

Dupuy's view on economism

Author:

Petrus Simons¹

Affiliation:

¹School of Basic Sciences,
North-West University, Vaal
Triangle Campus,
South Africa

Correspondence to:

Petrus Simons

Email:

petrus.simons@xtra.co.nz

Postal address:

PO Box 12–294, Wellington
6144, New Zealand

Dates:

Received: 18 Apr. 2013

Accepted: 19 July 2013

Published: 11 Nov. 2013

How to cite this article:

Simons, P., 2013, 'Dupuy's
view on economism', *Koers*
– *Bulletin for Christian*
Scholarship 78(1), Art.
#2110, 7 pages. [http://
dx.doi.org/10.4102/koers.
v78i1.2110](http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/koers.v78i1.2110)

Note:

This article is an extended
review of Jean-Pierre
Dupuy's (2012) book: *L'avenir
de l'économie; sortir de
l'econo-mystification*.

Copyright:

© 2013. The Authors.

Licensee: AOSIS

OpenJournals. This work

is licensed under the

Creative Commons

Attribution License.

Read online:


Scan this QR
code with your
smart phone or
mobile device
to read online.

French economist and philosopher Jean-Pierre Dupuy has drawn attention to the dominance of society by not only the powers of finance and commerce, but also by economic rationalism, a methodology of maximising profit, rent, utility, happiness, given suitable sets of incentives. Financial markets are largely irrational as they move from major booms into busts and instil a speculative mentality throughout society. Society itself is compared to a supermarket in which we choose from amongst a wide range of closely related alternatives, without having any clue of adverse consequences. This is a form of fatalism. Similarly, threats of major catastrophes are downplayed, including a nuclear conflagration, climate warming and moral collapses, especially individualism stimulated by desire as a key motivator of indefinite economic growth. The author's proposal of enlightened catastrophism is discussed and an alternative is proposed in the form of enlightened subversion inspired by moves that would strengthen the ability of families and those responsible for managing businesses, education and health to exercise their own vocations in mutual service.

Dupuy se siening van ekonomisme. Die Franse ekonoom en filosoof Jean-Pierre Dupuy het die aandag gevestig op finansiële en handelsmagte se dominerende rol in die samelewing. Hy het ook aangetoon hoe ekonomiese rasionalisme 'n dominerende rol in die samelewing speel, spesifiek deur die metodologie vir die maksimering van wins, nut, verhuur, geluk en die verskaffing van geskikte insentiewe. Finansiële markte is grootliks irrasioneel in hulle beweging van grootskaalse oplewings en plotselinge prysstygings tot bankrotskap en bevorder 'n spekulatiewe mentaliteit regdeur die samelewing. Die samelewing self word vergelyk met 'n supermark waar in ons 'n keuse maak uit 'n wye reeks van nou-verwante alternatiewe sonder om 'n idee te hê van wat die ongunstige gevolge inhou. Dit is 'n vorm van fatalisme. Die bedreiging wat grootskaalse katastrofes inhou word onderspeel. Sodanige katastrofes sluit in 'n atoom-ontbranding, klimaatsverandering en morele ineenstortings, veral individualisme wat gestimuleer word deur begeerte as 'n kernmotiveerder van oneindige ekonomiese groei. Die outeur se voorstel van verligte katastrofisme word bespreek en 'n alternatief in die vorm van 'n verligte omverwerping word voorgestel. So 'n alternatief is geïnspireer deur bewegings wat die vermoë van gesinne en diegene wie verantwoordelik is vir die bestuur van besighede, onderwys en gesondheid versterk om hulle eie roepings in gemeenskaplike diens uit te leef.

Introduction

Jean-Pierre Dupuy (born 1941) is professor emeritus of the French École Polytechnique and professor at the University of Stanford. After a career spanning 30 years as an economist, he turned to philosophy. During the 1970s he collaborated with the philosopher, Ivan Illich (1926–2002), on issues of health.

Dupuy's (2012) view of the world has been influenced by the French philosopher, René Girard (born 1923), who is known for considering human culture as a realm of violence, marked by, amongst other things, envy, leading to mimesis, or attempts at rivalry. Given that Girard contrasts our violent human culture with the Kingdom of God, Dupuy's analysis of the financial crisis which erupted in the United States of America (USA) and swept around the world in 2008 and the following years should deeply interest adherents of reformational philosophy.

In the light of this philosophy's emphasis on 'sphere sovereignty', or the differentiation of culture into distinct spheres subject to their own specific norms, but yet forming an interdependent society (known as 'sphere universality'), Dupuy's view that the State (politics) has become subservient to financial markets (*legio*), whilst the matters economic (i.e. the whole sphere of business, finance and money) have far too large a place in our lives, should have our immediate sympathy.

Dupuy denounces the view that it is right for economics to have the upper hand because it stands for what is rational and efficient, whereas politics is full of irrational influences. By bowing to the

demands of the economic without questioning them, we are turning it into a religion and this endangers our future – and, indeed, our politics – because we have no way of limiting its scope. This is what the author understands by economism, but which I would prefer to call ‘economism’, because it involves an absolutisation of what is meant to be no more than a mode of being: the responsible stewardship of resources given to us, alongside many others that are equally important.

Overview of Dupuy’s essay

Dupuy (2012) has written a conceptual pamphlet to demonstrate how modern society has become subservient to economics and its rationality and, therefore, cannot be regulated from the outside any more. Economics rules by the ethics of ruthless competition. A summary of seven key points of the analysis is provided below.

The dominance of financial markets

Governments reacted in panic to the financial crisis which erupted in 2007 and 2008. Their leaders have made many compromises and unheard-of efforts to balance their budgets so as to pacify the markets. Journalists have referred to the crisis as a tsunami, a blind natural force. Yet it was a moral crisis. Sacrifices have been made to placate the markets at the expense of employment, the environment, education and other vital services.

Sacrifices used to be made only to what was considered sacred. Over the past four centuries, the world has become disenchanted and desacralised. Commerce and economics have taken the place of the sacred as a remedy for being ruled by our passions. Friedrich A. von Hayek argued that incentives should play no role in economic life, because that would subject people to the arbitrary will of another human being. If the economic system were to work without human interference, it would provide an abstract, impersonal rule, similar to a law of nature, so that passions such as envy and resentment would cease to have any impact.

Analyses of the financial crisis often make false distinctions – for instance, by contrasting the real economy, which produces goods and services, and the speculative economy. We speculate by buying what we do not need in the belief that somebody else will desire to have it and be prepared to pay a higher price for it at a future date. However, desires also play a strong role in the ‘real’ economy. Financial operators have been speculating on future rising values of food and rare raw materials, even by buying or constructing warehouses.

By casting doubt on the ability of states to repay their debts, the financial markets have forced central banks to create massive amounts of liquidity to keep the financial markets operating. Such panic reactions indicate that the economic or financial system is unable to limit or regulate itself.

This is also borne out by the enormous swings in the financial markets from booms to busts. During the 1990s a speculative

boom developed around the Internet (dot.com). It collapsed not long after the turn of the century. When speculators turned from shares to real estate (based on sub-prime mortgages issued in the USA), another major boom occurred. Its collapse is the cause of the current crisis.

When a boom is in full swing, the participants believe that it will go on forever. Benoit B. Mandelbrot (1924–2010), a complexity theorist, illustrates this with the story of the captain of a ship that is sailing across a lake in thick fog and who does not know where the opposite bank is. The longer he sails, the more he thinks that the water is very wide and that the bank will be a long way off yet. But he may hit that bank sooner than he thinks!

Nobody believes that globalisation, and capitalism as its core element, will come to an end: it will end, it is thought, only as a result of a major catastrophe. Yet, we are moving between the destruction of nature caused by the operation of our technical-economic system, on the one hand, and, on the other, extreme human violence, especially in the form of a general nuclear conflict. Financial investors put this reality far out of their minds.

The excessive place of economics in life today

By so closing their eyes to the destructive tendencies of the technical-economic system, the financial investors prove to be followers of ‘homo economicus’. As long as expected profits appear to exceed costs, all expressed in monetary terms, investments should proceed. Such calculations are now made by most modern citizens, as documented by Schirrmacher (2013). Everything is for sale, even politicians (through funding of their election campaigns in exchange for promises). The only norm that counts nowadays is efficiency, which works by a rational or economic calculation of costs and benefits. As soon as costs exceed benefits, one should terminate a service, a car or even the life of a human being.

Dupuy (2012) refers to the ‘statistical fact’ that we incur most of the costs of medical care during the last year of our life. By that time the monetary benefits we contribute to society will have declined to almost zero. Utilitarians are inclined to use this statistic to question why we spend such large amounts of money on the last year of life when it could have been spent on our younger years.

Take the scenario where a certain sum of money could be spent on (1) cancer research and/or (2) the elimination of black spots on roads. Here one maximises the number of lives saved by comparing marginal revenues and marginal costs for each activity. If the number of lives saved could be increased by switching money from road improvements to cancer research or vice versa, one finds the point where such switches would not save any more lives. At this optimal point the value of a human life is determined. When costs exceed this value, no more effort to save lives should be expended. Similarly, one can calculate the maximum number of patients who can be treated cost-effectively. By means of

such calculations the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) international panel of scientists who study climate change for the United Nations) has worked out that a life lost because of climate change in Mexico is much more valuable than one lost in Bangladesh. In other words, a human being is valued only as a sum of money.

Violence

When economics, with its maximisation of 'utility', becomes the dominating religion of our time, it ceases to be able to limit itself. No limits are imposed upon it from the outside. Government cannot do this because it has become part of the economic system. This implies that all barriers to violence have been removed; climate warming cannot be stopped; as nuclear weapons are being miniaturised, they become like 'normal' weapons and this may lead to a general nuclear conflict. In the light of real and potential disasters, the protection of nuclear power stations may not be as strong as required, as was shown by Fukushima in 2011.

The only regulation that applies to economics is a form of self-transcendence. Under conditions of perfect competition, individual firms and consumers take prices as a given. Yet, through their buying and selling, they collectively set prices. In contrast, since no monetary values are set for restoring the natural environment or the climate, such regulation is unable to prevent pollution, climate warming and armed conflicts over scarce resources.

Dupuy (2012) relates an enlightening fable. An inventor visits the president of a large country that is suffering a severe business downturn and tells him that he has an invention that would accelerate growth and return the country to its former prosperity. However, there is a price to pay: he should accept an annual death toll of 20 000 people. The president shudders and decides not to proceed. He has just rejected the invention of the motor car. In actual fact, worldwide, 1.2 million people are killed every year in car accidents, according to the World Health Organization (WHO).

The general issue raised here is this: How many innocent victims are we prepared to sacrifice on the altar of the common good? The moral issue of deaths on the roads is easily turned into a natural phenomenon by saying that the deaths result from car traffic flows which are subject to hydro-dynamic laws and statistical regularities.

Time and prophecy

Why is it that we so easily accept such large numbers of fatalities? Is it possible to say that our failure in this regard results from a lack of faith in the future? This would be the more surprising, given that the economic system presupposes that there will be a future and that people will honour the promises they make. One makes and sells something only if one believes that the buyer will pay for it. Capital investment in new technologies or new products assumes that once they are ready, they will have a market. Indeed, the (silent)

assumption is that we have an indefinite future. Were we to know, for instance, that the future will end in 20 or 30 years' time, no long-term capital investment would take place. All structures with a long-term value would become worthless. This would effectively also reduce the values of shorter-term assets. As a result, the whole economic system would seize.

The current financial crisis is based on doubts as to whether creditor states will repay the loans they have contracted themselves into or underwritten. As a result, such states find it very difficult to keep borrowing, if only to refinance their borrowings. Consequently, interest rates rise and add to everyone's debt burdens.

Given the crucial nature of the future, forecasts are important. Some forecasters have such a high reputation that people act on their views, with the result that the forecast future tends to be realised (self-fulfilling prophecies).

Economic rationalism and the future

Since the outcome of our investing and financing lies in the future, the theory of rational choice says not only that 'rational people respond to incentives' but also that 'they will also consider the future consequences of present choices' (Harford 2008:9). Dupuy (2012) casts doubt on this last statement. In supermarkets we may choose one brand of washing powder from 30 available; but would we consider any future consequences of the choices we make there?

Max Weber ([1930] 1992) held that the belief of the Puritan Calvinists in predestination, as well as the Lutheran emphasis on our God-given calling to work, explains their work ethic and the spirit of capitalism. Up to this day, key capitalist centres tend to be Protestant rather than Catholic.

Especially with reference to Puritans such as Baxter in New England (in the 17th century), Weber believed that Calvinists sought a guarantee for their election to eternal life by working hard in their earthly callings. If they experienced success, then this indicated a blessing from God and a sign that he had truly elected them.

From the standpoint of economic rationalism, this is very strange, because they should have chosen a dominant strategy or 'sure thing principle' of doing little, given that their eternal destiny was beyond their control. Clearly, the Calvinists rejected such a dominant strategy, although they might have admitted that they could have opted for it.

Dupuy (2012) believes that this strange way of believing simultaneously in predestination and in free will may be similar to existentialism. He quotes Jean-Paul Sartre: 'I believe that my friend Pierre is friendly to me i.e. I decide to believe it and I conduct myself as if I were certain about it.' In rational choice theory such a position is known as evidentialist. It is a story we tell ourselves, a fiction. We can also apply this to Weber's ([1930] 1992) thesis: the Calvinists know that they have been predestined and that by refusing

the choice of fatalism and choosing to work assiduously, with such works being the effect of their predestination, they 'choose' their predestination counter-factually. From this point of view the actual choice of the Calvinists springs from a 'logic' that is different from, perhaps even superior to, that of rational choice theory.

In this regard, Dupuy (2012) refers to a paradox suggested by William Newcomb. Suppose there are two boxes. One is closed and one is transparent. The latter contains R10 000; the other may contain R1 million, if and only if a predictor foresees that the person will choose this box only. So, one may choose the closed box or both boxes. Rational people are inclined to take the two boxes and end up with ten thousand rand. This is also the choice of fatalists. Those who do not follow this logic and take only the closed box end up with R1m.

Calvinists are like those who take the closed box only. They work very hard because they want to convince themselves that they are elected forever.

Dupuy (2012) sees a similarity in the story of his daughter, who travelled from Rio de Janeiro to Paris one day before a plane crashed on the same route at the same time. He told his daughter that if she had left a day later, she would have been killed. 'But papa,' she said, 'if I had booked that flight, it would not have crashed.' He characterises such a belief as follows: the future determines the past counter-factually, although the past determines the future causally. This may involve either 'bad faith' or 'good faith'.

Competing individuals

Our author illustrates 'bad faith' on the basis of Camus's (1942) novel *The outsider*. The protagonist, Meursault, tends to look at himself, his relationships and the world at large, as it were, from the outside. He kills an Arab involuntarily. At the end of the story, when he is facing execution, he makes a confession to a priest. As a sulk he believes that he wants to be alone and that it is society that is envious of him as somebody who is different and it is society which, therefore, persecutes him. Compared to the 'self-election' of the Calvinist, Meursault self-excludes himself. Moreover, he needs others (god for him) so that they might know that he does not need them. Dupuy calls this a feature of modern individualism. As such, individualism is a lie, but a collective lie to itself. It requires a strange and negative co-operation with others. We need others to compete with, to surpass, if not to eliminate.

This is similar to the dialogue in Adam Smith's 'Theory of moral sentiments' between the man within the breast, who is subject to passions and desires, and the rational impartial spectator. All desires converge on material wealth, because it attracts the admiring regards of others. Compared to the immutability of God, the value of what others think is very fickle. It is this desire for admiration (self-conceit) that is the basis of our desire for indefinite economic growth.

Dupuy's (2012) preference is for 'good faith' in the form of the time of a project. Before I acted, I could have done something different; but once I have acted, it will always be true that I could not have acted differently. This metaphysics is shared by most of the world's rural populations. One should always act in such a way that the action would be causally possible if foreseen by an omniscient predictor. One should therefore not make promises that cannot be kept.

No to fatalism

However, in contrast to such 'good faith', 'bad faith', or the fatalism of economic rationalists, prevails today. Fatalists adopt a dominant strategy, that is, taking the two boxes in Newcomb's problem and finding the closed one empty or leading a life of idleness as we cannot change our eternal destiny. A society which believes that it is led by rationalism does not believe that the future can be forecast, because it is formed by human will. This is exactly the fatalism of the dominant strategy rejected by Weber's ([1930] 1992) Calvinists.

If we think of our society as a supermarket, then we all have myriad ways in which we can go. We choose the best. So we believe. Since, as individualists, we do not trust anybody else, economic transactions are hardly possible (will a buyer pay his bill?). Ethics has to come into play as a *deus ex machina* [an unexpected power or event saving a hopeless situation], often in the form of state law, to prevent chaos and violence. General mistrust, as evidenced in the current financial crisis, closes the temporal horizon as people and organisations turn in on themselves. Economic rationalists are those who will find Newcomb's closed box empty.

Rejecting this approach, Dupuy (2012) opts for a version of project time which he dubs 'enlightened catastrophism', which is the (unknown) time that separates us from the occurrence of surmised tragedies. We should let ourselves be guided by the future we have projected. Although we possess all the information needed to surmise major moral, natural, industrial or technical catastrophes, those threatened by them refuse to believe that they are imminent. Their knowledge is not translated into faith. In contrast, enlightened catastrophism acts as if the worst will come to pass and then assumes that we are free to refuse that destiny. By positing the worst as a fatality sure to happen, all powers of intelligence, imagination and determination are called upon to prevent it.

Politics should have a prophetic content such that prophesied adverse futures will not occur. This is impossible when financial markets use politicians as their servants. By suffering this econo-mystification we allow financial markets to be the masters of our destiny. It means that they become a blob, a very dangerous animal ready to devour nations and individuals, without any malicious intent, of course.

Strong points

Dupuy's (2012) analysis sheds light on some important problems we are faced with today. Those who are of 'green'

persuasion and are alarmed by the on-going pollution and destruction of the world's ecology as well as by the now certain warming of the climate as a result of greenhouse emissions have in fact been relegated to the function of an ecological conscience, or a *deus ex machina* that should put a stop to the destruction perpetrated by the current economic system.

His concept of enlightened catastrophism would call on all members of society to accept that nuclear power and nuclear armed conflicts as well as climate change are likely to generate major disasters within the foreseeable future. The precondition for such acceptance is that politicians are prepared to break with their sycophancy towards financial markets. There are historical precedents which show that this is possible. In 1953, for instance, a conference was held in London to deal with the enormous financial problems facing West Germany (Tsipras 2013). Effective government action then forestalled the types of problem now faced by Greece and other highly indebted European states.

Dupuy's suggestion that the state should not be ruled by financial markets and capitalist corporations is very important indeed. In the United States it would be necessary for Congress to kick out the lobbyists and govern on the basis of public justice rather than being beholden to corporate financiers. Moreover, electorates should cease to connive with business influence in the realm of politics.

Dupuy's metaphor of modern society as a supermarket is very apt. It is a system in which individuals – all of us – compete for the best portions of material wealth, regardless of how such wealth is produced and what catastrophes might result from it. Our behaviour is indeed a form of fatalism, inasmuch as we keep doing things that we know have adverse consequences.

In this regard, his analysis of economic rationality in conjunction with neo-classical economics as it is applied to areas such as medical care is worth noting. It shows in fact that the supermarket model applies also to hospitals and care for the dying as if there were no qualitative difference between medical care and the running of a fleet of jeeps by the army (an analogy used by Dupuy).

Despite the lack of faith in the future (given the fatalism of economic rationality in the competitive model of the supermarket) our society, not to mention the politicians, becomes upset when there is either little economic growth or no growth at all. Unless our material prosperity keeps growing indefinitely, we believe that we are somehow in trouble. In this respect, Dupuy makes a point that is rarely made: capital investment takes time and if, for whatever reason, there were to be a final point in time, all such investment would be worthless and also all current assets would lose their value. In this light, the insistence of financial markets that states should repay their debts and that any doubt about this leads to major problems becomes understandable.

Weaknesses

It is difficult to see how Dupuy (2012) would tackle the dominance of financial markets over politics and politicians. Would these markets, including their speculative activities run by means of supercomputers, be willing to play their part in tackling major threats as identified under enlightened catastrophism? No, along with other powerful interest groups, the financial markets would do their very best to downplay the severity of acute disasters.

So, how should the financial markets be constrained to play a servant role in society rather than that of a demanding taskmaster?

One of the problems is that each of the disasters referred to by Dupuy involves a long process over time, and that each produces incidents, events out of the ordinary, which may or may not foreshadow major calamities. Dupuy's response would be the story told by Mandelbrot above to the effect that if we have not yet experienced the potential calamity such as a financial collapse or a nuclear conflagration, we might still be very close to it.

Moral disasters

Economism, driven by self-interests, blinds people to moral issues. In the USA, there has been a series of mass shootings which has caused the second Obama administration to work towards gun control. Barack Obama, however, has yet to persuade a majority of USA citizens of the need for such control. Similarly, the intertwining of corporate business and government is well known – documented, as it has been, by Hauter (2012). But such unhealthy intertwining fails to arouse the indignation of the electorate.

The growing inequality between rich and poor, exacerbated by financial speculation, is another moral consequence of economism.

Climate warming

Discussions on climate warming focus on issues such as: by how much will sea levels and average world temperatures rise by 2100 and by when will the warming trend be irreversible? Meanwhile, weather events which are much more violent or frequent than in the past serve as warning signals, but without triggering determined attempts to reduce the volumes of carbon dioxide, methane and nitrous oxide in the atmosphere. Activists have suggested that the world should attempt to reduce carbon dioxide from the present 390 ppm (and rising) to no more than 350 ppm if the worst of climate warming is to be avoided. James Hansen, National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) climate scientist, together with other scientists, wrote in 2008:

If humanity wishes to preserve a planet similar to that on which civilization developed, paleoclimate evidence and ongoing climate change suggest CO₂ will need to be reduced from its current 385 ppm to at most 350 ppm. If the present overshoot of this target of CO₂ is not brief, there is a possibility of seeding irreversible catastrophic effects. (Weir 2009:32)

Nuclear disasters

Recent nuclear disasters, such as the explosions at Chernobyl in 1986 and Fukushima in 2011, were part of a series of accidents and near misses since the first nuclear bombs were exploded in August 1945. Dupuy (2012) rightly calls attention to the dangers of nuclear weapons losing their special status as a result of miniaturisation. However, decisions taken after the Fukushima disaster to cancel or delay the construction of new nuclear power stations are already being questioned.

Technicism ignored

The main reason why Dupuy's (2012) proposal of enlightened catastrophism is unlikely to stand a great chance of success is that he has ignored the fundamental motive of our culture to control the future by means of scientific technology or technicism. Schuurman ([1972] 1980:252–254) analysed approaches to the future of positivist thinkers who would seek to control it by means of science and technology, including planning and cybernetics, and by those critical of modern technology (transcendentalists) who would bet on creative disorder or permanent revolution. Schuurman's ([1972] 1980) own view of futurology is based on an analogy from technological development, especially its two traits of continuity and discontinuity. By drawing this analogy, he demonstrates that technical development is always both continuous, based on what is already known and available, and discontinuous: 'Invention, as the expression of human freedom, creativity and ingenuity, prevents such petrification' (Schuurman [1972] 1980:252). In addition, smaller changes are made regularly. Without recognising this combination, we are in danger of absolutising either technological–scientific control of the future or freedom and the new. The chaos brought about by freedom would call forth technical or scientific control, and extreme order would issue in a call for freedom.

Dupuy sees disasters looming that have their origin in the positivist attempt to create a better future by means of scientific technology. His own enlightened catastrophism runs the danger that it would be applied from a technicistic perspective. One might opt for geo-engineering, for example, to reduce the volume of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, but run the danger of unexpected adverse consequences.

If enlightened catastrophism were accompanied by a general repentance of the ways of technicism and economism, it might well work through major changes in the 'supermarket', because motor cars and aeroplanes would be used only as a last resort, ships equipped with sails, biofuels phased out and the land so freed restored by biological methods.

This is, of course, easier said than done. A general repentance or renewal movement involves a deep conversion, which is wrought ultimately by the Holy Spirit working through the Word of God.

The road ahead

A world dominated by technology and finance is unable to ban violence. On the contrary, it increases it. This appears

to fit in with René Girard's views. In March 2005, he said in an interview with Thomas Assheuer that Christianity is the only religion that has broken with anarchic religions in which the sacrifice or scapegoat is always guilty. Because Christ died as the innocent Lamb of God, taking away all our sins, we are unable to kill innocent 'sacrifices'. The West has colonised and exploited Islamic countries on the basis of its technical superiority. In this respect, the war in Algeria was a prophetic situation: we are now confronted with the sudden arrival of a violent Islamic movement on the world stage. Girard compares this with the Soviet Union, which turned politics into religion, but hopes that this is a corruption of Islam rather than its essence. When Christianity refers to things eschatological, then it does not talk so much about God destroying this world but rather about people destroying the world themselves. Christianity is a non-violent religion inasmuch as it localises violence in ourselves. It does away with the guilty scapegoat of primitive religions (Assheuer 2005:49).

One would therefore expect Christians to be in the vanguard of peace movements, including the movement for nuclear disarmament, and against police brutality, the destruction of the world's ecology and climate warming.

The dominance of finance over the State and the rest of society is strongly at variance with the so-called principle of sphere sovereignty, a view which says that there are spheres in society that are intrinsically different from one another, each subject to God's sovereignty and called as such to serve one another, but not for one or more to supplant the others. Abraham Kuyper called on this principle to defend the establishment of a free Christian university in 1880, that is to say, free from State governance but called to serve society in its own specific scholarly way. As he expounded this principle, Kuyper emphasised the crucial task the State has to be on the lookout for those who would try to rule over other institutions for their own benefit and that it nip in the bud all attempts of other spheres to lord it over others (Kuyper [1880] 1956:51).

In this way of thinking, the State should call the sphere of finance and economics to order and take measures to ensure that they serve rather than dominate others. The problem Dupuy (2012) is wrestling with is that the State has become subservient to financial or economic powers and, consequently, is unable to do its job properly. This implies that it is effectively powerless to contain the violence involved in the powers' increasing dominance over society. Financial speculation based on foodstuffs may trigger food riots in various countries, as it did in 2008. Since business corporations rely on the power of scientific technology to outwit competitors and seduce customers into buying whatever they produce, no matter what the effects are on the environment and employment, there is no chance that we will be able to constrain the trajectory of economic life to a truly sustainable one which will allow current and future generations to live in true peace and freedom.

When education and medical care must adhere to competitive business models, using economic tools such as operations research and rational choice, their provision becomes dominated by the need to maintain a balance of income and expenditure. This cannot be good for such vital public services.

The problems posed by a globalised system of financial dominance have deep historical roots. The economic system, shaped by Western technology, has always sought to extend itself by colonisation. Many non-Western cultures have been affected by this or split between westernising elites and those adhering to their now marginalised religion and culture. The current trend towards an increasing gap between rich and poor, both within Western countries and between Western countries and the many so-called developing countries, has increased violence.

Enlightened subversion

If we cannot rely on the State to liberate us from the oppressive rule of financial markets, and if for the same reason Dupuy's (2012) proposal of enlightened catastrophism offers little chance of success, what, then, can be done?

Dupuy's emphasis on time should assist us. If we were to change our very short-term focus to much longer-term thinking, pressures would abate. His analysis of the interrelationship between travel and work might point the way. Many people experience frustration in driving to work by car as a result of traffic jams or by being tortured at work by monotony and stress. Many others are frustrated as a consequence of becoming and being unemployed. Some manage to find compensation in leisure activities. But would it not be possible to create a different lifestyle by enhancing the world beyond the sphere of jobs? Recent initiatives – such as transitional towns, permaculture, developing communal gardens, collecting chickens from battery poultry farms that otherwise would be destroyed as being too old and having them around family homes, tending beehives and vegetable gardens on top of office buildings – could be extended and organised as part of new, sustainably organised communities. They all have a longer-term focus than conventional approaches. Unemployed people could be taught how to set up gardens and grow quality vegetables on plots of urban land without using chemical fertilisers and pesticides, and the produce could be sold to schools as an input to school lunches or supplied to hospital kitchens, soup kitchens and food banks. Skilled tutors would be provided by social welfare organisations, city governments, and so forth. Gradually, new communities would develop and start to displace modern supermarkets and their suppliers.

Essential to success along these lines is that we reinstate the importance of the commons, areas that are publicly

owned and managed. A feature of modernity is that private property has expanded to such an extent that the commons have virtually disappeared, or are about to be privatised. Yet, well-run commons are an important means of strengthening sphere sovereignty, as they provide families, schools and churches with scope for interaction and development that is not available within the private spheres of business and finance.

Since the financially powerful would strongly resist bringing the commons back (land, clean rivers, health, local currencies, railways, roads, raw materials, the radio spectrum, etc.), such a development should be adopted and advocated by politicians.

Conclusion

Dupuy's (2012) book should stimulate all who adhere to a reformational view of the world to ponder how far our modern society has moved way from what Kuyper ([1880] 1956) called 'sphere sovereignty'. It should also cause them to consider how this move might be subverted peacefully, for example by raising people's awareness of desire as a key motivator of economic growth, by fostering the development of new commons and by encouraging long-term rather than short-term thinking. Should these come to pass, it would amount to an enlightened subversion of the current economic or financial power structures.

Acknowledgements

Competing interest

The author declares that he has no financial or personal relationship(s) that may have inappropriately influenced him in writing this article.

References

- Assheuer, T., 2005, 'Jesus, unser Sündenbock; was das Christentum über menschliche Gewalt lehrt: Ein Gespräch mit dem Religionsphilosophen René Girard', *Die Zeit*, 23 March, p. 49.
- Camus, A., 1942, *The outsider*, Librairie Gallimard, Paris.
- Dupuy, J., 2012, *L'avenir de l'économie; sortir de l'écono-mystification*, Flammarion, Paris.
- Harford, T., 2008, *The logic of Life: The rational economics of an irrational world*, Random House, New York. PMID:PMC2605141
- Hauter, W., 2012, *Foodopoly: The battle over the future of food and farming in America*, The New Press, New York.
- Kuyper, A., [1880] 1956, *Architectonische critiek, fragmenten uit de social-politieke geschriften van Dr. A. Kuyper*, H.J. Paris, Amsterdam.
- Schirrmacher, F., 2013, *Ego: Das spiel des lebens*, Karl Blessing Verlag, München.
- Schuurman, E., [1972] 1980, *Technology and the future: A philosophical challenge*, transl. H. Morton, Wedge Publishing, Toronto.
- Tsipras, A., 2013, 'Notre solution pour l'Europe', *Le Monde Diplomatique*, February, p. 11.
- Weber, M., [1930] 1992, *The protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism*, transl. T. Parsons, Routledge, London.
- Weir, K., 2009, 'Living lightly: The great leap to sustainability on mother earth', *Pacific Ecologist*, 18, Winter, 2/33.