The Austere Life

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If in Europe the esoteric gesture was often only a pretext for the blindest self-interest, the concept of austerity, though hardly ship-shape or watertight, still seems, in emigration, the most acceptable lifeboat. Only a few, admittedly, have a seaworthy example at their disposal. To most boarders, it threatens starvation or madness.

Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia*

“Austerity” is not an economic category, yet we encounter it almost daily nowadays as an economic modifier.[[1]](#footnote--1) When Pope Francis derides society’s enthrallment to money or calls for more jobs creation, he is universally understood to be condemning governments’ austerity measures. Similarly, and ironically, he has himself, it is said, imposed austerity measures on the Vatican, including a hiring freeze. These are our all-to-familiar encounters with austerity, and they hearken back to the etymological origin of the term, which denotes a harsh or bitter taste. Austerity measures are bitter pills.

However, Pope Francis does not deploy the term “austerity” in any of the languages through which he communicates his views on economic matters. What one does find in his writings and pronouncements is an entirely different usage of the term. Addressing a group of soon-to-be-created Cardinals in February 2014, he extolled them, “please, to receive this appointment with a simple and humble heart. And, while you ought to do this with gladness and joy, do so in a way that this sentiment is far from any kind of expression of worldliness, from any celebration alien to the evangelical spirit of austerity, moderation and poverty.”[[2]](#footnote-0) Similarly, news stories have often referred to the positive reactions of Catholics and others to the Pope’s austere lifestyle, symbolized by his decision not to live in the sumptuous apartment reserved for the pontiff but rather in a guesthouse elsewhere in the Vatican, or to eschew the papal limousine for a Ford Focus. So here we have a different, second sense of austerity, one denoting an aversion to ostentation and excess. The political significance of the difference between this meaning of austerity and the popular one needs explication.

The bitter pill of what have come to be called austerity policies is justified, in economic terms, by the expectation that these policies will rectify market imbalances and lead, in the long term, to economic growth. Much of the criticism of these policies focuses on exactly this point, attempting to demonstrate that they have failed. In April 2013, University of Massachusetts economists Robert Pollin and Michael Ash reported on research they had conducted along with a PhD student, Thomas Herndon, that revealed statistical flaws and coding errors in an academic paper that had appeared three years earlier, written by Harvard economists Carmen Reinhart and Kenneth Rogoff, which claimed that economic growth fell off sharply when national debts reached 90 per cent of gross domestic product. Reinhart-Rogoff had been cited by the likes of Paul Ryan and the UK’s Chancellor of the Exchequer George Osborne in their arguments to cut government spending and reduce public debt. The UMass economists showed that the argument concerning the 90 percent threshold is false, throwing “austerity economics” into doubt. Nobel Laureate and New York Times op-ed columnist Paul Krugman and others then relied on this critique to argue in favor of increased spending in a slump and to say that austerity policies don’t work in such a setting.[[3]](#footnote-1) Further, given that these policies demonstrably do not work, their continued pursuance must be based on a moral argument rather than an economic one: “‘debt is evil, debtors must pay for their sins, and from now on we all must live within our means.’ And that kind of moralizing is the reason we’re mired in a seemingly endless slump.”[[4]](#footnote-2)

Adam Smith’s views on the matter are instructive here. In *The* *Wealth of Nations*, Smith judged every prodigal an enemy, every frugal man a friend of the public good because the first squandered and the second augmented the national capital.[[5]](#footnote-3) This focus on productive versus unproductive expenditure led Ronald Blyth to argue that Smith’s emphasis on parsimony provides “the moral arguments against debt that still resonate today,” and are thus among the intellectual foundations of contemporary austerity measures.[[6]](#footnote-4) But Smith was not as contemporary as all that. Still with one foot in an older tradition of political economy, Smith, like Pope Francis, deployed the term austere in what I have characterized as the second, critical sense.

In every civilized society, in every society where the distinction of ranks has once been completely established, there have been always two different schemes or systems of morality current at the same time; of which the one may be called the strict or austere; the other the liberal, or, if you will, the loose system. The former is generally admired and revered by the common people: The latter is commonly more esteemed and adopted by what are called people of fashion. The degree of disapprobation with which we ought to mark the vices of levity, the vices which are apt to arise from great prosperity, and from the excess of gaiety and good humour, seems to constitute the principal distinction between those two opposite schemes or systems.[[7]](#footnote-5)

Smith’s categorization of two moral systems, the austere and the liberal, is grounded in the distinction of “ranks,” and the dynamic between the two systems that he goes on to describe will be important to what I want to explore further. “Almost all religious sects have begun among the common people, from whom they have generally drawn their earliest, as well as their most numerous proselytes,” Smith notes.

The austere system of morality has, accordingly, been adopted by those sects almost constantly, or with very few exceptions; for there have been some. It was the system by which they could best recommend themselves to that order of people to whom they first proposed their plan of reformation upon what had been before established. Many of them, perhaps the greater part of them, have even endeavoured to gain credit by refining upon the austere system, and by carrying it to some degree of folly and extravagance; and this excessive rigour has frequently recommended them more than any thing else to the respect and veneration of the common people.[[8]](#footnote-6)

The “vices of levity” are always ruinous to the common people, Smith observed. The “people of fashion,” whose moral system is the liberal one, “are very apt to consider the power of indulging in some degree of excess as one of the advantages of their fortune, and the liberty of doing so without censure or reproach, as one of the privileges which belong to their station. In people of their own station, therefore, they regard such excesses with but a small degree of disapprobation, and censure them either very slightly or not at all.”[[9]](#footnote-7) But the common people might view such indulgence differently.

Indeed, austerity as a statement of moral disapprobation has a long history. In this respect, the ur-model of the austere life in the western tradition is Socrates. Famously ridiculed by Aristophanes and celebrated by Plato alike for his unconventionality, Socrates flaunted his indifference to money, claiming his poverty as a sign of his virtue in a democratic Athens that he saw as morally corrupted by the pursuit of pleasure and material wealth (*Ap.* 23b-c). In this, Socrates was updating an earlier Athenian stance of moral superiority over a decadent Persia. In *The Republic*, Plato signified how far Athens had fallen in the episode in the second book where Socrates is building a just city in words. Our needs, he says, will create the city, and from this he constructs a version of a simple division of labor that serves to satisfy minimal needs. When he describes a diet of vegetables, olives, cheese, figs, beans, and so on, Glaucon objects that he is describing a “city of pigs.” Socrates replies that, “All right, I understand. It isn’t merely the origin of a city that we’re considering, it seems, but the origin of a *luxurious* city. And that may not be a bad idea, for by examining it, we might very well see how justice and injustice grow up in cities. Yet the true city, in my opinion, is the one we’ve described, the healthy one, as it were. But let’s study a city with a fever, if that’s what you want” (*Rep.* 372.d-373a).[[10]](#footnote-8) The healthy city, like the healthy man, is an austere one, in control of its appetites. In this context, the target is undoubtedly a feverish Athens.

The Socratic image of the austere life as the virtuous and just life was carried forward largely by the Stoics (though the Cynic Diogenes made a spectacle of austerity, as it were[[11]](#footnote-9)) and transmitted through the western tradition in its Roman form. If there is a sense of decline from an austere virtue to an uncontrollable appetite in Socrates, that sense is overriding in Roman texts of the late Republic and early Imperial period.[[12]](#footnote-10) It is immediately visible in Livy’s *Ab urbe condita* (*From the Founding of the City*). In his preface, which dates from between 27 and 25 BC, Livy wishes his reader to reflect upon the virtues of Rome’s founders and to note the decline in virtue that he believes to have infected it over time. “No *res publica*,” he writes,

has ever been greater, or more sacred, or richer in good examples; nor have avarice and luxury immigrated so late into any state; nor has there been a place where so much honor was awarded for so long to poverty and frugality. In addition, by how much there was a lack of substance, by so much was there less desire; recently riches have brought in avarice, and overflowing pleasures, and lust [*praef*. 11-12].[[13]](#footnote-11)

Livy and Cicero bequeathed to history the incantation of the virtuous founders and others—Romulus, Cincinnatus, Camillus, and Cato, who was a particular hero of the Stoics, for instance—whose examples are to be imitated whenever the society shows signs of moral decline signaled by the private desire for wealth that trumps the common good.[[14]](#footnote-12) Seneca, who along with Cicero probably had the greatest influence on subsequent writers in the Stoic moral tradition, asserted in the second of his *Epistulae Morales ad Lucilium* that, “It is not the man who has too little who is poor, but the one who hankers after more. . . . You ask what is the proper limit to a person’s wealth? First, having what is essential, and second, having what is enough.”[[15]](#footnote-13)

Peter Brown has recently shown the engagement with Roman authors such as these by early Christian writers on the issue of wealth. Of particular importance for this discussion are the positions taken respectively by the late fourth and early fifth century figures, Ambrose, Jerome, and Augustine. Indeed, Ambrose rewrote Cicero’s *De officiis* in order to adapt his conception of the *res publica* to the Church, but he also harkened back to Seneca in invoking an innocent past when nature’s riches were shared, before the institution of private property.[[16]](#footnote-14) The repeated attacks on avarice were Ambrose’s instrument as he played to the ears of the poor, whom he understood as constituting a Christian *populus*, while reminding the rich of their responsibility of generosity.[[17]](#footnote-15)

Jerome, “the persistent advocate of ascetic renunciation,” mirrors Livy in bemoaning the decline of the Church from its heroic origin to his own times, when it “has grown great in power and riches and has shrunk in spiritual energy.”[[18]](#footnote-16) But Jerome’s intention was in some sense opposite to Ambrose’s. Jerome addressed the social elite and preached an extreme doctrine of sexual abstinence and a view of absolute poverty that harkened back to the Cynics.[[19]](#footnote-17) But whereas Ambrose deployed his assault on greed in order to facilitate a cohesive Christian *populus*, some of the late Roman rich embraced Jerome’s message as a mark of distinction, separating themselves from “ordinary,” less rigorous Christians.[[20]](#footnote-18)

Ambrose was himself part of the Roman elite before he became bishop of Milan. Jerome came from a provincial backwater but had rich parents. One scholar has said of him that, “His attraction sees to have been to the ascetic idea rather than to the ascetic life.”[[21]](#footnote-19) The same can be said of his patrons, for whom care of the poor was less important than their own self-image.

Augustine, like Jerome, came from the provinces, but grew up in relatively modest circumstances. When he described himself as poor he meant not that he was impoverished but rather not wealthy, or at least not as wealthy as others.[[22]](#footnote-20) We should perhaps bear this in mind when, in *The City of God*, Augustine praises Roman examples of voluntary poverty accepted for the public good in order to deter any sense of pride on the part of Christians for making similar sacrifices. “Those Romans,” he writes,

had a republic richly endowed with all resources (and ‘republic’ means ‘state of the people,’ ‘state of the country,’ ‘commonwealth’), while they themselves lived in poverty in their own homes. So much so that one of them, who had already been consul twice, was dismissed from the senate by the censor’s ban, because it was discovered that he had ten pounds of silver plate. Such was the poverty of men whose triumphs enriched the public treasury. It is a far nobler resolution that leads Christians to regard their riches as belonging to all, according to the principle described in the Acts of Apostles; by which everything is shared out according to individual need, no one claims anything as his individual property, and everything belongs to the common stock.[[23]](#footnote-21)

Inspired in part by Cicero’s Stoic sense of republican virtue and in part by the writings of the mystic Plotinus and his focus on the infinite, Augustine formulated his conception of a “spiritual communism,” which entailed the abandonment of private property in favor of the public good, even if only in the small republic of the monastery. [[24]](#footnote-22)

It was something akin to this that perhaps led Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels to remark that, “nothing is easier than to give to Christian asceticism a socialist tinge. Has not Christianity declaimed against private property, against marriage, against the state? Has it not preached their replacement by charity and poverty, celibacy and mortification of the flesh, monasticism and the organized church? Saintly socialism is but the holy water with which the priest blesses the fulminations of the aristocrat.”[[25]](#footnote-23) Augustine’s monastic model did indeed entail the abolition of private property, which is what set him apart from Cicero and Seneca, but the harsher model of Christianity belonged to Jerome, whose writings sustained rather than threatened his wealthy patrons. When we speak of Christian asceticism we blur the difference between these models. That difference, I wish to argue is between asceticism and austerity.

Note that in Pope Francis’ comments to the new cardinals, quoted above, he referred to “the evangelical spirit of austerity, moderation and poverty.” Austerity and poverty are separate elements of the invoked spirit, while “moderation” would seem to debar the extreme acts of mortification to which Marx and Engels refer. I understand the Pope’s invocation of austerity to be closer in spirit to a Stoic moderation than to the self-denying poverty characteristic of the ascetic.[[26]](#footnote-24)

According to the *OED*, “austere” is one way to define “ascetic” in its adjectival form. However, while the latter can also be used as a noun, the former cannot[[27]](#footnote-25) The ascetic is “One of those who in the early church retired into solitude, to exercise themselves in meditation and prayer, and in the practice of rigorous self-discipline by celibacy, fasting, and toil.” Or, “One who is extremely rigorous in the practice of self-denial, whether by seclusion or by abstinence from creature comforts.” This sense of a practice of self-denial and abstinence is the one deployed by Max Weber in his famous *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, albeit in a post-Reformation world, once asceticism “strode into the market-place of life, slammed the door of the monastery behind it, and undertook to penetrate just that daily routine of life with its methodicalness, to fashion it into a life in the world, but neither of nor for this world.”[[28]](#footnote-26) In his discussion of the prodigal vs. the frugal man, Adam Smith postulated that, while “the passion for present enjoyment” is occasionally incapable of restraint, for most people most of the time, “the principle of frugality seems not only to predominate, but to predominate very greatly” because of a universal desire to better one’s condition through saving.[[29]](#footnote-27) For Weber, this principle is one that has *become* universal as a result of the Calvinist notion of a calling: “the religious valuation of restless, continuous, systematic work in a worldly calling, as the highest means to asceticism, and at the same time the surest and most evident proof of rebirth and genuine faith, must have been the most powerful conceivable lever for the expansion of that attitude toward life which we have here called the spirit of capitalism.”[[30]](#footnote-28) The controversy over the specific link to Calvinism in Weber’s interpretation is of no importance here. What is important is the connection made by both Smith and Weber between asceticism and economic growth.[[31]](#footnote-29)

To draw out the political significance in the present context between asceticism and austerity, consider the fact that the austere can be deployed as an aesthetic category while the ascetic carries no aesthetic meaning. Modernist art and design is austere in its minimalism, calling the architecture of Mies van der Rohe to mind. In literature, the plays of Samuel Beckett exemplify an austere style. We may say of a desert landscape that it is austerely beautiful. The essence of austerity in this minimalist sense, as in the usage I attributed to Pope Francis, above, is opposition to unnecessary ornament and ostentation, an ethic of simplicity and sufficiency.[[32]](#footnote-30)

Because the proponents of so-called austerity measures and their opponents all understand austerity as asceticism, they are engaged in a dialogue that is bounded by the imperatives of economic growth, which is to say entirely within the logic of capitalism. It is in this context, within a late capitalist society, that what might otherwise be construed as a moral critique marshaled from the point of view of the austere life against the corruption engendered by the pursuit of material wealth becomes a fundamental political critique. Recall that Smith argued that the austere system of morality is the moral system of the common people and that the fluctuation between it and the liberal moral system of the “people of fashion” is related to “the degree of disapprobation with which we ought to mark the vices of levity, the vices which are apt to arise from great prosperity, and from the excess of gaiety and good humour.” The popularity of Pope Francis and his focus on the austere life may then be seen in this context as a reaction against the perceived indulgences of unscrupulous bankers and brokers, as represented, for example, in Martin Scorcese’s film, *The Wolf of Wall Street*. It is important, however, to see also that while possibly triggered by reaction, the austere life is embedded in a positive vision radically at odds with the one that drives the indulgences of the “liberal system.” The Pope articulated this positive view through a critique of what he identified as the “pathologies” of the contemporary economic system, one cause of which is “our relationship with money, and our acceptance of its power over ourselves and our society.”

Consequently the financial crisis which we are experiencing makes us forget that its ultimate origin is to be found in a profound human crisis. In the denial of the primacy of human beings! We have created new idols. The worship of the golden calf of old (cf. *Ex* 32:15-34) has found a new and heartless image in the cult of money and the dictatorship of an economy which is faceless and lacking any truly humane goal.

The worldwide financial and economic crisis seems to highlight their distortions and above all the gravely deficient human perspective, which reduces man to one of his needs alone, namely, consumption. Worse yet, human beings themselves are nowadays considered as consumer goods which can be used and thrown away. We have started a throw-away culture. This tendency is seen on the level of individuals and whole societies; and it is being promoted! In circumstances like these, solidarity, which is the treasure of the poor, is often considered counterproductive, opposed to the logic of finance and the economy. While the income of a minority is increasing exponentially, that of the majority is crumbling. This imbalance results from ideologies which uphold the absolute autonomy of markets and financial speculation.[[33]](#footnote-31)

While the ascetic can be conceptualized as having an economic meaning when interpreted as frugality, or economizing of resources, there is a deep sense in which austerity as I have treated it here is a profoundly un- or anti-economic concept. The austere life entails a rejection of consumption as a self-defining element. The austere life is antithetical to economic growth fueled by the production and satisfaction of expanding need through the transformation of desire into need, which is of the essence of a capitalist economy. The bitter pills of so-called austerity measures are justified in terms of future growth and are therefore a generalized ascetic program based on an individual logic of self-restraint and deferred gratification aimed at the weakest elements of society. Opponents propose economic stimulus, which has the merit of sparing the weakest greater hardship but also the effect of preserving the order that systematically produces them. By contrast, an austere politics entails the abandonment of that shared logic of perpetual growth and the promise entailed in abandoning it of a redistribution of wealth and hence of power. So while liberals and conservatives debate the meaning of Pope Francis’ interventions wholly within the framework of capitalism—is he really for or against free markets?—perhaps his popular appeal is a reflection of the “austere system” that resonates with the common people, as Adam Smith might have foreseen.

1. Mark Blyth, *Austerity: The History of a Dangerous Idea* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013): 98-99. [↑](#footnote-ref--1)
2. http://www.vatican.va/holy\_father/francesco/letters/2014/documents/papa-francesco\_20140112\_nuovi-cardinali\_en.html# [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
3. http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/johncassidy/2013/04/the-rogoff-and-reinhart-controversy-a-summing-up.html. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
4. http://www.nytimes.com/2010/11/01/opinion/01krugman.html?pagewanted=print. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
5. Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, 2 vols., ed. R. H. Campbell and A. S. Skinner (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976): 340-43. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
6. Blyth, *Austerity*, 114. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
7. Ibid. 794. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
8. Ibid. 794-95. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
9. Ibid. 794. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
10. Translations from *Apology* and *Republic* by G.M.A. Grube, rev. C.D.C. Reeve, in *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett, 1997). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
11. See the discussion of shamelessness in Raymond Geuss, *Public Goods, Private Goods* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2001), chap. II. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
12. See Catherine Edwards, *The Politics of Immorality in Ancient Rome* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 20-22, 176-78, and *passim*. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
13. Andrew Feldherr’s translation in his *Society and Spectacle in Livy’s History* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998), 39-40. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
14. Machiavelli follows the Romans not only in his emphasis on the importance of the virtuous founder, but also in his advice to founders to choose fertile land for their city’s site and impose a harsh necessity through laws to counteract the laziness and corruption that follow easy wealth (*Discorsi* I:1). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
15. Seneca, *Letters from a Stoic*, trans. Robin Campbell (London: Penguin, 1969), 34. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
16. Peter Brown, *Through the Eye of a Needle: Wealth, the Fall of Rome, and the Making of Christianity in the West, 350-550 AD* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012): 131. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
17. Brown emphasizes the discomfort of the rich in the face of Ambrose’s sermons: “When they entered a Christian basilica, the rich were exposed to the gaze of a crowd of hundreds drawn from all classes, many of whom might have had good reason to resent them. It was a venue more claustrophobic than was the amphitheater in which the notables of the city had long faced their ‘people.’ In this situation, a bishop not only spoke out to defend the poor. He also had it in his power either to shame or to shield the rich.” Ibid., 142. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
18. Quoted in ibid., xxv. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
19. Ibid., 266. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
20. Ibid., 259-72. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
21. Megan Hale Williams, in *The Monk and the Book: Jerome and the Making of Christian Scholarship* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006): 31. Quoted in Brown, *Through the Eye of a Needle*, 261. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
22. Ibid., 151-52. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
23. Augustine, *City of God*, ed. David Knowles (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972): 210-11. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
24. Brown, *Through the Eye of a Needle*, 178-83. Brown attributes the term “spiritual communism” to Goulven Madec. Ibid., 183 n.34. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
25. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, in Terrell Carver, ed., *Marx: Later Political Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996): 21-22. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
26. Of course, care for the poor is entailed in the notion of poverty here, and there are many avenues of Catholic tradition he is treading. I do not claim that he is following Ambrose or Augustine rather than his namesakes Francis Xavier and Francis of Assisi. Instead, I am reading his comments in relation to the present situation and within the framework I have laid out in order to advance a particular interpretation of austerity. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
27. Or at least anymore, since its meaning as an astringent or bitter substance is not obsolete. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
28. Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (New York: Scribner’s, 1958): 154. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
29. Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, 341-42. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
30. Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, 172. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
31. Marx also saw a connection between Protestantism and capitalism: “The cult of money has its asceticism, its self-denial, its self-sacrifice—economy and frugality, contempt for mundane, temporal and fleeting pleasures; the chase after the *eternal* treasure. Hence the connection between English Puritanism, or also Dutch Protestantism, and money-making.” Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy (Rough Draft)*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (London: Penguin, 1993): 232. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
32. Which is not to say that the objects produced by modernist minimalism could not take on a patina of luxury by a kind of inversion. See Thomas de Monchaux, “Why Less Isn’t Always More,” *New York Times*, Feb. 25, 2012: <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/26/opinion/sunday/why-less-isnt-always-more.html>. For a brilliant defense of the modernist aesthetic, see William H. Gass, “Making Ourselves Comfortable,” *New York Times*, August 3, 1986. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
33. http://www.vatican.va/holy\_father/francesco/speeches/2013/may/documents/papa-francesco\_20130516\_nuovi-ambasciatori\_en.html. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)