



# Economism

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## Abstract

### Economism

*Modern society is characterised not only by a fascination with scientific technology as a means of solving all problems, especially those that stand in the way of material progress (technicism), but also by an obsessive interest in everything that has to do with money (economism or mammonism). The article discusses the relationship between technicism and economism, on the basis of their relationship to utilitarian thinking: the quest for the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people. Recent major studies of neo-liberalism (seen as an intensification of utilitarianism) by Laval and Dardot are used as reference to the development of utilitarianism. It is suggested that the western view of the world, as expressed in economism and technicism, with a utilitarian ethics, features three absolutisations: those of theoretical thinking, technology and economics. In a second part, the article draws on the framework of reformational philosophy to suggest an approach that, in principle, is not marred by such absolutisations.*

## Opsomming

### Ekonomisme

*Die moderne samelewing word nie alleen gekenmerk deur 'n fassinatie met wetenskaplike tegnologie as middel om alle probleme, veral dié wat in die pad staan van materiële vooruitgang (tegnisisme), op te los nie, maar ook deur 'n obsessiewe belangstelling in alles wat te make het met geld (ekonomisme of mammonisme). Hierdie artikel bespreek die verhouding tussen tegnisisme en ekonomisme, gegrond op albei se verhouding tot die nuttigheidsdenke: die soektog na die grootste geluk vir die grootste hoeveelheid mense. 'n Onlangse studie van neo-liberalisme (gesien as 'n versterking van die nuttigheidsleer) deur Laval en Dardot, word as verwysing gebruik vir die ont-*

*wikkeling van die nuttigheidsleer. Dit word beweer dat die westerse beskouing van die wêreld met 'n nuttigheidsetiek soos geopenbaar in die ekonomisme en tegnisme, deur drie verabsoluterings gekenmerk word, naamlik van teoretiese, tegnologiese en ekonomiese denke. In 'n tweede gedeelte bou die artikel op die raamwerk van die reformatoriese filosofie om 'n benadering aan die hand te doen wat in beginsel nie geskaad word deur sodanige verabsoluttering nie.*

## **1. Introduction**

In 2009 Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval published a thorough analysis of the current prevalent neo-liberal ideology as a new way of understanding the world. In 2007 Laval had already published a major work on the historical roots of “the economic human”, in which he argued that during the seventeenth century in Europe a major shift occurred from a christian to a secular understanding of human life; from attempting to do God’s will in serving people, to seeking one’s self-interest. Utilitarianism, seeking the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people, continued to build on this new understanding, which Laval (2007:13) calls economism. Thuillier (1995) sees our world as deprived of poetry, being dominated by an elite of scientists, engineers and merchants. The latter is close to philosopher Schuurman’s view that our society is deeply technicistic in character. How does this compare with Laval and Dardot’s characterisation of it as utilitarian or economistic?

The first part of this article addresses this question. The second part attempts to sketch an approach, based on reformatinal philosophy, which is not marred by absolutisations and which may thereby lead to poetry or “a new song”.

## **2. Is our culture economistic, technicistic or utilitarian?**

### **2.1 Laval’s study of the roots of neo-liberalism**

Laval (2007) argues that during the seventeenth century western thinking shifted from a christian focus on doing God’s will (love God and love your neighbour) towards individual self-interest. This resulted in the development of utilitarian approaches to economic life and government policies. Laval does not analyse utility or utilitarianism from an epistemological or theoretic economic perspective. Instead, he explores how the utilitarian discourse has managed to “constitute a credible image of a human, moral and political reality that imposes itself upon us” (Laval, 2007:26). Utilitarianism requires

people to promote their self-interest by achieving a surplus of pleasure over pain. Money helps us to maximise utility by a calculation of costs and benefits. We are exhorted to do this in all spheres of life and society. Charity may well be part of this if it provides happiness. Laval emphasises that political (theoretical) economics, with its construction of Homo Economicus (HE hereafter), bears the imprint of a prior monetisation and commercialisation of all human relationships (Laval, 2007:322-323).

Over the past three/four centuries, utility has become:

The master of all values which calls all to account. It critiques every institution, every discourse and every position. It asks everyone, the poor, the rich, workers, bosses, children, even animals: what are you contributing to the machine known as society? All interests of all individuals are pertinent to this great potential accounting system that should be set up to approach the greatest happiness. It is utility's vocation to encompass everything. (Laval, 2007:323-324; trans. – PS.)

We may ask why an abandoning of christian ways would lead to the adoption of a utilitarian creed? Laval examines this question with reference to particular strands of theological thinking in the seventeenth century. Until that time the common good was seen as primary, whilst utility was understood as public utility. Gradually, individual goals were loosened from collective duties required under feudalism and utility received a materialistic connotation (Laval, 2007: 28). Whereas in mediaeval society interest had a generally negative meaning, especially in its monetary sense, during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries it acquired a positive goal as a love of legitimate gain (Laval, 2007:42). At the same time humans were more and more seen as individuals able to rationally calculate their own interest (Laval, 2007:50).

Laval reviews various French moralists, who were influenced by Augustinian thinking as represented by Jansenists and Pascal. The latter saw a decline in moral fibre, saying that religion was disappearing, with everything being for sale. Vanity and the possession of goods were taking the place of faith.

Jansen (1585-1638), who was strongly influenced by St. Augustine, drew a sharp distinction between the human will which is irresistibly attracted to earthly goods and which dominates people completely, and the equally irresistible heavenly love of God. Only the latter enables a human being to do anything that is good in God's eyes. Under the impetus of Jansen's work, French thinkers started to analyse

the exploits of the love-of-self. They discovered that all people are merchants. We sell our own self, displaying our “virtues” to best effect, while attempting to get the highest “price” for ourselves. Social life is governed by the me-idol.

If this is so, then, how is human society possible? Would it not be a house divided against itself? According to the Jansenists, paradoxically, life in the corrupt city of the world is possible only on account of covetousness. The love-of-self helps to maintain good order, by teaching us to respect others, because we might need their help. Respect, customs, habits and conventions keep us in check. Even thieves have conventions. Enlightened self-love knows its true interests. There is no point in desiring the goods of others, unless we are able to enjoy them in peace. The desires of self-love may be met by commerce, flattery, ruses and coalitions. Servants may control their demanding masters by providing them with useful services. We should try to make others happy, lest they make our life miserable. In short, passions which are corrupt in themselves help to keep society peaceful by maintaining order on the basis of people’s interests.

The utilitarian approach has resulted in a conflation of society and markets, human life and production. Although there are many publications that analyse and denounce this economism (Laval, 2007: 13), little is done to oppose and resist this way of thinking and living, despite a possible ecological catastrophe and the degradation of the standards of living of numerous people. We should not blame Adam Smith for this, but realise that,

... before, during and following Adam Smith a complete and coherent veritable anthropology has been deployed, which offers to the western representation a unitary normative foundation as a pure and straightforward substitute for the dogma of the Christian religion (Laval, 2007:18; trans. – PS).

Faith in this new creed has rendered western elites unable to make a decisive break with utilitarianism. In Laval’s words (2007:14):

1. The fiction of society as a production machine and a market has become a dogma or creed at the heart of our view of society.
2. This fiction is not so much a figment of the imagination, but rather a determinant or regulating power of our acting and behaving.

3. This creed feeds our hopes of material progress. It has become a system of compensations and constraints, of hopes and fears, which enclose humans in what Max Weber called 'the iron cage' of the modern economy. We are prisoners, but believe that we are free.

It is striking that Laval employs a technical metaphor: society is a "machine of production". Similarly, he approves of Mauss' dictum that HE has become a complicated calculating machine (Laval, 2007:25). The machine of the market promises liberty, the choice to consume whatever one fancies, so that it is the means of achieving pleasure and avoiding pain. The free consumer, however, is also a useful object who must work to earn the means of his freedom (Laval, 2007:14-15).

Laval considers the modern ideology of neo-liberalism as an intensification of utilitarianism. It involves the two key dimensions of privatisation and general competition. In principle, it tends to perceive individuals as well as all social organisations as private business enterprises. Proponents think of a society organised along business lines as a mechanism that is automatically regulated by demand and supply (negative feedback). Maximisation of utility and profits by all foster economic growth.

If individuals act basically as business enterprises, then, it is also true that the spirit of business enterprise, with its calculation of profits and losses, overwhelms all the areas of life people are involved in. People are subjects as well as objects. (Laval, 2007:333; trans. – PS.)

Referring to Hannah Arendt, Laval points out the reverse side of modern utilitarianism, namely the exclusion, in principle, of those considered to be deprived of utility (Laval, 2007:343). During the twentieth century millions of people lost their lives as a result.

On the whole, Laval (2007) has made a sharp diagnosis of the spirit of our time.

In terms of Vollenhoven's classification of time spirits (*Zeitgeists*) in the history of philosophy (Vollenhoven, 2000), Laval has documented an important aspect of the unravelling of the synthesis between christian and non-christian ways of thinking that prevailed during the Middle Ages. Of course, within this synthesis there were many signs of the secularisation that Laval locates as originating in the seventeenth century.

We are left, however, with a problem inasmuch as Schuurman, in many publications, has characterised our time as being under the spell of technicism, which he describes as

... the pretension of humans, as self-declared lords and masters using the scientific-technical method of control, to bend all of reality to their will in order to solve all problems, old and new, and to guarantee increasing material prosperity and progress (Schuurman, 2003:69).

Although Laval's strong focus on utilitarianism casts a revealing light on today's society, he does not account for the absolutisation of science and its application in technology. Having said this, there is, nonetheless, a connection between these two approaches. Before considering this, it may be helpful to take note of the views of another French philosopher on our civilisation's current state.

## **2.2 A culture lacking in poetry: Pierre Thuillier**

Thuillier (1995) addressed the crisis of western civilisation, especially the rapid degradation of the environment, by identifying documents written over the past thousand years that could have served as signs of a collapse to come. He assumed that there would be a deep crisis affecting all areas of life during 1999-2002. Choosing the literary form of a "report", supposedly written by a study committee in 2081 on the causes of this collapse, he analysed its deep historical roots.

Developments subsequent to 1995 such as 9/11 (in 2001) and its aftermath as well as the near certainty now of a significant warming of the climate, the use of precious land for growing bio-fuels rather than food, the dwindling of tropical forests, endemic hunger suffered by one billion people, as well as a world financial crisis, give Thuillier's ominous title a sense of realism.

Thuillier wonders why plenty of warning signs during the past millennium have been ignored. His conclusion is that the West has lost all sense of poetry and, hence, of true culture.

A society has a culture in the true sense of the word only when it is able to mobilise around certain ideas, certain myths, certain beliefs. One has a culture when one knows how to situate oneself with respect to the universe, to other people, to the past and the future, to pleasure and suffering, to life and death. To our great amazement: why has the modern West destroyed all

great myths and all great beliefs which may give meaning to human existence? (Thuillier, 1995:27; trans. – PS.)

He notes that all heralds of modernity have proudly put an end to all excessive poetic imagination and any spiritual project. All great myths have been reduced to superstitions (Thuillier, 1995:27). Human relations have been reduced to technical/economic relations. Engineers, bureaucrats, generals, business managers and politicians (Thuillier takes them all together as technocrats) have no time for poetry. Reason prevails, especially when applied to technology and business. Scientists, engineers and merchants are the key people of our age.

The Marquis de Condorcet (1743-1794) provides an instructive example. He waxed eloquent about progress by means of reason applied in technology so as to produce happiness and liberty. His belief in reason was so strong that it assumed the character of a myth, without his noticing it. His was indeed a cult of progress, albeit dressed up as following a law of nature (Thuillier, 1995:64). The focus on progress led him to believe that happiness could be quantified, for instance in terms of a gradual increase in life expectancy. In general, a higher material standard of living (real monetary GDP per head) is still believed to correspond to a greater degree of (social) happiness. Those who question such progress are not necessarily more virtuous. Thus, Thuillier deconstructs the idea of a “planetary conscience”, because those who believe they have it often forget the problems of their next-door neighbours (Thuillier, 1995:80-82).

The blindness of the West became poignantly apparent at the time of the tsunami that swept about 250 000 people around the Indian Ocean to their deaths on Boxing Day 2004. Soon, the disaster was used as a new opportunity for economic growth. Beaches cleared of fishing people and their boats and hovels could be used for the construction of hotels to attract tourists, although the construction of hotels close to beaches had been an aggravating factor in the disaster along with the destruction of mangroves and coral reefs to stimulate the cultivation of tiger prawns for export (Klein, 2007:8).

In Thuillier’s view HE has been developing since the twelfth century when merchants became more powerful than the orders of clergy, nobles and the third estate. As a result money became an essential tool. This put merchants and bankers at loggerheads with the church. Towards the end of the fifteenth century the church had lost the battle. Nicolas Cardinal Cusa wrote in 1463 that God could be considered as a banker, because as the Almighty He is able to

produce all money (Thuillier, 1995:186). Money and reason are in fact closely related. In 1494 Luca Pacioli (b. 1445) described the Italian invention of double-entry bookkeeping as a rational and systematic system of keeping track of assets and liabilities, profits and losses. Thuillier is convinced that economics as a theoretical discipline is well on its way to becoming the most representative and the most sublime of all western sciences, encompassing eventually all aspects of life, including morals, law, state, people's various needs, et cetera. Social life is becoming a gigantic market. Nevertheless, Thuillier (1995:189-190) makes the important point that a total fusion of reason and economics has not yet been achieved.

Thuillier's argument is powerful inasmuch as it not only shows the intimate connection between technicism and economism, but also their history and their devastating effects on society and the natural world. A weakness in his argument is that he does not clearly distinguish the two as a result of devoting chapters to each of a series of key phenomena. Nevertheless, insofar as he does, he locates the connecting link between the two in faith in reason and in a belief that markets can supply all of our needs. Reason has become so strong that it has displaced "poetry", a view of life and the world in which everything has its own peculiar place and meaning.

However, no matter how strong, reason can never totally eliminate all awareness of something other than reason, because intuitively most people would accept that life is more than applied logic. The present shadows of progress are also such a reminder. Hence, current cultural problems, including the absence of poetry (publications of poetry have been declining) might provide interest in different approaches.

Other than Laval, Thuillier draws on both the period of synthesis (Middle Ages) and post-synthesis periods and this emphasises how deep the roots of the present crisis are.

### **2.3 Schuurman's views on technicism**

The idea that our modern culture has become impoverished by its single-minded focus on reason and progress has been a major theme in Schuurman's work since 1973. In his view these two have led to a very strong, primary emphasis on scientific technology. He describes the ethos of western culture as marked by material values and standards: "spiritually the focus is on technology, with a picture of a technical construction that continually increases in strength" (Schuurman, 2005:23).

The construction comes about in a major way through the efforts of the business sector, i.e. science, technology and economics tend to go together. He recognises that the drive towards scientific-technological mastery of the world (technicism) is so strong that it evokes resistance in the form of attempts to regain freedom. Nevertheless, such opposition has remained powerless to enforce a change in direction. He lists as key values of the western ethos, among others, efficiency, reliability, success and maximum profits, “with little or no attention to the cost of humanity, society, environment and nature” (Schuurman, 2005:22). This single-minded focus has led to “cosmological and ethical deficiencies”, because we fail to do justice to “the multi-faceted depth and breadth of reality” and “reduce everything to the status of a useful object” (Schuurman, 2005: 29).

The question this raises is how such technical domination affects economic practice? Since, according to reformational philosophy, people shape their practices in response to a given structure or ordering, there seem to be the following possibilities:

- Technological developments push society along by opening up new possibilities. Economic agents pull technical progress by research and development to outsmart their competitors and increase their profits. Schuurman puts it like this:

Technological push has priority over economic pull. Science and the economy as such are usually interpreted technicistically, whereupon via positive feedback, they reinforce technicism. Then taken together they feed a greedy society. (Schuurman, 1995:138.)

He cites wars and the development of space travel as instances where economic arguments of high costs and sacrifices have been put aside and concludes that in western culture “the economy is also interpreted technicistically, with utilitarian economics as a complement” (Schuurman, 1995:139).

- Scientific technological designs are reduced to tools to improve the monetary profit and loss accounts of households and individuals. The technological domination is in fact a scientific/technological/economic domination. This would explain the neglect of ecology and climate.
- As a corollary of the previous possibility, the functional possibilities of the subjects of the kingdoms of “material things”, plants

and animals are reduced to scientific technical/economic possibilities.

- Science, and thereby, reason, is the underlying motivation of what appears to be a domination of the scientific/technological/economic functions. As Thuillier puts it: “Science is the theology of the Technocracy” (Thuillier, 1995:460). Schuurman’s reaction would be that reason has become a constructing reason: “Western philosophic thought is thinking through technology” (Schuurman, 1995:140).

Commercial as well as political/military powers have a huge influence on the course of scientific technology by their financing of research and development and their capital investment, undertaken to increase future profits. In the modern world scientific technology, economics and politics are inseparable, yet distinct. Business corporations compete on the basis of scientific technology and by seeking political influence on regulatory regimes affecting them. Korten (1995) wrote about “corporations ruling the world”.

This still leaves the possibility that the true meaning of what is economic has become distorted as a result of this very close association. The quote from Schuurman under the first possibility hints in this direction, suggesting that we have a technicistic interpretation of what is economic.

Importantly, in his view there is

... a hidden utilitarian ethos in the instrumentalistic conception of natural and technological science: what can be made should be made, with an eye to enhancing the utility of what is made, for as many people as possible (Schuurman, 1995:75).

It would seem that the approaches of Laval, Thuillier and Schuurman complement each other. In terms of reformational philosophy, especially Vollenhoven’s version, we can say that the three functions of theoretical thought, technology and economics are seen as the highest functions in human society, so that all others are lower in significance and bear the imprint of the “higher ones” (Vollenhoven, 1938:150-165).

In a secularised society people do not acknowledge the importance of the heart of humans, the centre of their relationship to God. In Vollenhoven’s thought the heart is pre-functional and as such the seat of the relationship between God and humans. Religion motivates our functions. In western modernity the heart has been put

into the three functions mentioned. Ethics then becomes subservient to these functions as an instrumental ethics, designed to achieve a maximum of benefits and pleasures.

## **2.4 Dardot and Laval on the modern self**

Dardot and Laval's chapter on "the factory of the neo-liberal subject" (Dardot & Laval, 2009:414-456) is instructive in this respect (note the technical metaphor). Modern individuals are seen as consisting of capital that should yield a high profit. As mini-enterprises, they are motivated to deliver the highest possible performance in order to achieve the highest possible enjoyment. They cannot lose, because if they incur a loss it is the result of their own decisions. The more enjoyment they achieve, the more they are encouraged to perform. This applies to all human activities, including sexual relationships, sports, business, family, education and arts.

One can imagine that when people are pushed to their limits, without break, that they fall ill or become depressed. Depression has indeed become a widespread phenomenon.

Working under a system of general competition, inequality is accepted and even stimulated. Those on low incomes should have an incentive to do better. Those on high incomes are heroes to neo-liberal politicians, because they are presumed to keep the wheels of commerce turning. However, as scientific technology keeps advancing, production becomes automated and requires less human labour. This deepens inequality and poverty. Technicism and economism tend to increase the number of excluded, contrary to utilitarian intentions.

If civil society becomes an economic/commercial society, guided by private utility, there is no external norm to regulate the economy. Being normed by itself, it becomes meaningless, going round in circles, without being restrained by a superior principle (Laval, 2007: 344). The combination of scientific technology and economics worsens the cosmic and ethical deficiencies which Schuurman has identified as arising from technicism.

This can only be true if the ethical norm of utilitarianism encompasses the technical and economic norms. Whilst under technicism and economism this may indeed be attempted, it is unlikely to be wholly successful since the technical and the economic are subject to the supra-human given norms that constitute them. There will be

resistance to such a take-over. This would explain why Thuillier has not yet been able to detect this takeover by economic science.

Asking whether an escape is possible, Laval suggests that we should ask anew what it means to be a society and what it means to be human (Laval, 2007:346).

Although it would be beyond the scope of this article to answer these questions satisfactorily, it is possible to sketch a perspective from which this might be done. Negatively, this involves an anti-utilitarian approach to science, technology and economics.

### **3. An anti-utilitarian approach**

#### **3.1 Utility**

In neo-classical economic theory, utility does not mean usefulness, but rather the happiness of a consumer who buys something. A retailer who tries to sell tomatoes needs to display them so that consumers are tempted to purchase them. When the marginal utility of the last unit bought equates with the price expressed in money, the consumer is in equilibrium.

This idea of utility is a distortion of true economising, because it focuses on the sensual aspects of things rather than on their intrinsic qualities.

Reformational philosophy takes as its starting point that the Creator God has subjected the whole of the world and the whole of life to his law. What is can only exist because of this law (the law and the creation subjected to it are correlata). Vollenhoven (Tol & Bril, 1992:93-106) distinguishes the structural law, to which the Creator has subjected all creatures; the law of love, which is revealed to us in God's Word, and the positive law which is issued by human office bearers in all manner of institutions and communities to help their people carry out their calling, given the structural law and the directives of the law of love. In practice, we tend to choose a direction which is the opposite of what love demands. This affects also the working of the structural law as it is represented in norms for human society. There is a statistical regularity in murders and divorces, as Vollenhoven put it (Tol & Bril, 1992:103-105). As we hear the gospel and believe its promises, our hearts are turned, in principle, to produce good fruits.

The structural law applies to the subject members of all kingdoms. The kingdoms develop according to various modes of being (moda-

lities). All their subjects function in all of these modalities. Subjects may play a role in other kingdoms through their object functions. A tomato may be eaten by animals and people. Potentially, human life becomes fruitful by means of a proper use of the object functions of other creatures. This is difficult as we might easily harm their integrity as subjects (e.g. by producing tasteless but good-looking tomatoes).

As humans we use the other kingdoms all the time, as we breathe, eat, sleep and act in many ways. So, what is a specific economic use? For this we need an idea of what the economic mode is all about. Its core, in my view, is fruitfulness or abundance. The creation is characterised by abundance, even super-abundance, as John Calvin noted (Biéler, 1961:233). As such it is given for all to use, including future generations, but not to be squandered. It is our tragedy that we seek abundance always for our own short-term purposes and at great cost to the environment.

The positive laws that rule our present world are mainly set or influenced by business, aided by a neo-liberal ideology. They do not allow the poor to eat at the table of the rich, except by minimal social welfare or begging. States must create an environment in which corporations, universities, families and individuals are able to compete. To get the better of competitors, science is called upon to devise new products. Scientists, engineers and financial managers form the hard-core of modern society.

Business corporations are owned by shareholders, who invest financial capital and expect the highest possible dividend yield. Under globalisation it is possible to produce where wages are lowest and where environmental regulations are laxest. Often, production systems involve many sites across the world, necessitating trade flows to assemble final products. Concomitantly, emissions of carbon dioxide and other gases contribute to climate warming. We are wasting resources future generations may need.

Utilitarianism distorts the economic norm to an abundance of consumer pleasures minus pains in a short-term perspective.

A major focus on money (Jesus referred to the Mammon of unrighteousness, or dishonest (monetary) wealth; Luke 16:9) leads to the exploitation of fellow human beings and to the neglect, waste and destruction of our natural environment.

### **3.2 Reformational philosophy: the poetry of observing limits**

One of the tenets of this philosophy is that everything is subject to proper limits. There is a place for the state as well as for business enterprises and universities. None, however, should try to dominate all of life and the world. Secondly, the life of these entities should be shaped in response to all normative principles simultaneously and not to an economic principle at the expense of everything else. A business corporation should seek to have proper relationships between management and staff and to produce things without damaging the health of people, plants, animals and the ecology. In this way, the corporation's economic management is limited by social and ethical considerations. Prices charged should be set correctly in terms of all costs, both monetary and non-monetary (juridical). Technical processes should be well thought out (analytical) and should be run optimally (technical/economic). The corporation should be credible and trustworthy in all its dealings and publicity (certitudinal).

A second tenet is that universals are found via concrete individual entities. If the latter are this or that (nouns), then the former represent so or so (adjectives, as designations of modes of existence). A power plant functions in fifteen such modes, as follows:

- It is composed of a set of distinct units or machines (discreteness).
- It has a spatial configuration and is connected to a network of users (space).
- There is a distinct movement of flows through the machinery (movement).
- It incorporates an energy transformation process (physical).
- The plant forms an organic whole in which all parts fit together (biotic).
- It has a life of its own (psychic).
- It is aesthetically pleasing or ugly (aesthetic).
- It is logically put together (analysis).
- It expresses an effective technical design (technical).
- It is run by means of indicators on control panels (lingual).
- It is run by staff/management for the benefit of a community (social).

- It has a positive useful effect (economic).
- Management must account for its performance (juridical).
- It provides loyal service to families (ethical).
- It functions reliably (certitudinal).

As people we use the rest of the creation by obeying or disobeying the norms that apply in the kingdom of people (modalities 7-15 above). In this way, the manner in which we understand and carry out our tasks has major effects, for better or worse, on other kingdoms. Christians too keep falling below the standard required, despite their earnest endeavours. We are saved by grace and not by works. Yet, as St. Paul puts it: “for freedom Christ set us free; so stand firm and do not submit again to the yoke of slavery” (Gal. 5:1).

The economic modality involves an economic norm, which I suggest is:

Use the world’s given abundance wisely for the benefit of all present and future generations, without wasting it.

Given means are always limited and their use is directed also by other normative principles such as the ethical, the aesthetic, technical, et cetera. With respect to the kingdoms of things, plants and animals, the economic object functions of their subjects should be used so as to preserve their long-term fruitfulness. A cow, for instance, has an economic object function (to produce milk or meat). By caring for her we should allow the cow to produce milk in as natural a way as possible, rather than by selective breeding changing her into a giant udder.

Economism involves not only an overemphasis on what is economic, but also has consequences for the relationships between things. As the world approaches “peak oil” (when the global production of oil exceeds 50% of the total volume available), land that used to produce food has been switched to the production of bio-fuels. The ensuing reduction in the supply of food, along with the effects of higher oil prices, conspired in 2008 to cause food riots in many countries. By treating reserves of oil as limitless, oil has been wasted on a major scale and has, in turn, triggered other wasteful practices.

Goudzwaard (1999) has argued that a society which seeks an unlimited expansion of material production will create a dynamic of downward moving spirals such as the growing poverty of those ex-

cluded from employment and income, lack of services, because they cannot keep pace with the dynamics of production, environmental degradation and the problems of the Third World, including a growing migration of people to the First World where unemployment grows because of the shift of production to the Third World. However, the presence of downward spirals implies that upward spirals should be possible. By cleaning up the environment, we may create employment. One could also start by anchoring the financial system to non-financial values such as the needs of Third World countries.

### **3.3 A new meaning perspective**

The set of fifteen modalities, which reflects an attempt to approximate the given ordering of the cosmos as well as its potential for a dynamic unfolding through time, may be read as a poem in fifteen stanzas. It may set the scene for a meaning perspective that might take the place of utilitarianism. Schuurman (2005:37-39) has suggested the biblically derived metaphor of the garden-city. This has various implications such as working with what is given and developing it harmoniously by doing justice to all, without imposing technical structures that mould everything into uniform patterns. Venter (2002) gives the example of two African villages being connected by a footpath that follows the given shape of the land, in contrast to a straight motorway, which is constructed to allow lorries to drive at a speed required by markets. How crucial this example is to illustrate both technicism and economism is shown by Vandana Shiva with respect to massive road-building projects and the growing of bio-fuels in India. Old roads and railways, elephants, donkeys and sacred cows must make way for what she calls the sacred car. Land is taken forcibly from peasants (Shiva, 2008:49-94).

It should be a joy to work out a new project by asking what its effects would be in each of the fields associated with the fifteen modalities. This is what good gardeners do when designing a garden that yields its wholesome fruits sustainably for all in an aesthetically pleasing manner. Schuurman's metaphor of the garden-city points to how our cosmic and ethic deficiencies may be overcome, at least in principle.

## **4. Conclusion**

Utilitarianism reduces all given norms to the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people. Reason is applied in science and in scientific technology: what can be made should be made so as to increase happiness. Technicism, therefore, strengthens economism (purchase ever more, regardless of wastage and environmental de-

struction) and economism, in turn, reinforces technicism (new inventions and products keep consumers interested). The two interact continuously. Economism is a pursuit of the good life, in a material sense, without acknowledging any limits. Over the centuries the economic sector of life has been reduced to a money-making machine, run by business enterprises with the support of the State, which disregards any effects that cannot be expressed in money. It has, therefore, become blind as to its waste of people, land, animals, plants, water and clean air. By paying systematic attention to all limits on economic activity arising from all modalities, we may begin to sing a new song (Ps. 98).

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**Key concepts:**

economism  
neo-liberalism  
technicism  
utilitarianism

**Kernbegrippe:**

ekonomisme  
neo-liberalisme  
nuttigheidsleer  
tegnisisme