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Thomas F. Head

George Fox University, thead@georgefox.edu

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The Business of Our Lives

Reflections on A Plea for the Poor

TOM HEAD

I view John Woolman's *A Plea for the Poor* through the eyes of my own experience. In particular, two aspects of my experience shape my vision: that of being an economist and that of being a Quaker. The economist in me is sensitive to statements about prices, wages, rents, production, distribution, equality, inequality, contracts, poverty and wealth. The Quaker in me responds especially to the language of the spirit. When Woolman speaks of God, the Creator, our Redeemer, Jesus Christ, pure wisdom, Divine love, tender mercies, universal love, the Fountain of universal light and love, our Lord, our Saviour and so on, the life of the spirit is the context for my understanding and interpretation. Both streams of experience—economy *and* spirituality—are found in Woolman and are integrated in authentic and powerful ways. Thus, Woolman speaks to me as few others do.

I also want to acknowledge at this moment that I reflect upon *A Plea for the Poor* with elements of both nostalgia and gratitude. It was twenty-five years ago that I first encountered the writings of John Woolman. The occasion was my first visit to George Fox College. I was being interviewed by Arthur Roberts, then Dean of the College, for a teaching position. I suppose we talked about whether or not I had read John Woolman. Although I had a faint awareness of Woolman as a Quaker who worked to end slavery among Friends, I had not seen his writings and made no connection between his work and my professional life. Arthur pulled a paperback copy of *The Journal of John Woolman and A Plea for the Poor* off his office bookshelf, handed it to me, and said something like "If you're going to teach

Economics at a Quaker college, you ought to read this, especially *A Plea for the Poor*." On that day I had not yet completed interviewing, and it was to be some time before I had a teaching contract in hand, but, accurately or not, I look back on that moment as the start of my work at George Fox College. I remember carrying that borrowed book along with me on an outdoor excursion late in the spring or early summer and first reading *A Plea for the Poor* somewhere along a wooded trail in the Pacific Northwest. When I took up my teaching duties at George Fox College the following fall, I returned Arthur's book to him with a sense that this would not be the last time I would encounter John Woolman.

While these personal experiences heighten my interest in Woolman and inform my reading of him, I am also aware that I lack some experiences that would serve me well at this moment. I am neither an historian nor a literary scholar, and I feel these deficiencies acutely when I try to decipher some of the more inaccessible portions of John Woolman's works. Fortunately, so much of Woolman's writing is timeless, or nearly so, and my inability to comprehend dense or archaic passages does not totally keep me from catching his powerful sense of things.

Woolman's Economic Model

As I return to John Woolman's *Journal* and *A Plea for the Poor* from time to time and recommend them to students as significant documents in the history of economic thought among Friends, I am brought to the question of whether or not John Woolman offers anything close to what we could call an economic theory or model. The more I read him, the more I think he does, and *A Plea for the Poor* is a good place to find the kernel of that model.

Economists typically work with a model of human behavior which assumes that the business of our lives is the maximization of welfare or well-being. As a broad, general approach, the idea of utility maximization is not altogether wrong or inappropriate, for the model builders allow for the broadest assortment of economic goods and services to be fed into our utility functions, constrained only by society's sense of what is legal and ethical, often a rather fuzzy constraint. If fast cars and fancy clothes are our passion, then so be it. But if community development and acts of kindness give us pleasure, then the model will acknowledge those as well. Whatever economic agents deem to be the source of well-being, the economist will accept. These given preferences will then be used in the process of moving toward an optimal allocation of resources.

Prevailing economic thought understands itself as describing what is, as opposed to what ought to be. It does explain a great deal of economic behavior, both selfish and altruistic. Modern economic thought does a fairly decent job of explaining how we improve our well-being, how we build our

wealth, etc. However, the acceptable discussions are usually confined to what is called positive economics (what is), in contrast to normative economics (what ought to be). Many will say that positive economics is the only form of economics, especially the only form of economics that qualifies as a science since only positive statements are testable ones, the only ones which can be rigorously investigated and thus proven to be right or wrong.

John Woolman offers some observations that are decidedly in the form of positive statements, and he subjects them to testing by the best evidence he can bring to the fore, but few of these discussions stand out as profound or memorable. Instead, it is the more normative statements which form the core of his observations about the business of life. His more important and more lasting contribution is not in the form of the value-free propositions found in modern economics but in the form of value-laden propositions about the design of creation.

In *A Plea for the Poor*, we discover not the economics of the moment but the economics of all time. Here, in one rich paragraph, is Woolman's sense of what our real business is:

Our gracious Creator cares and provides for all his creatures. His tender mercies are over all his works, and so far as true love influences our minds, so far we become interested in his workmanship and feel a desire to make use of every opportunity to lessen the distresses of the afflicted and to increase the happiness of the creation. Here we have a prospect of one common interest from which our own is inseparable, so that to turn all we possess into the channel of universal love becomes the business of our lives (p. 227).¹

For Woolman, our own individual interests—the stuff of utility maximization—derives from a common interest, a world designed with care and provision for all. Acting consistently with this design, all we possess becomes not the source of mere personal well-being but of the happiness of all creation.

To the modern ear, it all sounds rather soft, idealistic, or even deluded. It may have sounded so to many people in Woolman's time, too. Seeing beyond 'me' and 'mine' has long been a struggle. So often we fail to "consider the connection of things" (p. 233). But Woolman's writings suggest that if we fail to see how our own economic destiny is related with the whole, we will ultimately not be well off. Is he right? Is this true?

1. All page references are to *The Journal of John Woolman and A Plea for the Poor*, The John Greenleaf Whittier Edition Text of 1871, New York: Corinth Books, 1961. While Phillips P. Moulton's excellent edition of *The Journal and Major Essays of John Woolman*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1971 is now a scholarly standard, I have returned in this paper to the text of my first reading of Woolman.

While it takes many ways of knowing to evaluate the truthfulness of his viewpoint, I would suggest that psychology may yield far more evidence than does economics. Who are the people most fulfilled in life? happiest? most content? most filled with a sense of meaning and purposefulness? Is it the group of people with ever-increasing amounts of wealth and power? I think not. I think it is more likely to be those who “become interested in his workmanship,” those who deeply sense how things work.

How Do Things Work?

Early in *A Plea for the Poor*, John Woolman chronicles many things that are not working. He identifies people who are needlessly unemployed. He finds others who are overworked, “who labor harder than was intended by our gracious Creator” (p. 224). He is also pained by the way animals are treated: “Oxen and horses are often seen at work when, through heat and too much labor, their eyes and the motions of their bodies manifest that they are oppressed” (p. 224). Something is not right here.

In what sense are things not right? Is it in a normative sense; that is, do we not like the way things are? Or, is it in a positive sense; that is, do we see a system that is not performing as designed, a system that is not working. Or is it both? While I can easily make the distinction between positive and normative in the classroom, I do not find it so easy to make when reading John Woolman. *A Plea for the Poor* simply does not conform. At the heart of John Woolman’s understanding of economics is the idea that we live in a created order and that there is purposefulness and meaning in its design. While I do not sense a reluctance in his thought to permit individual variation, and thus the stuff of economic preferences and economic freedom, I also do not sense that he is willing to accept the notion that individual preference is the whole of the story.

There is a design, and John Woolman diagnoses our failure to attend to the logic and requirements of that design as the source of our economic difficulties. He does so in language that is inviting and powerful. Consider a sampling of the language that he uses in *A Plea for the Poor*:

...[tenants] often find occasion to labor harder than was intended by our gracious Creator (p. 224)

... business which is foreign to the true use of things (p. 225)

... regulate their demands agreeably to universal love ... (p. 225)

...discourage those branches of business which have not their foundation in true wisdom (p. 225)

To be employed in things connected with virtue... (p. 225)

... while they live answerably to the design of their creation... (p. 226)

... acts contrary to the gracious designs of Him who is the owner of the earth...(p. 226)

Goodness remains to be goodness, and the direction of pure wisdom is obligatory on all reasonable creatures. (p. 226)

- ...greater toil or application to business than is consistent with pure love...
(p. 226)
- ...the right use of things...(p. 227)
- ...that use of things prescribed by our Redeemer...(p. 227)
- ...the man whose mind is conformed to universal love...(p. 228)
- ...Am I influenced by true charity in fixing all my demands? (p. 228-9)
- ...increase labor beyond the bounds fixed by Divine wisdom...(p. 233)
- ...consider the connection of things...(p. 233)
- ...that state of being in which there is no possibility of our taking delight in anything contrary to the pure principle of universal love (p. 235)
- ...the impossibility of our taking pleasure in anything distinguishable from universal righteousness...(p. 235)
- ...to act agreeably to that Divine wisdom which he graciously gives to his servants (p. 236)
- To labor for an establishment in Divine love, in which the mind is disentangled from the power of darkness, is the great business of man's life...
(p. 236)
- ...a closer application to business than our merciful Father designed for us...(p. 246)

To labor for a perfect redemption from this spirit of oppression is the great business of the whole family of Christ Jesus in this world (p. 249). Throughout *A Plea for the Poor* John Woolman raises our sights, speaking in lofty words of the highest of concepts, the universal wisdom that informs, directs and inspires right living.

In short, to know how things work requires religious knowledge. It is here that the line between positive economics and normative economics is blurred. As Woolman seeks to understand the nature and causes of oppression, he returns again and again to spiritual wisdom. His explanation, to put it simply, is that oppression occurs when human action moves too far out of balance. "While our spirits are lively, we go cheerfully through business; either too much or too little action is tiresome, but a right portion is healthful to the body and agreeable to an honest mind" (p. 227). In Woolman's world-view, labor is a very good thing and clearly part of the created order, but too little or too much leads to failure and misery. The system has a logic: "Divine love imposeth no rigorous or unreasonable commands..." (p. 229).

Conclusion

Are the thoughts of John Woolman, writing over two hundred years ago, relevant to the global economy today? While some would write him off as a sentimental fool, others in this postmodern era would be open to the wisdom that comes through in a world-view that so fully integrates faith and economics. A John Woolman writing today would still find oppression in

our betrayal of the Third World, in multiple environmental crises, in threats to human rights and civil society. A John Woolman today would plea for the poor, plea for the alienated, plea for the children, plea for the victims of war, and plea for the earth. A John Woolman today would, as the bumper sticker says, think globally and act locally, for that is what the John Woolman of the 18th Century did, and his thoughts and actions are of the caliber that transcend historical details and reach across the years to offer a model of the way to be.

I want to end by telling a story about my youngest son, Eliot Arthur Head, whose middle name honors the spiritual impact of Arthur Roberts on our lives. I was talking with Eliot one day a couple years ago about well-known Quaker figures. We were discussing what people such as George Fox and William Penn had done. When I asked, "What did John Woolman do?" I was expecting to hear answers such as: He fought against slavery, he wrote a journal, he wore funny clothes, he was a tailor, or perhaps he took care of an orchard. Instead, then eight-year old Eliot blurted out, proudly and without hesitation, that he knew the answer: "John Woolman wrote receipts." To Eliot, this is what John Woolman did; he wrote receipts!

Eliot was remembering the story we had read together in which John Woolman was asked by his employer to draw up a bill of sale for the purchase of a slave. In Eliot's mind, John Woolman wrote receipts, sometimes very memorable receipts. John Woolman had never been involved in such an economic transaction before, and he felt paralyzed as he started to write. At 23 years of age, doing his day's work, he recognized that he was doing something violating his Christian religion, something inconsistent with the business of our lives. He went on and did the work he was assigned, but the course of his life was profoundly changed by the events this incident set into motion.

The thing that struck me about Eliot Arthur's answer is that *we all write receipts*. That is, we all do some little thing in the economy. It is all connected. And it all must ultimately find harmony with "that use of things prescribed by our Redeemer" (p. 227). We can all stop in the face of oppression, examine our actions, and turn toward the true use of things. We all have the opportunity to attend to that deeper Source of economic wisdom and to redirect the business of our lives toward a healthful and sustainable economy. For John Woolman, the religion of our lives and the business of our lives were not two separate realms. His plea is one of wholeness, and I return to this text once again with deep gratitude for the wholeness of another man, our teacher, colleague and friend Arthur Roberts.