of mercy requires a willing gift as a token of repentance. Both are necessary if there is to be reconciliation and forgiveness.

All this is accomplished by Christ, who dies and is raised to life again. We are enabled to participate in his death and in his resurrection. First he represents us when he accepts the penalty due for our disobedience under the old regime. If we identify ourselves with him, then, when he dies, that is *our* punishment and *our* sacrifice. Then he represents us again when he rises to new life. That is *our* forgiveness, as we are enabled to fulfill the purpose for which we were created.

7. Conclusion

It seems possible to construct a model of salvation in Christ using concepts familiar to economists. It begins by assuming that human beings and God himself are all rational agents, in the rather special sense of rationality that economists have adopted. It uses game theory, especially the recognition of time inconsistency in many forms of policy pronouncement. But it then goes beyond rationality assuming that human agents, and even God himself, are motivated by powerful emotions. Their behaviour is then reasonable, in that it does lead to happiness and fulfillment, but it is not rational in the same, rather narrow, sense.

Thus we, as economists, seeking to encompass theology within the framework in which we usually work, may learn something of the limitations of that view of the world.