

A SYNTHESIS OF COMMERCE AND CHRISTIANITY IN FREDERIC BASTIAT

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department

of Political Science

University of Houston

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the requirements of the Degree of

Master of Arts

By

Wesley A. Gant

May, 2014

INTRODUCTION

One of the most important figures of the 19th century was a man largely ignored by intellectual history. Few Frenchmen are as well-renowned as the great American traveler Alexis DeTocqueville. Yet his own contemporary, Frédéric Bastiat, who was arguably more influential in his own time, was all but forgotten for many decades and is rarely mentioned in mainstream academia today. The circles in which his work is discussed are relatively small and almost exclusively libertarian. However, even these groups who champion Bastiat's work tend to misunderstand the full context and meaning of his contribution, and therefore misrepresent it. I aim to fill out this context, enabling a more complete view of Bastiat and his work through an analysis of his religious experience.

One might say that the recovery of Bastiat's work has come in two waves. The first occurred during the latter part of the 20th century, as the Foundation for Economic Education published several books written by or about Bastiat. The second wave is occurring as this is written. A sudden interest in the principles of classical liberalism—perhaps sparked by debates over the role of government during the Obama administration—has identified Bastiat as a fruitful source. This is likely due to the fact that, as I will show, Bastiat intended his work to be of great use to the layperson. However, accessibility to Bastiat's work in English is quite narrow, which has led to several recent projects aimed at translating and promoting more of his work. Thus, we are at a new turning point in the discussion to shape our understanding of who Bastiat was, what his primary concerns were, what he was attempting to do, and how to best analyze his contribution in light of these considerations.

Bastiat was an economist—and some would add political philosopher—whose pamphlets sparked a movement for free trade in one of the most powerful nations on the planet. His terse words, exceptional wit and entertaining stories capture one of the most potent arguments for political and economic liberty in existence, and have been reprinted for millions. In particular, Bastiat was a forceful critic of state protectionism and unintended consequences. This is where the story ends for most of his readers.

Scholarship has focused almost entirely on Bastiat's economic views without taking into account his religious claims. To extend a more well-rounded context, I argue in this thesis that Frédéric Bastiat's work is best understood as an attempt to reconcile two convictions: on one hand the observed realities of a commercial order founded on natural self-interest, and on the other hand his belief in the tenets of the Christian faith, including purpose, order and virtue. I will show that Bastiat was deeply concerned about alleged “antagonisms” between faith and free trade—as well as between faith and science—and sought to make the case through natural law that these are critical facets of a holistic worldview. Such a framework, he argued, pointed the way to human peace and progress through limited government. Not content with a purely utilitarian economic argument, Bastiat grounds his claim in ethics.

If correct, my thesis offers a clearer view of the core motivations and convictions which led to a profusion of writing in Bastiat's last years, and can provide insights for a better analysis of his work. Why did he follow one path of reasoning over another? Why did he use particular language, or publish his ideas in a particular format? Questions like these and many others are assisted by a better understanding of Bastiat *the man* than we currently have available. My thesis therefore builds on current biographies to frame

Bastiat's contribution in terms of his central convictions.

In making my argument, I will first show that Bastiat struggled to reconcile in his own young mind the problem of seemingly opposite but deeply held principles. Having delved into decades of quiet scholarship, Bastiat emerges a forceful proponent of a worldview that brings these together, relying heavily on a concept he calls the "law of responsibility." I will show that one of his primary goals was to convince the world that one need not reject commerce to embrace Christianity, or vice versa. Indeed, he argues, the tenets of Christianity suggest a divine order that includes political and economic freedom. I will therefore explore the natural law system he puts forward to merge Catholic doctrines with the principles of classical liberalism. The reader may notice a heavy use of long quotes in which Bastiat strays from point to which I am drawing attention. I have chosen to leave many of these quotes intact only to illustrate a theme of this paper: Bastiat was at all times cognizant of the role of faith as justification for every reasonable argument, and he frequently uses Christian concepts as the threads which bind his whole philosophy. Again, it is the goal of this paper to place his political and economic ideas back into their context.

LITERATURE REVIEW

For a 20th century audience, Frederic Bastiat owes his emergence from obscurity to Leonard Reed and the Foundation for Economic Education (FEE), the organization he co-founded with free market economist Henry Hazlitt, and over which he presided for 37 years (Read 2008). Reed took notice of a dissertation by a young man named Dean Russell, a student of William Ropke at the Graduate Institute of International Studies,

University of Geneva. The relationship between Reed and Russell led to the development of the dissertation into a book titled *Frederic Bastiat: Ideas and Influence*, the first of many Bastiat-related books published by FEE. The book—a general biography of the life and work of Bastiat—was the first in such work in the United States, although similar books were published in France at the end of the 19th century. In it, Russell paints Bastiat as an effective writer and advocate of free trade, who made the economic principles of Smith, Quesnay and Say accessible to a broad French audience, but who lacked originality as a theorist.

Over the last half century, this has been the predominant view of Bastiat among economists, which explains his curious absence in most textbooks on economics or intellectual history. However, George Roche, writing in *Frederic Bastiat: A Man Alone* only two years after Russell—and published again by FEE as *Free Markets, Free Men* in 1993—noted several innovations in Bastiat’s analysis. While he echoes Russell’s general findings, he credits Bastiat with drawing attention to the economic idea of “what is seen and what is not seen,” the application of economic principles to the ballot box, and the limits of political solutions in commercial society (Roche 2003). Bastiat may be considered a proto-Austrian economist, establishing a collection of ideas that would be picked up later by such writers as Carl Menger, Ludwig Von Mises, Friedrich Hayek, James Buchanan and Anthony Downs. Indeed, this is the precise thesis put forward in a recent book by Robert Leroux, who argues in *Political Economy and Liberalism: The Economic Contribution of Frédéric Bastiat* that Bastiat’s influence spawned a movement that paved the way for these well-known voices in economics and political science. The book was rewarded with the "Prix Charles Dupin" by the Académie des Sciences Morales

et Politiques of Paris, Economics Section, in 2008 (Médias 2014).

The view of Bastiat as a significant contributor to modern economic thought is gradually taking hold, at least among more libertarian-leaning academics. A web forum discussion inspired by Leroux's work took place during July 2013 on the specific topic of Bastiat's contribution (Leroux 2014). In the discussion, David Hart provides perhaps the most elaborate list of the ideas today's economists owe to Frederic Bastiat:

1. His methodological individualism
2. Rethinking the classical theory of rent
3. The rejection of Malthusian limits to population growth
4. The quantification of the impact of economic events
5. The idea of "spontaneous" or "harmonious" order
6. The interconnectedness of all economic activity
7. His theory of the "economic sociology" of the State
8. His Public Choice-like theory of politics.

As Director of Liberty Fund's Online Library of Liberty and Academic Editor of the organization's *Collected Works of Frederic Bastiat*—the largest collection of Bastiat's work in English—Hart's authority on the subject lends weight to these observations. In preparation for this thesis, I had the benefit of speaking with Dr. Hart, who provided the index to Liberty Fund's forthcoming volume—the third of six. According to Hart, "most accounts have focused on Bastiat the economist, not Bastiat the political or moral philosopher." He added that this was "an open field" as far as he knew.

My conversation with Hart confirmed my initial suspicion that very little has been written on Bastiat beyond of the works I have already mentioned, especially on his moral concerns. A search on JSTOR turns up only a handful of articles. Robert McGee (2010) argued that Bastiat’s early years as an accountant trained him to think of practical economic concepts such as opportunity cost, for which he was “ahead of his time.” Carlos Braun (2011) sides with Hart in noting that the “conspiracy of silence” against Bastiat—as Joseph Salerno (2006) labeled it—is unwarranted. Examining his ideas on method economic order, law, value, distribution and money, Braun argues that Bastiat was both “a good political scientist” and “a fine economist.” Buccino’s dissertation (1990) explores Bastiat’s educational philosophy compared to those of other classical liberals.¹

I have uncovered two items that explore, to some extent, Bastiat’s religious or ethical thought. M. G. O’Donnell’s brief 1993 essay shows that Bastiat saw two modes of correcting unjust behavior. The first, and “more beautiful” of the two references one’s internal sense of justice, so an individual does good because it is simply right. However, where this fails, humanity can appeal to a less inspiring “utilitarian” or “economic” ethics: the individual avoids injustice because the costs of the action are felt by him. For instance, one might avoid stealing only because of presumed legal ramifications, in the event of being caught. As Bastiat laid this out quite clearly in the second chapter of the second series of *Economic Sophisms*, there is little to disagree with here. I only wish to dig deeper, showing why and how Bastiat may have reached these conclusions through his religious ideas. The only work to my knowledge that explores this facet of Bastiat was

¹ Comments on the work of Salerno and Buccino were offered by Braun and McGee respectively. McGee noted that Buccino’s dissertation was never published.

published in 1991 and again in 2003 by the Acton Institute. In the small reader *Providence and Liberty*, Raoul Audouin shares a collection of passages that place many of Bastiat's ideas within a religious context. However, the slim volume provides very little analysis, which is limited to a brief preface and introduction.

The bulk of the work on Frederic Bastiat explores his economic ideas, their political implications, and the influence he garnered among the French people of the 19th century, and a subset of economists in the 20th century. My thesis does not argue that existing accounts are wrong, but that they have been developed beneath a dim lamp and are therefore less robust than they ought to be. While it is not necessary to share Bastiat's religious beliefs to accept his reasoning and conclusions, it is necessary to view him this context in order to understand his concerns and motivations, and thereby grasp his method. Bastiat was not arguing for free trade on the grounds of mere utilitarianism alone—although he includes this rationale—but on the grounds of virtue, purpose, harmony and order, which enables both Bastiat and his audience to embrace liberty without rejecting their most fundamental beliefs and values. As other writers have done, I will examine some of Bastiat's conclusions, but I hope to step further in tying them together to view his project in light of this greater objective.

BIOGRAPHY

A review of Bastiat's background provides a helpful window into the experiences and ideas that would shape his work. In the year 1801, Claude Frederic Bastiat was born in the provincial French town of Bayonne to a respected merchant and banking family (Russell 1985). Before his tenth birthday, both his mother then father died, leaving him to

live further inland with his grandfather in Mugron. There he attended several schools, including the Benedictine College of Soréze, where he would have been educated in the Catholic tradition. “The seed of his convictions was planted here” according to Raoul Audouin (2003). However, Bastiat decided to leave the school early and return to Bayonne to work with his uncle at the firm his late father had been a partner. It was here that, as McGee (2010) argues, Bastiat developed the practical business experience that would later surface in his writing and analysis. It was also during this time that Bastiat was introduced to the works of Jean Baptiste Say—a man he would later refer to as “my intellectual father” (Audouin 2003). In letters written to a friend, a 19 year old Bastiat wrote that “a good merchant must understand law and political economy,” and that his enthusiastic discovery of Say’s *Traite d’Economie Politique*, had taught him to always work from fundamental principles (Russell 1985). Indeed, constant reference to fundamental principles would become a defining feature of his work, and none could be more critical than the very starting point and purpose of the world as created and governed by God. In his youth, Bastiat was deeply curious about religion—the precepts of which, to him, appeared discordant with scientific knowledge. In the same year as his transformational discovery of J. B. Say’s economic ideas, he writes:

“What interests me most seriously is philosophy and religion. My soul is full of uncertainty and I can no longer tolerate that state. My mind refuses to admit faith, while my heart longs for it. Indeed, how could my mind bring together the grand ideas of Divinity and the childishness of some dogmas? On the other hand, how could my heart refrain from finding in the sublime morality of Christianity the proper rules of conduct?” (Audouin 2003)

A month later, and to the same friend, he writes that though he is uncertain about the “mythology” of certain catholic dogmas, “I believe in Divinity, in the immortality of the

soul, in the rewards of virtue and punishments for vice.” Here we see several concepts taking shape that will develop in Bastiat’s thought. First, an innate sense that there exists a beautiful order in the world that compels him toward belief in a great designer. Second, a commitment to standards of reasoning that demand evidence through observation. If grand metaphysical ideas are indeed true, and help explain social phenomena, they must be tamed according to empirical observation if they are to be accepted. Having eventually resolved this for himself, this is precisely what he sets out to do for the public.

Several relevant doctrines of Catholicism would have helped form Bastiat’s understanding of the universe and the individual’s role therein from a theological perspective.

The most obvious and fundamental concept is the existence of good and evil. Common among all branches of the Christian faith is a belief in a world created by a perfect sovereign, but corrupted and inhabited by evil. It is due to this corruption that humans experience pain and suffering, and must labor through all the trials of life. As the famous passage of Genesis 3 quotes the words of the Lord to Adam, having discovered his betrayal: “Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat food from it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return.”²

Bastiat refers directly to this scripture in *Economic Harmonies* to connect good and evil with pleasure and pain, the knowledge and experience of which is introduced to

² New International Version, accessed via BibleGateway.com

man in that moment. The Lord's admonishment is brought about only because the heart of man had chosen evil. We must surmise that, according to scripture, mankind would have enjoyed a peaceful and eternal life had he chosen differently. We read that it is only after this event that Adam is asked to slaughter his first animal—for sacrifice and clothing. Labor and death were, until that moment, completely unknown. Thus, Bastiat concludes, "Evil exists. It is inherent to human failing. It manifests itself in the moral as well as in the material domain" (Aoudoin 2003).

That these things would be the consequence of human choice highlights a second key factor in Christian thought: free will. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states that man is "a rational being" who is created "with free will and is master over his acts" (3.1.1.3). It is through this freedom that one "shapes one's own life," and engages the "force for growth and maturity in truth and goodness." The *Catechism* goes on to observe the application of this doctrine among humans in society:

"Every human person, created in the image of God, has the natural right to be recognized as a free and responsible being. All owe to each other this duty of respect. The right to the exercise of freedom, especially in moral and religious matters, is an inalienable requirement of the dignity of the human person. This right must be recognized and protected by civil authority within the limits of the common good and public order."

In this sense, Catholic doctrine embraces the free-thinking, free-acting individual, whose rights to such are properly defended by coercive force. The source of this right is human dignity, which is to say the sovereignty one has over one's personhood and future. These are themes that become prominent in Bastiat's writing.

Professor Brian Baugus referred to Bastiat as "a devout Catholic," (Baugus 2014) and Rev. Edmund Opitz said he was "devoutly religious" (Aoudoin 2003). As such,

Bastiat would have been familiar with these doctrines, which have been a feature of Catholic thought since at least St. Augustine in the 4th century (New Advent 2014). To be sure, Bastiat’s argument develops among remarkably similar lines. It may be argued, however, that the strength of Bastiat’s faith stands in question. The *Catholic Encyclopedia* states that he was “aloof from the Faith until the very eve of his death,” and quotes Proudhon—his intellectual adversary—as the authority on Bastiat’s words in his last hour: “I see, I know, I believe; I am a Christian” (New Advent 2014).

This interpretation is perhaps due to Bastiat’s reticence in publicly stating the specifics of his religious convictions. Much of his writing resembles the style of many enlightenment Deists, who alluded to “providence” in their prose, but who stopped short of identifying who or what was behind it. In his youth, Bastiat wrote a letter explaining his inner struggle to come to terms with his convictions. Reading it, one gains a sense of the inquiry that came to dominate his life:

“I confess, my friend, that the matter of religion keeps me in a state of hesitation, of uncertainty that begins to weigh heavily on me. How could one avoid seeing a mythology in the dogmas of our Catholic faith? And nonetheless, such a mythology is so beautiful, so consoling, so sublime that one might find it preferable to the truth. [...] My predicament is hardly bearable. My heart is burning with love and gratitude for my God, and I do not know a way to pay him the tribute of praise, which I owe him. [...] The unbeliever must necessarily construct a morality for himself ... but he will never be sure that some reason will not appear tomorrow for him to build another system. The religious man, however, has his path set for him; he is nurtured by a divine and permanent rule” (Audouin 2003)

Young Bastiat saw religion as desirable and intuitively reliable, even if not easily acceptable on empirical grounds. Yet, in maturity, these views shift in favor of religion. Many of his later remarks take a much more specific shape in attributing praise not to

providence or some mystical being, but to the biblical God. In a posthumously published chapter of *Economic Harmonies*, Bastiat declares that the “one ruling thought” that rules his work stands “at the very beginning of the Christian creed: I believe in God” (Audouin 2003). In a letter to his dearest friend Felix Coudroy, Bastiat reports that he follows several priests of distinction “regularly.” Elsewhere, he states quite directly: “The Lord saw it good to bind suffering with our nature... I submit without protest to the Lord’s decree, admitting moreover that I cannot imagine a better device... I do not simply bow to that generous and powerful hand—I also bless, admire and worship it” (Audouin 2003). These and many other passages reveal a man of sincere, if sometimes unsettled faith.

As Bastiat embraces more overtly religious language over time, he also develops a less confident view of scientific epistemology. Also found in *Economic Harmonies*, Bastiat writes that the social laws of responsibility and solidarity “should be viewed as a whole, in their common action, were it not that science, with its feeble vision and uncertain step, is reduced to its scientific method, that unfortunate crutch which constitutes its strength even as it betrays its weakness.” In parallel to Bastiat’s thought in regards to the state, we see recognition of both the unquestionable value of empirical science, as well as the dangers of failing to observe its boundaries. Within their proper roles, both science and the state perform critical yet limited functions.

It is perhaps true that Bastiat waited until the end of his truncated life to embrace a full commitment to Christianity. If so, it is also clear, however, that this was not a sudden development, but the culmination of many years of close friendship with the faith;

he had adopted the language and worldview of Christianity long before his rise to public prominence. To argue that he did not hold its theological tenets privately is a matter of speculation, and for all intents and purposes his thoughts and motives were clearly influenced by the religion he had found “so beautiful, so consoling, so sublime.”

For the thesis I am advancing, however, the extent to which Bastiat was “devout” in his Catholicity is not of import. What we must observe is that this free trade advocate was keenly aware that, just as the tenets of religion can be difficult to accept without scientific rationale, his arguments for economic freedom were likely to fail without the support of a moral order—in particular, the moral philosophy of Christianity, which had shaped Western civilization for nearly two thousand years.

THE DISMAL SCIENCE

Bastiat was intent to set himself apart from a particular brand of liberalism that he felt had abdicated the search for virtue. Writers such as Bernard Mandeville and Thomas Hobbes had advanced a philosophy in which the individual is ruled by selfish passion. While some concluded that the state must therefore assume complete control, many others seemed to praise self-interest, arguing that the role of the state is merely to stay out of the individual’s way. Adam Smith’s “invisible hand,” for example, asked nothing of citizens beyond the serving of their own interests—or, at least, such is the common interpretation.

In his own day, Bastiat confronted an audience that increasingly viewed economists with distaste. In 1849, economist Thomas Carlyle famously described his

field of study as “the dismal science.” More interesting is the context in which he coined the phrase. Upon showing that economic principles suggest a reintroduction of slavery, he laments that instead of a “gay science” like that of music, economics is “a dreary, desolate and, indeed, quite abject and distressing one; what we might call, by way of eminence, the *dismal science*.” It was so considered by its role in finding “the secret of this Universe in 'supply and demand,' and reducing the duty of human governors to that of letting men alone" (Persky 1990).

Jean-Jacques Rousseau represented the views of many when he criticized commerce as “the avid thirst for profit, it is effeminacy and the love of comfort that commute personal service for money... use money thus, and you will soon have chains.” He adds: “the better the state is constituted, the more does public business take precedence over private in the minds of the citizens” (Rousseau 1968).

In *The Problems and Promise of Commercial Society*, Dennis Rasmussen (1998) summarizes Rousseau’s critique of commerce into three arguments. First, the “division of laborers” separates members of society into classes, dulls their minds to their assigned tasks, and trains them to think of their own economic advancement, not their citizenship. Secondly, modernity has brought about what Rasmussen terms an “empire of opinion”: as interpersonal relations led to competition among men, and as our social status is so central to success in commercial society, men are trained to construct a facade, having the “Semblance of all the virtues without the possession of any” (Rousseau, *Arts and Sciences* 2014). For Rousseau, is it a sign of the captivity of man in civilized society that he should suppress his natural instincts and take upon himself such an artificial character as to “live only in the opinion of others” (Rousseau, *Origin and Inequality* 2014). Lastly,

Rousseau believed that commercial society traps individuals into a state of constant want—Rasmussen calls this an argument against the “pursuit of unhappiness.” In the early stage of man, his needs are few, such that he can satisfy them himself and rest content in his achievements. Rousseau recognizes that commercial society enables greater wealth and opportunity, but sees them as a curse in disguise; we become addicted to material riches and an elevated reputation, neither of which can ever fulfill our deepest needs. Thus, man becomes a slave to a perpetual struggle to advance himself, never realizing his potential for virtue and true liberty. Rousseau’s critique reflects three of the common arguments against commerce in Bastiat’s day.

A studious believer in the principles of economic liberty handed down from Smith, Say the Physiocrats and many others, Bastiat sought to defend and liberate economics from its dismal characterization, and provide a moral counterargument to Rousseau in favor of commerce. “If you believe that political economy rejects association, organization, and fraternity,” he writes, “you are mistaken” (Bastiat 2012, *Justice and Fraternity*) For Bastiat, the laws of economics dictate that services are exchanged for services. “But does this mean that we are unaware of the perpetual struggle between the wrong and the right?” he asks rhetorically. He asserts that unjust force and fraud are “the very things that we reject as breaches of the social laws of Providence” (Bastiat 1964) Elsewhere he clarifies that by the term “laissez faire,” he does not mean “let people alone, even when they commit an injustice.” Rather, he encourages his readers to “study the laws of Providence, admire them, and let them operate” (Audouin 2003) To Rousseau’s argument that commerce fundamentally rejects duty and virtue, Bastiat develops a response grounded in Christian theology, which emphasizes

precisely these characteristics.

THEOLOGICAL FRAMING

Bastiat argued, as we will see, that the principles of commercial freedom were entirely consistent with the precepts of Christian theology and ethics. The central claim of this position was Bastiat's notion that there exists order, purpose and harmony in the natural world, which should be a source of awe and inspiration, not disappointment. This choice of argument might have also found justification in other moral systems, but the Judeo-Christian ethos of the Western tradition was—if nothing else—an effective vehicle for the delivery of such a message to the mass public.

In order to establish an argument for virtue in freedom, it was critical for Bastiat to address the problem of self-interest. If man is exclusively motivated by selfish desires, as many of his contemporaries claim, freedom will always lead to antagonism among men. While Bastiat agrees with the classical liberal principle that man is driven by self-interest, he stresses that this is a morally neutral force, which may lead to virtuous or vicious outcomes in the hands of a given individual. Importantly, Bastiat identifies self-interest as the “motive force” of progress, and the moment we understand this role is the moment we stop viewing self-interest in negative terms. Self-interest, in other words, is what makes possible the pursuit and achievement of human happiness. Bastiat defines and gives purpose to self-interest in a theological context:

“Man suffers; society suffers. We ask why. This is equivalent to asking why God has given man feeling and free will. We know on this subject only what is revealed to us by the faith in which we believe. But whatever may have been God's plan, what we do know as a positive fact, what human knowledge can take as a starting point, is that man was created a sentient being endowed with free will. [...] Now, to be sentient is to be capable of receiving identifiable sensations,

that is, sensations that are pleasant or painful. Hence well-being and suffering. [...] The motive force is that inner, irresistible drive, the very essence of all our energy, which impels us to shun evil and to seek after the good. We call it the instinct of self-preservation, personal interest, or self-interest” (Bastiat 1964, 466).

In this way, Bastiat argues, man is not only “irresistibly disposed to prefer good to evil” but has the intellectual faculties necessary to distinguish between them.

If this account still falls short of inspirational, Bastiat argues that it is only in human freedom that we find the source of moral improvement. There are two reasons for this: first, what he calls the “natural laws of responsibility and solidarity” compel men to learn moral behavior over the course of a lifetime, and from generation to generation; secondly, the very presence of coercion distorts and negates the sincere moral motive for any individual. We will return to these themes in the course of this paper.

He therefore situated himself between two opposite extremes that are fundamentally at odds with this claim. It is worth quoting the following passage—only briefly referenced earlier—at length in order for the reader to grasp the way in which Bastiat formulates his argument from a central theological premise:

“In this book there is a central, dominant thought; it pervades every page, it gives life and meaning to every line. It is the thought that begins the Christian's creed: I believe in God.

Indeed, if this work differs from the writings of some economists, the difference consists in the fact that they seem to say: “We have little faith in God, for we see that the natural laws lead to disaster, and yet we say: *Laissez faire!* because we have even less faith in ourselves, and we realize that all human efforts to halt the operation of these laws merely hasten the day of catastrophe.”

If it differs from the works of the socialists, it is because they say: “We do indeed pretend to believe in God, but in reality we believe only in ourselves, since we want nothing to do with *laissez faire*, and each and every one of us offers his social plan as infinitely superior to that of Providence” (Bastiat 1964, 439)

In Bastiat's logic, a genuine trust in the sovereignty and grace of an omniscient and omnipotent God, combined with the fact of free will as the default position of humanity, leads reason only to the conclusion that freedom must play a role in God's ultimate plan.

Thus, demands for heavy regulation of the market deny the wisdom of God's design in favor of man's—which, curiously, is already deemed self-interested. Yet, while praise of liberty for the sake of private vices recognizes providential design, it ignores its purpose. Unlike later libertarian thinkers such as Nobel laureate Friedrich Hayek, who derived many concepts from Bastiat, Bastiat himself denied that liberty is valuable for its own sake. He argues instead that liberty must be protected not because of its intrinsic worth, but for what it accomplishes in the great story of man, namely, a continuous drive toward perfection.

Human perfectibility is a rugged terrain in Christian theology, which Bastiat navigated carefully. The scriptures explain that the world and mankind were perfectly created. Furthermore, Christ is held as the example of sinless human perfection for which every disciple must strive in pursuit of restoration with God. In heaven, man is to be restored to God and live a holy existence without sin. Yet, scripture is also clear that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). None can earn their place in heaven by their own power, and none can reasonably expect to attain perfection in a temporal life. Mankind must always recognize its depravity and dependence upon the grace of God.

Bastiat's theory of natural harmony is logically contingent upon the proposition of human perfectibility. He therefore frames his thesis in such a way that avoids potential

theological pitfalls:

“harmony does not mean the idea of absolute perfection, but the idea of unlimited progress. It has pleased God to attach suffering to our nature, since He has willed that we move from weakness to strength, from ignorance to knowledge, from want to satisfaction, from effort to result, from acquisition to possession, from privation to wealth, from error to truth, from experience to foresight. I bow without murmur before this decree, for I cannot imagine how else our lives could have been ordered. If, then, by means of a mechanism as simple as it is ingenious, He has arranged that all men should be brought closer together on the way toward a constantly rising standard of living, if He thus guarantees them—through the very action of what we call evil—lasting and more widely distributed progress, then, not content with bowing before this generous and powerful hand, I bless it, I marvel at it, and I adore it.

Consistent with Catholic teaching, Bastiat’s theory allows for two simultaneous realities in the human condition: a continuous state of both improvement and corruption. It served Bastiat’s purpose to point these consistencies out to his readers:

“Christians of all communions, unless you alone of all mankind doubt the divine wisdom as manifested in the most magnificent of God's works that it is given us to know, you will not find one word in this book that contravenes the strictest tenet of your moral code or the most mystical of your dogmas” (Bastiat 1964, 28)

Surveying the works of Bastiat, one can observe quickly that university faculty were not his primary audience, which offers further evidence of his actual intentions. Donald Boudreaux laments the unfortunate fact that “because of his sterling clarity and humor, and partly because so much of his effort was spent on fashioning vision-correction for the masses (rather than on building highly specialized microscopes and telescopes), Bastiat is held today – as he has been held for a long time – as having been something less than a first-rate economist. This attitude toward Bastiat is wholly unwarranted” (Leroux 2014). Until *Economic Harmonies*, published shortly before his death, Bastiat appears to have shown little interest in a traditional academic reputation.

Indeed, what pulled Bastiat out of the provincial shadows and small-town social taverns was the sheer lack of a pro-commerce voice among French influentials, and an opportunity to shift opinions and policy. He never completed college and had spent twenty years in a rather isolated mode of scholarship. In his first attempt at publishing his ideas, he sent articles to a French newspaper (Russell 1985). When he found this route unsatisfactory, he began his own journal, in which he published widely-accepted economic theories alongside his own—no doubt contributing further to his lack of visibility to later scholars. Writing to the son of Jean Baptiste Say, Bastiat announced his project to translate reports of the commercial freedom movement in England in hopes of inspiring the French masses: “People will see therein the partisan spirit attacked at its root,... the theory of markets for goods depicted not with pedantic methods but under popular and striking forms” (Audouin 2003). Beyond *Economic Harmonies* and his journal articles, most of his work was published in pamphlets that were small, colorful and very easy to read—clearly written for a broad audience with little or no education.

Dean Russell finds a notable influence on a young Frederic Bastiat’s writing style. In a letter to a friend, he wrote, “I have discovered a real treasure—a small volume of the moral and political philosophy of [Benjamin] Franklin. I am so enthusiastic about his style that I intend to adopt it as my own.” Russell notes that “Bastiat’s technique of presenting serious economic principles in amusing and terse story form” is clearly evident in his *Economic Sophisms* (Russell 2014). Such a presentation is undoubtedly intended to reach an audience for which standard academic writing would have been too complicated or too boring.

Bastiat’s goal was to educate the French commoner, for whom a strong reference

to religious concepts would have been meaningful. He therefore places these references at the core of his arguments in an attempt to unify two competing ideas: the empirical science from which he derived economic principles, and Christian theology, from which he derived purpose and virtue.

It is to this subject which I now turn. I will show that Bastiat formulated a theologically sound system of classical liberalism through a natural law explanation. This explanation combines the science of natural human phenomena with the order and ethics prescribed by the Christian worldview. This exploration will, I hope, suggest that to view Bastiat as merely a liberal economist is to misunderstand his project.

BASTIAT'S NATURAL LAW

The Enlightenment was dominated by attempts to root the human experience in practical and pure reason—to deduce an absolute science of everything. The argument for economic freedom in Bastiat's time was therefore largely materialistic and emphasized individualism. There were notable exceptions. Adam Smith and the moral sense theorists of Scotland held that “man naturally desires not only to be loved, but to be lovely; or to be that thing which is the natural and proper object of love.” Smith says that “nature, when she formed man for society, endowed him with an original desire to please” (Smith 1982, III.II). A feminine personification of “nature” here suggests this is not the same Creator we find in Bastiat's language. While Smith was clearly concerned with morality, the separation of his moral philosophy in one book from his economic philosophy in

another³ provides little clarity as to how he viewed one in the context of the other. John Locke appealed to natural law to show that “life, liberty and property” were inherent rights belonging to every individual irrespective of one’s community. Certainly these were moral rights. However, Locke grounds human rights in *self-preservation*—an argument which some found convenient for the pro-slavery position and other vicious objects pursued by self-interest, though Locke himself held to a more conservative moral system.

Bastiat similarly adopts a natural law argument to outline the rights and duties of both individuals and political authorities, but grounds his view in human *progress*. With nearly two hundred years between them, including substantial developments in the fields of politics and economics, Bastiat is able to build upon and, one may argue, improve upon Locke’s system. In doing so, he provides more convincing evidence that human liberty is not only a prosperous endeavor, but one fitted with moral rights and responsibilities, appropriate for the most devout of Catholics.

The concept of Natural Law finds its origins among the classical Greeks, and in particular, Aristotle, who contrasted “natural” and “conventional” justice in his *Nichomachean Ethics*. Unlike conventional justice, which is man-made and varies from one people to the next, natural justice for Aristotle “has the same validity everywhere, and does not depend on acceptance” (Aristotle 2000). The idea is passed on to the Roman world most notably by Cicero, who argued that “There is a true law, a right reason, conformable to nature, universal, unchangeable, eternal.” Cicero moves one step further, drawing implications for civil government and a basis for natural rights: “This law cannot

³ Respectively titled *A Theory of Moral Sentiments* and *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of The Wealth of Nations*

be contradicted by any other law, and is not liable either to derogation or abrogation. Neither the senate nor the people can give us any dispensation for not obeying this universal law of justice” (Cicero 1998, *The Republic*, book 3). Thus, from this Greco-Roman foundation, we understand Natural Law to be the universal set of ethical principles which are discoverable through reason, and exist beyond the actions of governments.

This line of thought would be advanced theologically by one of the greatest thinkers of the Catholic tradition, St. Thomas Aquinas, who described Natural Law as “the rational creature’s participation of the eternal law” (Aquinas 2010, *Summa Theologica*) Natural law is “eternal” in that it is a permanent feature of the human experience, as designed by the Creator. Like Aristotle and Cicero, Aquinas believed individuals come to understand Natural Law through their own independent reason—the law is, in a sense, written on the hearts of man. It thus serves a role in human teleology, guiding them toward what is good, away from what is evil, and ever toward holiness in God. As it pertains to rulers, natural law is that which advances the common good, and the legitimacy of laws is measured by this dictum (Thomistic Philosophy 2014).

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* today defines the common good as “ the sum total of those conditions of social life which allow people as groups and as individuals to reach their proper fulfillment” (Catholic Church 2006). It identifies “the human person”—not collective entities—as the “subject and end of all social institutions, but acknowledges that humans need community, as well as “a legitimate authority that preserves order and contributes to the realization of the common good.” This legitimacy is measured by the extent to which rulers are accountable to both their subjects and the

law itself. Furthermore, the principle of subsidiarity demands that “a community of a higher order should not assume the task belonging to a community of lower order and deprive it of its authority.”

We find then, in the Catholic tradition, several key positions. First, a view of the individual not as an isolated creature but a member of multiple social spheres, each having its own proper authority structure. Second, the notion that the purpose of all authority is the advancement of the common good, defined as the *fulfillment* of each individual. Third, that the sovereign of a given sphere (including the personal one) must reason and judge the actions which will produce such fulfillment. Fourth, that the laws governing actions and consequences are divine, universal and eternal. It follows that to the extent one understands and adheres to these laws in one’s given sphere of sovereignty, one draws closer to the divine plan.

In arguing that modern commercial society is consistent with these tenets, Bastiat develops a natural law explanation that gives economic sovereignty to the personal sphere, and what may be called *retributive* sovereignty—the right and responsibility of punishing disruptions of justice—to the political sphere.

Before examining this argument, we must address the method used to determine natural law principles. How does reasoning lead us to our “proper fulfillment”? What is the science by which we can test, measure and describe that which makes up the natural law of all mankind?

We are presented with an epistemological and normative problem: we must verify that something we call *right* and another we call *wrong* do indeed exist, then reach some conclusion of how humanity might determine *what* is right and *what* is wrong. In other

words, to speak of justice, we must have reason to believe we are dealing with something objective and absolute, not subject to imagination and personal preference. This must be done to meet Bastiat's standard of scientific truth.

In Bastiat's methodology, a judgment on the morality of an action is based on its effects, considering all available evidence. In other words, if an action produces happiness and well-being it is good, but if it is destructive, it is bad. Moreover, temporary pleasures may not be considered good if they are ultimately counter-productive to human fulfillment. Therefore, an act that causes injury either to oneself or to another can be considered wrong, unethical or unjust. This rather utilitarian view of ethics is consistent with Christianity in Bastiat's understanding. We find an example of this thought in the following passage:

“It will probably be a subject of eternal debate between the philosophically minded and the religiously minded to determine whether an act is vicious because supernatural revelation has declared it to be so regardless of its consequences, or whether revelation has declared it to be vicious because it brings about bad consequences. I believe that Christianity can take its stand in favor of this second opinion. [...] It can hardly be admitted that God, who is the supreme principle of order, made an arbitrary classification of human acts and promised that some should be punished and others rewarded without any reference to their effects, that is, whether discordant or in tune with the universal harmony. When He said: ‘Thou shalt not kill. Thou shalt not steal,’ surely it was His intention to forbid certain acts because they are harmful to man and society, which are His handiwork” (Bastiat 1964).

For Bastiat, we learn good and evil by their fruit—whether they are “in tune with universal harmony.” He therefore believes it is necessary to draw our understanding of human nature and morality from observation across history, cultures and classes, identifying universal cause and effect relationships. Believing this gives classical liberalism an advantage over its intellectual adversaries, he writes, “the [liberal school] proceeds in a scientific way. It observes, studies, groups and classifies facts and

phenomena, it looks for relationships of cause and effect; and from all these observations it deduces general laws according to which men prosper or waste away.... The [socialist] school ... proceeds through the imagination. Society is for it not a subject for observation but a field for experimentation; it is not a living body with organs to be studied but a piece of inert matter on which the legislator imposes an artificial arrangement” (Bastiat 2012).

When we use this qualitative method, he argues, we find that certain kinds of behavior are more conducive to things that humans perceive to be good: love, peace, joy, prosperity, leisure, security, courage, positive emotional or physical feelings, et cetera. Classical liberals generally describe these using the terms “pleasure” or “utility.” Two elements of Bastiat’s methodology are important here. First, unlike those who might emphasize impulse and short-term gains, he takes “pleasure” to mean both momentary and long-term, so the cost difference between the two can be calculated. For example, a short-term pleasure gained by eating fatty foods may not be worth extra pounds gained in the long-term, so people often weigh these considerations and defer momentary pleasure by making healthier choices. Secondly, this calculation must be made by the *individual*, from his or her own perspective. Perhaps some people find the benefit of certain foods greater than the cost of being overweight. David Hart claims this “methodological individualism” is one of Bastiat’s original contributions to the field of economics (Leroux 2014). The evaluation of trade-offs between temporary and long-term pleasure becomes an important element in Bastiat’s system of natural moral education, which I will explore later.

Though value is determined by the individual, we are naturally concerned with

the effects of certain conditions upon individuals *in society*: Do they prosper? Are they virtuous? If we observe across human civilization certain widespread norms and practices that cultivate long-term utility for society—broadly defined—we conclude it is good. Conversely, if outcomes are painful or destructive, we consider the behavior that caused them to be bad. Through these observations we begin to formulate a foundation of natural law ethics and our first notion of rights. This conception of justice rests on a self-evident reality that can be observed and understood through reason.

Having established that good and evil—pleasure and pain—do exist, and tend to bring about a certain commonality in measuring human happiness, Bastiat proceeds from the assumption that people share general agreement on the greater *ends* we seek, so we differ primarily on the best *means* for achieving them. “I do not intend to query either the intentions or morality of anyone whomsoever,” he writes. “I am attacking an idea that I consider to be false and a practice that appears to me unjust” (Bastiat 2012, 119).

If ethics can be understood as right action that produces real human goods, then it stands to reason that these goods have a role to play in the progress of mankind. Bastiat therefore viewed ethics as directives embedded into the purpose of man, which was, for him, a *theological* proposition. This advances the Catholic position that the ultimate purpose of man is reunion with a perfect God and a perfect creation. In this sense, Bastiat is a natural law thinker, who believed the role of law is to assist mankind in a progression toward good, away from evil. As Bastiat admits, this leads logically toward the perfection of mankind, and while George Roche (1993) claims he did not believe humans were completely perfectible in their temporal state, Bastiat was clearly committed to the notion that continual progress was man’s natural course. As we will see in the following pages,

he derives this commitment from a particular view of man's nature, purpose and duty.

THE CREATED WORLD

Bastiat's understanding of natural law begins with his view of the world in which man is placed. This begins, as noted, with a recognition that good and evil exist. Man is exposed to these through the experience of pleasure and pain, in broad terms. We find an example of this recognition in *Economic Harmonies*:

“Genesis relates how, when the first man had been driven from the earthly paradise because he had learned to distinguish right from wrong—to know good and evil—God pronounced this sentence upon him: [...] Here we have acts and habits producing good or bad consequences—or human nature. Here are toil, sweat, thorns, tribulation, and death—or human nature.”

A second critical and undeniable fact of this world is scarcity: everything in existence—from physical objects to the experience of time—is in limited supply. The reality that something can only be enjoyed for one purpose at a time bestows immediate value on not only on these natural resources, but on anything created from them. The more useful a given resource is, the more valuable it is.

Yet, the term “value” can only be understood in light of certain claims about the human experience, for value is derived from human appraisal. Many economists have attempted to define value, but Bastiat's answer observes three human phenomena: First, man has the faculties necessary to improve his condition and relieve himself of painful experiences. Second, this can only be done by effort, which requires a temporary experience of pain. These uncontroversial claims are followed by a third observation that is commonly associated with classical liberalism: the expectation that effort will relieve

pain is the primary motive for that effort. In other words, man is driven by a rational self-interest; without expected gain, he does not act.

Bastiat's economic theory of value—what determines prices—was, in his own eyes, one of his major original contributions to the field of economics. This theory held that individuals value a particular thing according to the labor it is expected to save them. A tool that will reduce a given task from six hours to three would be worth roughly three hours wages or fewer, assuming there is only one seller and others are not competing for the exchange. Because the buyer wants to reduce his labor and gain pleasures, he is willing to make an exchange that will leave him better off. In Bastiat's worldview, we exist in a world of pain and scarcity, and all that is required for human progress is labor and self-interest. The term “self-interest” has already been given a brief introduction and will be revisited here for clarification.

THE CREATED MAN

The natural harmony of human interests became the defining feature of Bastiat's thought, and was, for him, the necessary prerequisite for a free society. This is a critical: if humans are naturally antagonistic, logic dictates that harmony can only exist under an imposed order, but if Bastiat is correct that humans are naturally harmonious, the implied political prescription for human fulfillment is a high level of individual autonomy. Classical liberalism is known for advancing a rather vulgar conception of human nature, in which human interaction is driven by “self interest” and is therefore antagonistic. Socialists have also adopted this conclusion, though blame is directed not at nature, but at oppressive social relations. Both views seek to control the chaos produced by a self-

interested society. Bastiat finds that while self-interest is indeed present in human nature, it has been widely misunderstood and overstated.

Bastiat chooses a third way:

“Man is essentially a sympathetic creature. The more his powers of sympathy are concentrated on himself, the more of an egoist he is. The more they embrace his fellow men, the more of a philanthropist he is. Egoism is thus like all other vices, like all other prevarications; ... I do not think that we can make one of these states of mind the basis of society any more than we can anger or gentleness, energy or weakness” (Bastiat 2012, 84).

Men are, in this view, neither always good nor always bad; they exercise free will in how they esteem and interact with others. They can choose, from one moment to the next, whether to be honest and charitable, or to cheat and steal. He also suggests certain individuals are predisposed to one or the other. However, this is not to say Bastiat is neutral on the core motivations of man. In a section titled “The Motive Force of Society,” he offers the following analysis (emphasis mine):

“In giving us free will, [God] has endowed us with the faculty, at least to a certain extent, of avoiding what is evil and seeking after what is good. Free will presupposes intelligence and is associated with it. What good would it be to have the power to choose, if the power to examine, to compare, and to judge were not joined to it? Thus, every man born into the world possesses a motive force and an intellect.

The motive force is that inner, irresistible drive, the very essence of all our energy, which impels us to shun evil and to seek after the good. We call it *the instinct of self-preservation, personal interest, or self-interest*.

This impulse has sometimes been decried, sometimes misunderstood, but there can be no question as to its existence. We seek indefeasibly everything that to our mind can improve our lot; we avoid everything that is likely to impair it” (Bastiat 2012, 466).

Bastiat is clearly in the “self-interest” camp of political thinkers. But his definition does not exclude fellow-feeling or even altruism. From self-interest, he writes, has indeed come “all the evils of society: war, slavery, monopoly, privilege; but from this source also come all the good things in life, since the satisfaction of wants and the avoidance of suffering are the motives of human action” (1996, 38). Self-interest is not a condemnation upon humanity, but a force by which we are motivated. Moral judgment must be applied to its abuse, not its existence. We would not, for example, blame a vehicle’s accelerator pedal for causing an accident merely because it propelled the vehicle and therefore gave force to impact. The same force which can cause harm is also that which is harnessed for transportation and communication. He writes in *Economic Harmonies* (emphasis mine):

“the concept of the individual, of self-love, the instinct of self-preservation, the indestructible desire within man to develop himself, to increase the sphere of his action, increase his influence, his aspiration to happiness, in a word, *individuality*, appears to me to be the point of departure, the motive and universal dynamic to which Providence has entrusted *the progress of humanity*” (Bastiat 1964).

We are therefore compelled to work toward higher levels of lasting happiness, which is to say peace, goodwill, health, wealth and love; self-interest is the fuel of human fulfillment, and what Bastiat describes as the “law of responsibility” is the engine by which such fulfillment is reached. The following section will explore this concept as it operates in social and economic activity.

THE LAW OF RESPONSIBILITY

Bastiat's definition of self-interest as a morally neutral tool does not lead necessarily to positive outcomes. For self-interest to serve the purposes of human fulfillment in accordance with the plan of God, there must be some process by which individuals are enlightened to that which is best for them. Furthermore, the necessary incentives must be in place to entice men to choose virtue and service over vice and selfishness. In attempting to provide a moral view of commercial activity, it is critical for Bastiat to overcome the claim that commerce turns men's hearts toward their own satisfactions, and against one another.

As I have shown, Bastiat's view of natural progress begins with three observations of human experience as a result of creation and sin, given the presence of evil: first, that individuals have the *desire* to lessen their pain and increase their pleasure; second, that the attainment of goods requires *effort*; and third, that humans have the necessary *faculties* to do this. Man is a creative, analytic and willful creature. "He compares, he looks ahead, he learns, he profits by experience" writes Bastiat. "If want is a pain, and effort too entails pains, there is no reason for him not to seek to reduce the pains of the effort if he can do so without impairing the satisfaction that is its goal." He says the notion of property is based on this premise, but his rationale points to a fundamental concept: "Since it is the individual who experiences the sensation, the desire, the want; since it is the individual who exerts the effort; the satisfactions also must have their end in him, for otherwise the effort would be meaningless" (Bastiat 1964).

The desire for constant progress—physical, moral, intellectual and otherwise—is ongoing, and every generation builds upon the last. However, a critical factor must be

present. Bastiat's "law of responsibility" can be understood as God's plan for educating mankind on the principles of progress and ethics through experience. He explains, thus:

“for experience to become a real teacher and to fulfill its mission in the world, developing foresight, revealing the true nature of cause and effect, encouraging good habits and curbing bad ones—in a word, for it to become a fit instrument of progress and moral improvement—the law of responsibility must function. The results of bad actions must be brought home, and, let us admit it frankly, evil must, for the moment, exact its severe penalty” (Bastiat 1964).

That mankind has the will and faculties for improvement is therefore not enough; the law of responsibility implies two more conditions: 1) man must have the *freedom* to express his will in action, and 2) he must *experience* the effects of his action. It is only through such a process that individuals learn how to conduct themselves in order to achieve positive outcomes. As we will see later, he argues that altering either the freedom of action or the experience of consequences undermines this ethical principle and therefore produces an environment of injustice and disorder.

In the following section, I will show how Bastiat's application of this law of responsibility enables individuals to achieve fulfillment through social interaction and through exchange, and how this becomes the basis of such fundamental concepts as property rights, democracy and the rule of law.

Ethics in Social Interaction – the Law of Solidarity

Recall that Bastiat understands human predisposition to be sympathetic, hanging in the balance between altruism and antagonism. How do we ensure that mankind's self-

interested nature, which is capable of vicious and destructive ends, remains on the path of progress? For Bastiat, the problem resolves itself if people are allowed to experience the negative consequences of their actions. He therefore follows a reasoning similar to that offered more fully by Adam Smith. A moral philosopher as much as an economist, Smith's first great work, *A Theory of Moral Sentiments*, attempts to root human behavior in the sympathies we feel toward others, and our desire to be esteemed highly in their eyes. Through social interactivity we experience what is agreeable or disagreeable about the behavior we see in others. Likewise, we are exposed to their experiences and perspectives—including the way they respond to our own behavior. Like a mirror, we begin to measure our own words and deeds through the eyes of others. Our desire to be loved causes us to alter our behavior to portray a more amiable and appealing image. Therefore, Smith believed virtue is discovered through a process of socialization. He writes:

“We can never survey our own sentiments and motives, we can never form any judgment concerning them; unless we remove ourselves, as it were, from our own natural station... Were it possible that a human creature could grow up to manhood in some solitary place without any communication with his own species, he could no more think of his own character, of the propriety or demerit of his own sentiments and conduct, of the beauty or deformity of his own mind, than of the beauty or deformity of his own face” (Smith 1982, III.1.3).

In other words, to understand virtue we must understand vice, which we only understand in relation to others. We chisel away the unsightly aspects of our natural behavior through a process of social interaction that exposes them. While individual liberty enables man to wander from the good, the true and the beautiful, the free exchange and competition of ideas guides mankind back to them. This kind of

“equilibrium” idea is echoed in his economic writing.

The notion that society provides checks and balances to keep self-interest within its more virtuous sphere is taken by Bastiat to be an example of the laws of responsibility and solidarity:

“When a man's habits are injurious to those about him, a hostile reaction is clearly evidenced. Such habits are judged severely, they are criticized, they are sternly reprobated; ... Whatever advantages he once found in such conduct are soon more than offset by the pains heaped upon him by public disapproval; to the unpleasant consequences that a bad habit always brings about, by virtue of the law of responsibility, there are added, by virtue of the law of solidarity, other consequences even more vexatious.

Contempt for the man soon extends to the habit or vice; and since the need for others' good opinion is one of our strongest motives, it is evident that the law of solidarity tends, by the reaction that it inspires against vicious acts, to restrain and to eliminate them.

Solidarity is, therefore, like responsibility, a progressive force; and we see that, as far as the doer of the act is concerned, it resolves itself into a kind of refracted responsibility, if I may so express myself. It is another system of reciprocal penalties and rewards admirably calculated to curtail what is bad, to encourage what is good, and to carry mankind forward along the road to progress” (Bastiat 1964).

In short, the general desire for peace and belonging that all men share tempers harmful action and guides moral development. Concluding these remarks, Bastiat returns to his central argument of free will and responsibility as the foundation of moral education: “But for solidarity to have this effect ... one condition is indispensable: the connection between an act and all its effects must be known and understood” (Bastiat 1964).

If indeed there are good behaviors and evil ones, and if these become discoverable

through an organic process of social trial and error, Bastiat reasons, we should be free to engage in such a process. To use a common example, a child may be warned not to touch a hot stove, and she may listen, but she will not truly understand until she has witnessed the power of the heat herself. From that point on, no rules or warnings are necessary. Not only does she avoid touching the stove, they apply their experience to other situations involving extreme heat. In the same way we learn ethics by action and experience.

To be truly good, and to give full meaning and expression to a moral life, it is not enough to be guided by law or scripture alone. By experiencing the full effect of our consequences we internalize the reason why a particular action is immoral and therefore develop a deeper sense of personal judgment, wisdom and sensibility. Legalism, cut from the vine that gives meaning and purpose to moral action, is easily trampled upon by our more selfish temptations. We may therefore consider such a hollow system of morality to be a rather vulnerable and ineffective form.

Ethics in exchange

Bastiat's economic study fits comfortably into his understanding of man's duty to God and to one another for two reasons: first, he finds that individuals in a free economy naturally and voluntarily serve the interests of their neighbor; second, this leads to greater equality, without sacrificing prosperity. Bastiat understands economic behavior to be a form of social behavior, which therefore exhibits the same applicable rules just outlined: the interest of one is checked by the interest of others. As the natural law of responsibility is enforced, individuals become more socially responsive.

In order for a man to advance his economic condition without resorting to force

or fraud, he must persuade another to voluntarily transfer wealth to him. In the natural course of human interaction, there are two ways of accomplishing this—again, Bastiat’s view echoes that of Adam Smith—“either appeal to his sense of altruism, or his self-interest.” While Bastiat says we should praise charity, he argues that it cannot provide a basis for economic development in a society as long as self-interest is the “motive force” of humanity. This is not, as some might interpret it, a negative view. As mentioned, Bastiat sees self-interest as a force equally for good. In exchange, Bastiat does not see harm, but harmony.

The best means of advancing one’s economic condition is to offer a service in return, after which all of the parties to a voluntary exchange experience an improvement of their situation. Moreover, in anticipation of such opportunities, individuals dedicate their time and talents to the needs of others by seeking out methods for providing to his neighbor a greater benefit at lower costs. One person may offer to grow food, another to manufacture clothing, and another to repair leaking roofs. This is, in other words, the law of supply and demand—the emergence of an economy. Citizens of a community therefore assist one another voluntarily. As Bastiat notes:

“We not only can aid one another in all these ways, but we do so of necessity. What I affirm is this: We are so constituted that we are obliged to work for one another under penalty of immediate death. If this is true, society is our natural state, since it is the only state in which we can live at all.

There is one observation that I have to make concerning the equilibrium between our wants and our productive capacities, an observation that has always filled me with admiration for the providential plan that rules our destiny.

In the state of isolation, our wants exceed our productive capacities. In society, our productive capacities exceed our wants” (Bastiat 1964, 82).

Unlike charity, in which wealth moves from one individual to another in a zero-sum transfer, the result of exchange is positive-sum (all parties are wealthier). Thus, the productive capacities of society are greater. In isolation, an individual must dedicate himself to his own shelter and survival, but society allows surplus value to be exchanged. In effect, one's economic success reflects the value one brings to a community after satisfying one's own needs.

Thus, free exchange is the economic application of the law of responsibility, in which individuals act to create and sell goods, and only then enjoy the rewards. The result of free exchange is twofold: it compels men to work toward the advancement of his neighbor, and simultaneously raises the condition of all participants. For Bastiat, this is all part of God's design for the harmony of interests.

Diversity of opportunity and exchange also enables individuals to overcome even the challenges of natural inequalities. Where many other thinkers see competition, Bastiat sees cooperation. The free willing and acting individual, provided that he is able to experience and learn from his choices, will seek to advance himself by creating the very conditions needed for others to advance. This reciprocity leads to economic development for all—including the poor. Though humans are in many respects unequal, the various needs of society are unlimited, and resources in a free economy will tend toward their most effective use. This means each person has an opportunity to reach his or her full potential in voluntary service to others:

“If Nature has distributed unequally the resources she places at man's disposal, she has been no more uniform in her distribution of human endowments. We are not all blessed with the same degree of strength, courage, intelligence, patience, or artistic, literary, and

industrial talents. ... Thanks to exchange, the strong man can, up to a point, do without genius; the intelligent man, without brawn; for, by the admirable pooling of gifts that exchange establishes among men, each one shares in the distinctive talents of his fellows” (Bastiat 1964, 90).

Bastiat also notices that as new discoveries are made that achieve human ends with less effort, they eventually become common, thereby providing opportunities for the poor to achieve greater equality. He calls this “gratuitous utility,” in contrast to “onerous utility” (Bastiat 1964, 58). Gratuitous utility is made up of benefits provided freely by nature, plus those which are man-made, but demand no additional expense because society has incorporated them into its operation with ease and affordability. New understanding in the field of engineering, for instance, will help future engineers accomplish tasks at a fraction of the time and expense. Every person’s goal, he says, is to gradually replace onerous utility with gratuitous utility. Bastiat suggests that the poor in every generation actually become better off as tools, knowledge and methods become more readily accessible, and as market competition drives down costs.

In an article titled “Justice and Fraternity,” Bastiat argues that an active and secure economy produces “the prime condition for the liberating of the working class ... first of all by making life cheaper, and second by raising the level of earnings,” and thereby leads us “along the path of equality” (Bastiat 2012, 67). In *Economic Harmonies*, he maintains that there is nothing unjust about an unequal distribution of wealth if one’s share of it is merely reflection of their service to society (Bastiat 1964, 220). Quite the contrary, to alter these conditions would require the severing of consequences from actions, and breaking the law of responsibility. This, he says, is the very definition of injustice.

The capacity of a free commercial system to harmonize interests and provide economic progress for every member of society is, to Bastiat, compelling evidence pointing toward a divine order. The very nature of human society organically produces benefits for human fulfillment, both at the individual and collective level. It teaches men to be honorable and kind, and provides constant improvement in economic condition. This view of commerce stands in stark contrast to Rousseau's view, but is consistent with the Christian ethos.

A FOUNDATION OF GOVERNMENT

I have shown that Bastiat's "law of responsibility" demands that individuals are free to both exercise their will in action and experience the resulting effects. It is considered a "law" because it exists in nature, placed by God, shaping events irrespective of human will. As this law operates in society, citizens learn to direct their self-interest toward productive, moral behavior, which leads to greater cooperation, prosperity and equality. This law is a principle of natural law because these positive effects are natural and universal. This observation leads Bastiat to claim that governments are created to preserve this principle, and indeed have no legitimate authority beyond it. Specifically, he argues that such fundamental concepts as property rights and democracy are derived from the law of responsibility:

"I ask myself whether this right is a creation of the law or if it is not, on the contrary, prior to and higher than the law, whether it was necessary for the law to give birth to the right of property or whether, on the contrary, property was a fact and right that existed before the law and that had given rise to it? ... For our part, we study man as God has made him. We ascertain that he cannot live without satisfying his needs, that he cannot provide for his needs without work, and that he cannot work if he is not

certain of applying the fruits of his work to his needs. This is why we consider that property is a divine institution and that its safety and protection are the object of human law” (Bastiat 2012, 44-45).

Bastiat describes property as “the right to enjoy for oneself the fruits of one's own efforts or to surrender them to another only on the condition of equivalent efforts in return” (Bastiat 1964, 215). This is a form of the law of responsibility. His conception of property is broadly applied to human life and therefore deeply entwined with personhood. In *Economic Harmonies*, Bastiat uses this principle to identify the immorality inherent in the practice of slavery:

“As far as to say that a man should not be the owner of the pains he himself takes, that, in exchange, it is not enough to turn over gratis the help received from natural resources, that he must also surrender gratis his own efforts? But let him take care! This would mean glorifying slavery; for, to say that certain men must render services that are not paid for means that other men must receive services that they do not pay for, which is certainly slavery.

Bastiat describes slavery thus:

He ceases to exercise free control over the satisfaction of his own wants, and, no longer having any responsibility for satisfying them, he naturally ceases to concern himself with doing so. Foresight becomes as useless to him as experience. He becomes less his own master; he has lost, to some extent, his free will; he has less initiative for self-improvement; he is less of a man. Not only does he no longer judge for himself in a given case, but he loses the habit of judging for himself” (1996, 204).

In essence, the “right to enjoy for oneself the fruits of one's own efforts” is the right to activate one’s will and faculties toward the shaping of one’s own future. To steal or damage even a man’s relationships, talents, physical ability or intellect is to deny him his natural potential and therefore rob him of life. It is critical to note here that what may

often appear as an “economic” problem is deeply connected to ethics and human dignity.

Property is merely one manifestation of the law of responsibility. It is established by social convention with or without the state—government is only necessary for its enforcement. This occurs in nearly every human civilization for two reasons: in a practical sense, it enables the kind of rational economic benefits I have described; in a natural sense, humans tend to act on the principle from an early age. It is therefore both evident and intuitive—practical and natural—and for all of these reasons Bastiat interpreted property as a “divine institution.”

Democracy is also rooted in the law of responsibility, as it rests on the normative claim that legitimate political authority must derive from consent. This claim takes as its moral premise the idea that individuals possess or exercise ownership of something—their sovereignty—that no one else should remove or injure against the person’s will. The notion of sovereignty itself implies ownership. When one considers the implications of the law of responsibility, it is no stretch to conceive of it as the very foundation of our sense of justice: an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.

This is perhaps not the definition of justice that would satisfy everyone. It is rather unforgiving. Yet, Bastiat argues that it is precisely the frame of ethics that must be applied in order to attain the kind of moral improvement society desires. “[E]vil must, for the moment, exact its severe penalty” (Bastiat 1964, 460).

Natural Law Applied to Individual Sovereignty

To this point we have seen how Bastiat derives from the nature of man several

claims. Due to evil and scarcity, man desires to improve his condition. Because he has the faculties, he works to improve his condition when he believes his efforts will have such an effect. Looking toward their long-term interest, individuals gradually adopt behaviors that produce better outcomes in every area of life, including relationships. Moral and technical progress are learned through trial and error, which requires that the consequences of any decision are experienced by the person making it. In other words, individuals must be held accountable for bad choices, and enjoy the benefits of wise choices. Where this occurs, humanity will naturally reduce the evils of the world and increase the good. This, for Bastiat, is the basis of all law, and preserving this natural balance is the purpose of government. In this principle, we find the right of property, consent of the governed and many other fundamental tenets of western law.

In Bastiat's conception of a just social order, the natural law bears duties, rights and limits on both individuals and societies. He does not outline these in the manner I intend to offer here, but by doing so I hope to show how Bastiat's classical liberalism applies to political theory in the context of Christian ethics and natural law.

The individual person is subject to natural law, irrespective of political law. It is the *duty* of the individual to search for the truth and follow it. Thus, even where the human law is silent or contrary, we are called by God to be kind, gracious, forgiving and other attributes fitting a disciple of Christ. In a commercial society, we are to abstain from activities which may be legal according to our political laws, but which we know by natural law to be improper. The presence or lack of coercion should make no difference to the individual in the pursuit of his or her convictions—which, we should understand, may still encourage the individual to follow human law where prudent. This view allows

for civil disobedience where laws support racial, religious or other conflict, and abstinence in a highly liberal regime. Furthermore, observance of natural law allows one to understand one's rights and limits, as well as the rights of others.

It is the *right* of the individual to defend the principal law of justice, which Bastiat termed the "law of responsibility." A right can be understood as separate from duty in that one is not obligated to take an action, but has the sovereign authority to do so where judgment approves. Therefore, a person cannot rightly be forced by another to take an action. A beggar on the street has no right to take money from the pockets of a passerby, because sovereignty lies with the latter. The passerby may or may not feel compelled by God to give voluntarily, and therefore fulfill his duty according to natural law. Of critical importance in this scenario is to recognize that judgment must be reserved to the individual, for only by voluntary choice can an act of charity be rightly considered as such. Had the beggar been given the responsibility of choice, his decision would be a simple and self-serving one. Not only would this offer no altruistic benefit to the passerby, it would cause injury that is not felt by the beggar, and would thus be against the law of nature as God intended.

If individuals have a right to defend this principle of justice for themselves, they also have a right to defend it for others. The missionary to oppressed nations, the soldier on the battlefield, the jailer, judge and hero are all cleared of conscience so long as their actions—even those that cause injury—preserve justice and are not motivated solely by self-aggrandizement.

After rights and duties come the *limits* of a person's moral actions: an individual may not injure the rights or duties of another. One may not force his neighbor to give of

himself or make particular choices that rightfully belong within his own sphere of sovereignty. In a perfect universe, all of mankind would live within this boundary. However, as mankind is imperfect, a response is required for infractions against this rule, and the response provides the only legitimate reversal of it. An individual's rights may be imposed upon when necessary to restore accountability for injury already committed, but for which the original actor has not suffered. In other words, the balance required by the law of responsibility allows for the use of force, but only for restoration, as is consistent with the right to defend justice.

The duties, rights and limits of human behavior are intertwined, so that they are easily obfuscated. It is helpful to think of duties as that which a person ought to do, limits as those things which people ought not do, and rights as the space in which individual sovereignty must judge the appropriate application of the two. These theologically sound principles frame moral law among individuals, and form a foundation for moral law in the use of political power.

Natural Law Applied to Retributive Sovereignty

Once an individual is part of a political community, which is to say the establishment of organized coercion, a sphere of sovereignty is created and placed in the hands of rulers. The particular method of judgment can be constituted in a variety of ways—monarchy, democracy, aristocracy, et cetera—but such sovereignty in the Christian worldview exists for a single purpose: to enable human fulfillment, at both the individual and collective level. In Bastiat's framework it is therefore obligated to

establish an order consistent natural law, which can be logically deduced from that which natural law demands of the individuals for whom society is created.

As the individual has a duty to pursue and follow natural law in his own affairs, it is the *duty* of rulers to provide a safe space in which this can occur for citizens. It does this primarily by offering security and stability in political, economic and social life. At minimum, this requires a strong defense of the nation's borders and enforcement of justice within them, so that no citizen is made to serve another against his will. Those who cause harm to innocent citizens—whether by ignorance, insanity or malice—must be restrained in order for the community to flourish, for without a fundamental trust in one's neighbor, the engine of trade, association and civility comes to a halt.

As the individual has a right to defend justice, so too do rulers. Indeed, it is this *right* that enables the state to fulfill its duty. The use of force is entrusted to rulers not for any arbitrary purpose, but for the preservation of justice, which Bastiat understands as the law of responsibility. Thus, within retributive sovereignty, the state has the right to pass laws, cast judgment and punish the unjust by means necessary to this object. It may not have legitimate power, however, to take these actions toward ends beyond this right, unfounded in natural law. For this reason, Bastiat can say “the rights of each person are limited to the absolutely identical rights of all others. The law cannot therefore do anything other than to recognize this limit and see that it is respected. If it allowed some people to infringe it, this would be to the detriment of some of the others. The law would be unjust.” This leads to the limits of state action.

Just as the individual must not cause injury to the innocent, natural law rebukes the ruler who would pass laws against, cast judgment against or punish the innocent

citizen. When the state reverses the principle of responsibility and seeks to provide benefit to some at the expense of others, where there is no injustice to correct, the state is acting against Bastiat's law of nature. The state must not separate individuals from the consequences or rewards of their choices. This view would prevent governments from favoring special interests and engaging in protectionism—the condemnation of which made Bastiat a popular name among his peers, and unique among most early liberals.

The problem of taxation shows the usefulness of this approach. Thinkers who have argued that property is a sacred right have often run into the challenge of justifying some level of taxation necessary for even the most minimal government functions. In Bastiat's natural law ethics taxation could be fully within the rights of the state under the argument that resources are collected for services rendered. The practice would indeed extend beyond the proper boundaries of retributive sovereignty if collected disproportionately to this service. Progressive taxation is therefore unjust in this view.

The division of individual/economic sovereignty and collective/retributive sovereignty is supported by two features of the Christian faith. First is the concept of stewardship. This notion demands that the rightful authority over a given sphere take responsibility not only for its preservation, but for the fulfillment of its purpose and potential. Rulers are to be stewards of the people, who are in turn stewards of their own affairs. The former must not cross into the latter. The second concept is the principle of subsidiarity, in which “a community of a higher order should not interfere with the internal life of a community of a lower order,” therefore setting “limits for state intervention” and “harmonizing the relationships between individuals and societies” (Catholic Church 2006).

Bastiat does not provide an explicit and systematic organization of natural law, as outlined here. I have undertaken the task of organizing his thought in this manner only to show how the application of his principles remains within the tenets of the Catholic faith. Carefully navigating these tenets, he sought to offer a philosophy of ethics and government that allows for the simultaneous establishment of temporal authority and individual freedom.

Commercial liberalism as framed in Bastiat's works recognizes an omnipotent Creator, whose design and purpose for mankind is moral and technical progress, not merely self-gratification. As such, it applauds virtue, and even demands it as necessary for a stable society. However, it also allocates separate spheres of sovereignty to rulers and subjects, and emphasizes the critical role of free will in human progress. Free will, as Bastiat argues, must ultimately produce good—such is the genius of the divine order.

PERVERSION OF LAW

The law corrupt? The law—and in its train all the collective forces of the nation—the law, I repeat, not only turned aside from its purpose but used to pursue a purpose diametrically opposed to it! (Bastiat 2012)

Thus begins Bastiat's pamphlet, *The Law*, written shortly before his death, and for which he is most widely recognized. The very next paragraph begins: "We hold from God the gift that encompasses them all: life; physical, intellectual, and moral life."

Bastiat repeatedly claims that those who fail to see the natural harmony of human

interests show that they do not understand the gifts of God or trust His divine plan. Writers who seek to reconstruct society along aggressive egalitarian lines—those who ignore the law of responsibility by calling for such policies as the end of private property—are, in Bastiat’s words, “great manipulators of the human race” (Bastiat 1964). Their ambitious plans would lead not to the ends of progress for which they aim, but to their opposites. Thus, to critics who suggest classical liberalism has no ethical impulse or moral aspiration, Bastiat’s response is twofold: first, a correct understanding of the purpose and product of freedom shows that it is conducive to virtue and progress; secondly, policies that undermine freedom bring about moral decay and poverty—both of material wealth and of the human spirit.

The great error of the socialist critics of Bastiat was not that they sought to prevent harm from one person upon another—for that is the legitimate purpose of law—but that they sought to prevent even harm brought upon individuals by their own choices. This not only robs the actor of learning the effects of his or her action, it must necessarily redirect these harmful effects to an innocent party. Thus, injustice is committed and confusion abounds as to who is responsible for which consequences. Bastiat writes:

“[W]e not only do not deny that evil exists; we recognize that it has its purpose in the social order even as in the physical universe.

But if evil is to fulfill this purpose, the law of solidarity must not be made to encroach artificially upon the law of responsibility; in other words, the freedom of the individual must be respected.

Now, if man-made institutions intervene in these matters to nullify divine law, evil nonetheless follows upon error, but it falls upon the wrong person. It strikes him whom it should not strike; it no longer serves as a warning or a lesson; it is no longer self-limiting; it is no longer destroyed by its own action” (Bastiat 1964, 26).

The error in the socialist method is founded, according to Bastiat, upon a failure to comprehend the natural or divine laws, which leads to the mistaken presumption that rights are inventions of political will alone, and that notions of property and commerce are corrupt human conventions. “Once we establish the principle that property takes its existence from the law,” Bastiat writes, “there are as many possible means of organizing production as there are possible laws in the minds of dreamers” (Bastiat 2012) We will look at several consequences produced by the socialist philosophy of law, which Bastiat says distorts and slows human progress.

Government action, by intervening in the natural course of events, obfuscates cause and effect relationships, even of subjects unrelated to its aims. There is no question that laws exact immediate influence, which causes a great confidence in government to solve a limitless number of problems. However, swiftness and force should not be confused with effectiveness. Ignoring the laws of nature and justice, Bastiat argues, governments often give the appearance of a solution, while creating new, more complex problems. “If political economy succeeds in recognizing the harmony of personal interests,” writes Bastiat, “it is because, unlike socialism, it does not stop at the immediate consequences of phenomena, but proceeds to their subsequent and final effects. That is its whole secret” (Bastiat 2012, 80). In the following section I will highlight several consequences noted by Bastiat as the result of state action beyond its proper sovereignty. By ignoring or willingly surpassing the limits of state power in accordance with natural law, these actions not only fail to reach their objectives, but create injustice and undermine human dignity and the rule of law. These harmful

outcomes are provided by Bastiat as evidence that the law of responsibility is valid and transcends human law, which is to say they are warnings built into the divine order to guide humanity back toward the good.

“What is Seen and What is Not Seen”

It is necessary to note that, in Bastiat’s thought, the ethical, political and economic spheres of life are interrelated and reciprocal, so that changes in one influences the experience of the others. One of Bastiat’s greatest contributions to the field of economics is his theory of “what is seen and what is not seen,” (Bastiat 2012) which is today referred to as opportunity cost. In short, he argues that while we often see the immediate consequence of an action, the ripple effects are hidden from view. Additionally, he notes that we tend to count the benefits of a given action without considering the cost of possible alternatives. In voluntary market activity, individuals must determine where they will spend personal resources, and they will tend to do so in a manner that produces the highest return, as defined by the individual. Naturally, mistakes will occur, and resources will not be used with perfect efficiency. But where market activity is directed by law, return on investment is distorted and efficiency is substantially lower. Citizens in this case cannot evaluate the real value created by their actions, for themselves or others, and therefore cannot dedicate their time and resources accordingly. They also cannot tell when they have done something harmful, as the harmful symptoms are distorted. We find that, in attempting to ease burdens, more are created. Bastiat writes:

“[E]ven when an act, a habit, or a practice is recognized by common judgment to be bad, vicious, immoral; when no doubt

exists; when those who succumb to it are the first to deplore it; even then the interference of human law is not justified. We still have to know, as I have just said, whether, by adding to the bad effects of the vice the bad effects inherent in all legal machinery, we are not in the long run producing a sum of evils in excess of the good that the legal sanction can add to the natural sanction” (Bastiat 1964).

He illustrates with the problem of idleness—“proverbially known as the *mother of all vices*”—as an example (Bastiat 1964). First, we should be reminded that idleness will exact its own punishments before law has a word to say. What can the law contribute? If it adds punishment, it only reduces the productiveness of the individual and society. Perhaps the extra punishment does teach a moral lesson and people become less idle. Even still, what is the greater cost of this plan?

To enforce productivity, all citizens, hard-working or not, would have to be supervised, and have their privacy breached. This would also require legions of civil servants, and the increased taxes to pay them. In the case of a criminal charge, how might the case be offered in court? “Was the accused really idle, or was he taking a necessary rest? Was he sick, meditating, praying, etc.? How can all these delicate measures be weighed? Had he worked especially hard in the morning in order to enjoy a little leisure during the rest of the day?” This does not even begin to consider what Bastiat calls the “miscarriage of justice,” in which some idlers would escape and other industrious “put in prison to pay for one day’s idleness by a whole month of idleness!”

We can see how quickly a legal philosophy that has expanded far beyond the principle of responsibility and leads to obfuscation and injustice.

“Fraternité” Without Limits

On multiple occasions, Bastiat suggests that Socialists are not content to suppress negative actions and effects; they seek to cultivate “fraternité” in society. This general notion of brotherhood emanates from our natural desire for peace and unity, but limits to such an attainment—particularly by force—are often ignored. For Bastiat, there is nothing wrong with the idea of fraternity, but we must be cognizant of its limits: “Should we, as it is said, take this word literally? And does it imply that we should love everyone currently living on the surface of the globe as we love the brother who was conceived in the same womb...?” This is clearly not the case, he maintains, as “no man could exist for more than a few minutes if each sorrow, each setback, or each death that occurred around the world had to arouse in him the same emotion as if it concerned his brother...” (Bastiat 2012, 90). Humans tend to endear a relative few for whom they share personal love or respect, and it is primarily for this few that individuals are willing to sacrifice without exchange.

Bastiat recognizes that love necessarily implies sacrifice. We show love and commitment toward one another not merely through words or emotions, but by taking upon ourselves the joy and suffering of another. In other words, we take part in their engagement with the law of responsibility. At times, we voluntarily bear the consequence of another’s actions through an appeal to grace and altruism, which Bastiat applauds.

However, he argues, genuine love or fraternity cannot and should not be the product of force. “Fraternity is either spontaneous or it does not exist. To decree it is to annihilate it” (Bastiat 2012, 62). Coercive sacrifice removes choice and therefore removes moral substance. We are inspired by altruism because of property rights, not in

spite of them, for if a giver has no rightful claim to begin with, we do not consider it a sacrifice. To count as a moral good, a gift must be voluntary. Only in such a case has an individual offered up a part of his life and personhood and placed the interests of another above his own. The Christian critics of classical liberalism were correct to recite Christ's call for his disciples to give to the poor, but they failed to observe that this was in every instance an encouragement for voluntary action, not a compulsory statute.

Forced charity stands in direct opposition to the principle of justice we have so far outlined. To demand sacrifice, by law and punishment, is to remove from the sphere of one's judgment that which is otherwise guaranteed by the law of responsibility. While the state may have improved the temporary material condition of one individual, it has trespassed upon the rights of another. Moreover, it has made no one more virtuous, as no consent was given, no reflection upon conditions were made and no weights of interest were taken. In short: virtue implies sacrifice, and sacrifice implies *choice*. The pursuit of fraternity through the instrument of law is unjust, ineffective, infinite and all-encompassing.

Moreover, socialists are challenged to identify the extent to which the authority of the state may be used to enforce fraternity. "What is the fixed point of fraternity? What are its limits?" Asks Bastiat. "Obviously it is infinite." While he praises voluntary sacrifice, he questions how governments can determine the boundaries of justice so defined. Once legislators adopt this mandate, "who knows to what extent this principle will operate, what form a caprice of the legislator will give it and in what institutions a decree will bring it into existence from one day to the next?" (Bastiat 2012, 478).

Undermining Personhood

To achieve equality of conditions, it is necessary for sacrifices to be made for the common good. If it cannot be done voluntarily, it must be accomplished through redistributive measures by the state. Beneficiaries of this arrangement enjoy the fruits of someone else's labor, which results in two outcomes for the recipient. First, the he is unable to see how these resources were produced to begin with, so he fails to recognize patterns of success and failure. Second, having his desires met, he is less motivated to spend effort satisfying them. He therefore fails to discover the value of his talents in the service of his neighbor. What is the effect of these influences upon the recipient of free goods? He is severely disadvantaged in the natural educative process, and therefore struggles to advance himself or understand his value in the community.

“Foresight becomes as useless to him as experience. He becomes less his own master; he has lost, to some extent, his free will; he has less initiative for self-improvement; he is less of a man.” (Bastiat 1964).

Many who continue to experience a strong will for economic improvement, but are barred from the educative process, are led to less acceptable methods, including crime. Recognizing no connection between work and reward, they fail to provide for themselves and view the property of others as arbitrary. Some may argue that indeed property is arbitrary. Yet, this would also put the notion of criminality into question. In the absence of property rights, something as simple as theft could not be considered a crime without also admitting a severe contradiction of legal philosophy.

Undermining the Rule of Law

A society in which the indolent and lawless make up a small minority can survive. But a widespread cultural shift against the law of responsibility would lead to vice, poverty and a breakdown of social order. We have arrived at one of Bastiat's sharpest criticisms against the socialist project: the corruption of culture and law. "As soon as it is admitted that oppression and plunder are legitimate provided they are legal," writes Bastiat, "we see each class little by little demanding that all other classes be sacrificed to it" (Bastiat 1964). The broadly mandated law, in this case, loses sight of its original purpose, and becomes a secondary means of exchange as special interest groups compete and bargain for benefits which are not the product of nature or honest work. "Considered in themselves, in their own nature, in their normal state, and apart from all abuses, public services are, like private services, purely and simply acts of exchange" (Bastiat 1964). Bastiat is the first to propose this notion, preceding similar arguments by Anthony Downs' (1997) and Buchanan and Tullock (2008) by over a century.

In one of his many humorous illustrations, Bastiat offered a satirical critique of protective policies called "The Candlemakers Petition," which imagined an association of candlemakers requesting that the state issue a decree requiring citizens to block out sunlight. In the story, the candlemakers realize that the sun is providing free light during the day, thereby putting a substantial cap on sales of candles. In their argument, a change in the law would lead to more business for the candlemakers, therefore a boost for the economy.

As government gains power over the market, the market actively seeks government's power and market activity is gradually displaced with political activity,

which is increasingly seen as the most effective route to personal success. However, the net result of this political expediency is also increasing cynicism and mistrust of political leaders.

Bastiat therefore laments that “What is most deplorable is that plunder, when thus aided and abetted by the law, with no individual's scruples to stand in its way, eventually becomes quite a learned doctrine which has its professors, its journalists, its eminent authorities, its legislators, its sophisms, and its subtleties” (Bastiat 1964).

This observation compelled Bastiat to craft, rather cynically, one of his most famous quotes in “The State”: “The state is the great fiction by which everyone seeks to live at the expense of everyone else” (Bastiat 2012, 97). When people begin to view the state as a resource for advancement, it becomes the enemy of its own purposes by actively and willingly disregarding the right of property. It, in effect, becomes an accomplice to crime, rather than a defense.

We see that, just as political activity absorbs market activity, it comes to dominate social activity as well, establishing itself as the source of moral progress. And the result is the same. Instead of being a force for progress, it reverses the course of natural progress.

“[Placing the motive force of society in lawgivers] tends to weigh down the government with a crushing responsibility that does not belong to it. If there is suffering, it is the fault of the government; if there is poverty, the government is to blame. [...] When such ideas are current, the last thing that occurs to men is to turn their gaze upon themselves, and to see whether the real cause of their woes is not their own ignorance and injustice—their ignorance, which exposes them to the law of responsibility; their injustice, which brings down upon them the action of the law of solidarity. How could men dream of blaming themselves for their woes when they have been persuaded that by nature they are inert, that the source of all action, and consequently of all responsibility, lies outside

themselves, in the will of the sovereign and of the lawgiver?"
(1996, 471).

It might be countered that Bastiat's pessimistic view of political self-interest is a contradiction to his view of human harmony. This argument misses a critical difference between socio-economic interaction and political interaction. In regular social interaction, negative choices have consequences that offer an opportunity for correction. The power inherent in political authority places the legislator in a unique position to protect himself from the negative consequences of his decisions. Without proper accountability, the cost of corruption is lowered, and the benefits increased. This allows the darker side of our nature to avoid natural checks and reign more freely. Even where corruption is not explicit or intended, groupthink and overconfidence lead to ignorance and oversight. The more powerful such individuals are, the more damage they can inflict upon society, and they will be relatively insulated from the consequences.

ALIGNMENT OF NATURAL LAW AND HUMAN LAW

In review, Bastiat's teleological natural law argument for classical liberalism is that freedom leads to progress, both moral and technical. Genuine morality cannot come from the law alone; cut from the vine that gives meaning and purpose to moral action, legalistic rules are easily trampled upon by the darker temptations of self-interest. We develop a lasting moral posture only by understanding why some choices help others, and others harm them. This understanding can only come about through experience, which implies both the freedom of choice and the ownership of results, whether good or bad. He

has described this as the “law of responsibility.” The real test of this *natural* law, however, is how well it may be aligned with *human* law. We find that Bastiat’s ethical system implies the kind of limited, though effective, government recommended by classical liberal literature.

Though Bastiat is popular today among libertarian thinkers, he is no anarchist, and believes government plays a critical role in human flourishing (Bastiat 1964). In chapter II of the Second Treatise, John Locke writes, “though this be a state of liberty, yet it is not a state of license ... being all equal and independent, no one ought to harm another in his life, health, liberty, or possessions.” This is, in effect, the law of responsibility recognized and protected by law. One’s property is the product of one’s choices, and is therefore an extension of personhood. Because individuals recognize this intuitively, it exists in human society *prior* to political society, and is indeed the primary function of government. This may be summarized in the following passages from *Economic Harmonies*:

“There are certain types of services of which the principal merit consists in regularity and uniformity. It is even possible, under certain conditions, for this change to public status to effect an economy of resources and, for a given satisfaction, to spare the community a certain amount of effort ... I shall begin by stating that I call collective activity that great organization which finds its rule in the law and its means of execution in force, in other words, government. ... Their scope and their limits are indicated to us by this special characteristic of having force as a necessary adjunct. I therefore declare: Government acts only by the intervention of force; hence, its action is legitimate only where the intervention of force is itself legitimate. Now, force may be used legitimately, not in order to sacrifice liberty, but to safeguard it.”

...

“I cannot legitimately force my fellow men to be industrious, sober, thrifty, generous, learned, or pious; but I can force them to

be just. For the same reason, the collective force cannot be legitimately employed to foster the love of labor, sobriety, thrift, generosity, learning, religious faith; but it can be legitimately employed to further the rule of justice, to defend every man's rights" (Bastiat 1964).

Bastiat therefore, as previously established, grounds collective rights in individual rights, on the basis that political society is an outgrowth of natural human relations. The ethical principles of the law of responsibility that naturally apply between two persons also constitute the principles of collective justice. Government authority is a necessity brought about to give full effect to this principle of justice, as opposed to such limitless notions as love, grace and fraternity, which exist beyond the control of law. Genuine love and fraternity—they must be genuine to be valuable—are relational and sacrificial, which is to say they do not require force and cannot be activated by force. But justice lies fully within the rights of individuals to protect and enforce. Law and government are, in other words, the institutionalization of self-defense.

“Political economists do not say that a man may kill, pillage, burn, that society has only to let him alone; they say that society's resistance to such acts would manifest itself in fact even if specific laws against them were lacking; that, consequently, this resistance is a general law of humanity. They say that civil or criminal laws must regularize, not contravene, these general laws on which they are predicated” (Bastiat 1964).

Bastiat acknowledges the charge that “there are services that are not voluntary, whose remuneration is not arrived at by free bargaining; there are services whose equivalence is impaired by force or fraud; in a word, plunder exists.” However, this only supports his point: “The legitimacy of the principle of property is not thereby weakened, but confirmed” (Bastiat 1964).

The reader might be surprised that Bastiat also considers a basic level of welfare to the poor an appropriate function of government. However, he is careful to outline the very point at which such assistance breaks from the law of responsibility (emphasis mine):

“If the socialists mean that, in extraordinary circumstances and emergencies, the state has to store up a few resources, assist in certain misfortunes, and smooth over certain transitions, for God’s sake, we would agree. This has been done and we would like it done better; however, there is a point along this path that should not be exceeded, *the point at which governmental foresight destroys individual foresight by taking its place*. It is perfectly clear that organized charity would, in such a case, do much more permanent harm than temporary good” (Bastiat 2012, 63).

We may summarize Bastiat’s role of government as establishing a mutual self-defense against injustice, toward general stability and security in persons and things. The goal of this security, whether in trade, contracts, possessions, personhood or otherwise, is the liberation of honest activity. It is designed to allow the vast majority of society—individuals who, though self-interested, have love for their country and fellow man—to plan, judge, work, exchange, innovate, save, serve and prosper. According to the law of responsibility, such a focused government is an ethical government because it enables man to express himself, take care of his obligations to himself and others and fulfill his contribution to society in every way.

To act in opposition to these principles is to act contrary to the divine order and is therefore the very definition of injustice—a perversion of the law. Bastiat summarizes the effects of improperly conceived policies on both society and the individual:

“Under the philanthropic pretext of fostering among men an artificial kind of solidarity, the individual’s sense of responsibility becomes more and more apathetic and ineffectual. Through improper use of the public apparatus of law

enforcement, the relation between labor and wages is impaired, the operation of the laws of industry and exchange is disturbed, the natural development of education is distorted, capital and manpower are misdirected, minds are warped, absurd demands are inflamed, wild hopes are dangled before men's eyes, unheard of quantities of human energy are wasted, centers of population are relocated, experience itself is made ineffective; in brief, all interests are given artificial foundations, they clash, and the people cry: You see, all men's interests are antagonistic. Personal liberty causes all the trouble. Let us execrate and stifle personal liberty” (Bastiat 1964).

In a scathing comment, Bastiat directs our attention to the key premise that leads to such perversion: “In all things the guiding principle of these great manipulators of the human race is to put their own creation in the place of God's creation, which they misunderstand” (Bastiat 1964). For Bastiat, injustice in government flows from a poor appreciation for the natural order of human relations as designed by God.

CONCLUSION

“I trust entirely the wisdom of the laws established by Providence and, for that very reason, I put my faith in liberty.” (Opening page of *Providence and Liberty*, Audouin 2003)

Frederic Bastiat was a man of faith and science, deeply concerned that these two convictions were increasingly at odds in the public mind. He writes in *Economic Harmonies* (483) that the “onward march of mankind must seem to superficial minds to be destructive of every religious idea; for is its result not that, as science advances, God retreats? ... Unhappy are those who give so narrow a solution to this fine problem. No, it is not true that, as science advances, the idea of God is pushed back. Quite the contrary; the truth is that this idea grows, broadens, and is exalted in our minds. When we discover

a natural cause where we thought we had seen an immediate, spontaneous, supernatural act of the divine will, does this mean that that will is absent or indifferent? By no means. All it proves is that the processes involved are different from those we had imagined; that the phenomenon that we had looked upon as an accident in creation has its own special place in the universal order of things; and that everything, down to the most particular effects, has been foreseen from all eternity by the divine mind” (Bastiat 1964)

For Bastiat, the patterns we find in human behavior help us understand God and his creation, and vice versa. The particular patterns he found, combined with a fundamental belief in divine order and human purpose, suggested that the “law of responsibility” makes human progress possible where individuals enjoy security, stability and autonomy, and that a reversal of this principle produces vice and poverty. From this observation, Bastiat could reason that in order for the acts of the state to exist in accordance with natural law, the political sovereign must provide these conditions. This recognizes in one statement both the necessity and limits of coercive power; with its power over men, the state must always stop plunder, and never become the plunderer.

The worldview Bastiat so passionately advanced was one in which devout faith was consistent with both science and a market economy. In his time, Bastiat would have fit well the title of George Roche’s first book on him: *A Man Alone*. I have sought to show, however, that it was Bastiat’s intention to reconcile these seemingly disconnected belief systems into one holistic understanding of the world. A system of political and economic freedom, he argued, is not only the best alternative to tyranny, it is a wonderful system of mutual service and progress that reflects the beauty of God’s artistic hand in the natural affairs of human relationships.

It is impossible to know with certainty how “devout” a Catholic Bastiat was, or even what his deepest motivations were at any given point in his life. These are subjects of the heart for which we have no lens. Nevertheless, we can examine the contexts of a man’s life, the concerns he voiced, the language he used, the audience he targeted and the particular way in which he shaped his argument. From this analysis, it is evident that Frederic Bastiat sought to settle in his own mind the great war of his young convictions, and then announce to anyone who would listen that he had resolved a problem so fundamental it could change the world.

In seeking a defense of classical liberalism grounded in the tenets of Christianity, Bastiat moves away from John Locke’s self-preservation principle. While he does not deny this principle, he understands it as a right in light of responsibility and progress, not as an independent value. Bastiat also moves beyond Adam Smith’s “invisible hand” to argue that the market serves an educative function for the development of virtue, and that this is moreover the intended design of God for the progress of humanity.

My findings do not fundamentally change the conclusions reached by Bastiat, or how today’s thinkers have interpreted the application of his arguments to economic analysis and policy. I argue that Bastiat’s study was inspired and guided by his religious convictions, but its effectiveness in describing and predicting human behavior can be argued on purely secular grounds.

If I am correct, however, the discussion around Bastiat himself can offer new clues toward the hopes, concerns and goals that prompted his study. We therefore have an additional tool for analyzing the work he produced in light of his core motivations. Scholars may now inquire, for example, how Bastiat’s religious motivations influenced

his choice of language and argument, or how Christian beliefs and practice may have shaped his work in ways not mentioned here. Advocates of classical liberalism and Christianity alike may derive from this thesis new concepts and connections that give meaning and veracity to their claims. Furthermore, the teaching of Bastiat can now include a more comprehensive view of his life and work. Intellectual historians in may wish to explore Bastiat's religious contribution to the development of classical liberalism.

My findings suggest that Bastiat's theological grounding helped make him an influential writer, both in his own time and today, though some of his most important contributions are currently obscured from today's audiences. As Bastiat's work gains attention beyond particular libertarian circles and more authors highlight his moral thought, perhaps we will begin to see Frederic Bastiat's name featured more prominently among the many revered icons of classical liberalism.