



## Dr Anthony Annett

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This symposium starts from the perspective that the crisis we face today—an economic crisis, a social crisis, and an environmental crisis—is at some deep level a crisis of values. Let me talk about this from the perspective of *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis's landmark encyclical from 2015.

The signature theme of *Laudato Si'* is integral ecology—the notion that the relationship between human beings and the natural world is interconnected, inseparable, and part of a larger whole. Through this dynamic, Pope Francis is arguing that human activity is harming both environmental and human well-being, especially when it comes the poor. We are called upon to hear and respond to the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor, because these cries come from the same source.

This source, according to *Laudato Si'*, can be traced to what Pope Francis calls the technocratic paradigm in tandem with a culture of disconnected and disordered individualism.

The technocratic paradigm refers to the idea that human beings can and should achieve mastery over the earth and its resources in the name of unlimited economic progress—the ruthless logic of “possession, mastery, and transformation.” This paradigm disconnects human activity from questions of ends or purposes, leading all economic activity to be assessed narrowly in terms of utility, productivity, and efficiency—negating any inherent dignity or value in either the human person or in creation, and instead exalting a Promethean vision of human power.

Pope Francis argues that this leads a “relativism which sees everything as irrelevant unless it serves one's own immediate interests.” This mentality gives absolute priority to immediate convenience, driving people to treat their fellow human beings—and indeed all of creation—as mere objects to be taken advantage of. It elevates self-centeredness, self-absorption, and instant gratification as the yardsticks of human interaction.

All of this leads to Pope Francis' signature diagnosis—the throwaway culture, in which both people and things are used to satisfy gratification and discarded when they serve no further use. The throwaway culture gives rise to the ultimate economy of exclusion, in which the excluded as merely an “afterthought...treated merely as collateral damage” and “frequently remain at the bottom of the pile.” As Gustavo Gutiérrez put it, the excluded do not even have the right to have rights.

We might ask this question: where does this technocratic paradigm with its radical individualism come from? In one sense, it comes an Enlightenment mentality, with its twin pillars of using science to gain knowledge and control over the natural world and elevating the autonomous individual over the common good. Doesn't this sound familiar? And here, *Laudato Si'* denounces what it refers to as the “myths of a modernity grounded in a utilitarian mindset”—which it lists as individualism, unlimited progress, competition, consumerism, and the unregulated market.

This mindset has dominated political and economic discourse over the past few centuries. I don't have time to go deeper in these brief remarks. But suffice it to say that the dominant “liberal” political and economic paradigm today says that: (i) individual rights should not be sacrificed to any particular notion of the common good; (ii) we should not presuppose any particular conception of the good life. The goal of each individual is therefore to pursue their own conception of the good, as long as this doesn't hurt anyone else.

Translated into economics, this individualist and technocratic mindset reduces the goal of economic life to the maximal extension of individual choices. This is most evident in neoclassical economics with its emphasis on the maximization of subjective material preferences, and on the magic of the free market to do this efficiently.

Despite outward differences, the political left and the political right fundamentally agree on this point. For the libertarian, freedom is simply freedom from coercion—in terms of the common good, “common” implies some form of unjust compulsion, and “good” is an attack on the freedom to do as you wish. And free market outcomes are considered just, as they embody voluntary agreements. For the social democrat, freedom is understood in a more positive sense—the freedom to be able to pursue your own conception of the good requires that some basic social and economic needs be provided. So governments have a mandate to fix some of the most startling inequities in the market system. This is surely closer to the common good than libertarianism, but it remains rooted in individualism and in defining your own conception of the good.

This stands in stark contrast to an older way of looking at things. The older Aristotelian framing suggested instead that the “good” exerts a gravitational pull on human nature. As Aquinas said, following Aristotle, “*bonum est quod omnia appetunt*”—the good is that which all things strive after. For sure, we might misunderstand the good, and our wills might not be strong enough to pursue the good, but there is nonetheless such a thing as an objective good that we, as rational creatures, are capable of knowing. And this in turn requires the inculcation of virtue, which is the habitual orientation around “good” values. If we believe Aristotle, this is a necessary condition for authentic human flourishing. Even more, this has the code of the common good written into it, for as social animals, it is only through social cooperation that we can work out a shared understanding of what constitutes a good and dignified life.

But we seem to have gone in another direction entirely over the past few decades, especially with the rise of market ideology. We have been effectively “slouching toward libertarianism”—freedom without responsibility, rights without reciprocal duties. This degrades virtue by inculcating such values as egoism, materialism, hedonism, zero-sum competition—values that corrode and degrade solidarity, fraternity, and compassion. This makes us numb to vast amounts of exclusion, inequality, and environmental devastation. As just one example, think about how health care is framed in the United States—couched in the language of freedom and consumer choice, rather than solidarity and compassionate care. Or think about how the super-rich avoid and evade taxes on a massive scale, and lobby aggressively for financial rewards for themselves at the expense of the broader common good. Or how ideology opposes all attempts to properly account for the social cost of environmental pollution—because it violates this narrow and self-centered notion of freedom.

Practically speaking, the loss of the good gives rise to two major economic dysfunctions. One, we are no longer capable of indicting “bads” that hinder human flourishing. Pornography. Prostitution. Casinos. Strip clubs. Ultra-luxury. Firearms. False needs manufactured by advertising. The continued investment in fossil fuel technology. Two, the only common “end” we can all agree on is the maximum pursuit of individual choice and corporate profits—and we lack the moral resources to evaluate this goal. This, of course, is the technocratic paradigm in action.

What this implies is that ethics becomes shallow and superficial. Let me give some examples. You have surely heard of Martin Shkreli, an upstart young psychopath who grinningly boasted of jacking the prices of life-saving drugs for profit. But is what he did really any different from what major pharmaceutical companies are doing every day? Aren’t we focusing on the personal traits of this so-called “pharma bro” instead of the “ends” of this industry—whether to serve the common good or maximize profits at the expense of health and even life?

Take another example: the “Wolf of Wall Street” portrayed the notorious and debauched behavior of a crooked minor league stockbroker. People like this would be shunned on Wall Street. But people like John Paulson—the hedge fund manager who conspired with Goldman Sachs to design a security he knew would fail, conning investors into buying it, and making a billion dollars in the process—would not be. People like Paul Singer—a vulture fund manager who makes billions from buying up cheap debt from some of the world’s poorest countries and doing whatever he can to extort the full value of that debt from them—would not be.

And take the example of the Koch Brothers, major fossil fuel polluters and leading funders of both libertarian politics and climate change obfuscation and denial. It’s hard to find a starker example of values antithetical to *Laudato Si’* and the common good. But in a world where the “good” has little meaning, Charles Koch can be honored by a Catholic university in Washington DC, for his views on what he calls “good profit”—how entrepreneurship and innovation can improve the world. There is no mention of course, that his profit comes from befouling the earth, refusing to pay the social cost of this pollution, and spending hundreds of millions of dollars to spread self-serving lies. How can this kind of “wealth” be considered good? Only in a world where we have lost any objective standards, descending instead to subjectivism and relativism.

Let me now ask the question: can the left save us from this moral morass? I’m not optimistic, for a simple reason—the left too has drunk deeply from what Pope Pius XI called the “poisoned spring” of the “evil individualist” spirit. The spirit of solidarity and fraternity, the centrality of the common good, while not entirely abandoned, has been corrupted. It has, in too many instances, degenerated into an inflexible and narcissistic vision of expressive individualism, predicated once again on the maximal extension of individual choice. Once again, freedom disconnected from responsibility. Once again, rights disconnected from duties. Once again, libertarianism.

Hence the emphasis on unrestricted access to abortion, whose adherents use the exact same language of choice as free market libertarians. Both sides insist on the absolute right to self-ownership of either their bodies or their financial resources. But as Pope Francis says in *Laudato Si’*, “How can we genuinely teach the importance of concern for other vulnerable beings, however troublesome or inconvenient they may be, if we

fail to protect a human embryo, even when its presence is uncomfortable and creates difficulties?" This too is part and parcel of the throwaway culture.

Under the lure of this defective libertarianism, the left also insists on the unfettered freedom to express autonomous desires and have them honored and affirmed by society. Again, using the words of Pope Francis, this is self-centered and self-absorbed. And it is elitist—the implicit message here is that core issues of justice like fair wages, decent jobs, universal access to quality healthcare and education, and a healthy environment take a back seat to libertarian issues like abortion, transsexual bathrooms, and marijuana legalization.

This embrace of social libertarian goes hand-in-hand with an full-throttled endorsement of the technocratic paradigm by the left—a naïve utopian vision that technology can solve all problems; the fawning admiration of technological innovators, oblivious to ways they harm the common good; the prioritization of economic growth and financial market vitality over broader measures of wellbeing; the tendency to judge policies not in terms of whether are good or bad, just or unjust, but whether the benefits exceed the cost in a cold and calculating utilitarian manner; and the insistence that being “smart” and going to the right schools constitutes moral desert (and aren’t the people on Wall Street and Silicon Valley just so smart?).

But what about youth? Can we rely on this generation to reject the errors of their parents, and internalize a different set of values? I hope so, but again, it’s not so clear-cut. While the young thankfully reject the solidarity-destroying (and soul-destroying) excesses of economic libertarianism, they seem enamored with left libertarianism and expressive individualism.

And I fear that information technology is only making this worse. This is the virtual generation, but virtual community is a pale shadow of real community. Real friends make us happy, virtual friends most assuredly do not. Virtual solutions to the basic human need for purpose and connection are at best unsatisfactory, and at worse, forums for the inculcation of vice.

This is another example of what Pope Francis meant when he said that “immense technological development has not been accompanied by a development in human responsibility, values and conscience.”

Think about this. How many young people today are lost in a virtual world where worth is measured by status, wealth, celebrity, popularity, and beauty? How many are influenced by this Kardashian culture, the “rich kids of instagram” phenomenon, where narcissism seems to be the guiding principle? How many boys and young men have been exposed to pornography from an early age, which demeans and degrades women, often in ways that involve force and violence, all in the service of instant gratification? What does such exposure do to one’s psychological makeup, and the ability to express solidarity, fraternity, empathy, and compassion? And, in the darkest example of all, how many “lost” young people have been “found” by communities of hate—teaching racism, xenophobia, and even violence and terror.

Let me end with by painting you a picture. Think about a decades-long process of globalization that predominantly rewards the elites. Think about skyrocketing inequality within countries. Massive technological advance without a moral boundary. Massive greed and financial excess that led to a ruinous global economic crisis. And then—a backlash in the form of nationalism, insularity, racism, and even threats to democracy. The already-weak instruments of global governance and global cooperation coming increasingly under threat. And the undermining of the very notion of objective truth itself.

Does all this seem familiar? Good, because you clearly know that I am talking about the 1930s.

We all know what’s at stake. We know the urgency. In some ways, the dangers are even greater today—the pre-war generation did not have to grapple with a pending environmental catastrophe.

The only answer is a new moral narrative, rooted in sustainable development, oriented toward the common good. We need this narrative now more than ever, and young people must drive it. And it must be predicated on a shift in values—which is what this symposium is all about.

As Pope Francis said in *Laudato Si'*, “We must regain the conviction that we need one another, that we have a shared responsibility for others and the world, and that being good and decent are worth it.” *Being good and decent are worth it*. That first means having a proper understanding of what “good” actually means.