

Faith, works and talents entwined: Driving forces behind John Nevile's contributions

The Economic and
Labour Relations Review
24(2) 228–237

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DOI: 10.1177/1035304613482257

elrr.sagepub.com



GC Harcourt

The University of New South Wales, Australia

Peter Kriesler

The University of New South Wales, Australia

John Langmore

University of Melbourne, Australia

Abstract

In this article, we consider the mainsprings of John Nevile's many contributions to economics. John has repeatedly argued that because 'economic actions, institutions and policies affect people', they have an ethical dimension (Hawtrey and Nevile, 1986: 1), and he has stressed the importance of understanding the value judgements on which economics rests. His policy suggestions are aimed at improving social justice and the well-being of the most vulnerable. Apart from his deep knowledge of economic theory, his Christian faith provides an important foundation for his analysis, particularly of policy.

JEL Codes: B21, B40, E60

Keywords

Economic biography, economic methodology, economic policy, economic welfare, ethics

Introduction

Human rights are important for religious reasons. The God that I believe in is a God who cares profoundly for the vulnerable in society

(John Nevile in Conversation, 27 September 2012)

Corresponding author:

Peter Kriesler, Associate, Industrial Relations Research Centre, Australian School of Business, The University of New South Wales, Sydney, NSW 2052, Australia.

Email: p.kriesler@unsw.edu.au

This article's theme of faith, works and talents entwined is derived from a reflection on parallels between John Nevile and Austin Robinson (the distinguished Cambridge economist). At Austin's 1993 memorial service at Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge, one of the readings was the parable of the talents. Some thought it a peculiar choice, but a close friend who knew Austin intimately said it was peculiarly appropriate because Austin could not abide those who did not use their talents to the full. Austin's Christian upbringing (as the son and grandson of Anglican clergymen) emphasised works even more than faith, and this emphasis was exemplified in his long life of service to his profession, his country and to humanity generally (Harcourt, 2001). The parallels with John Nevile's many years of service to economics, the School of Economics at the University of New South Wales (UNSW), the university, his church, the wider community, Australia and also to humanity generally immediately come to mind (though, thankfully, this article honours John Nevile's 80th birthday and not a Memorial Service). This article seeks to relate John's contributions to the fundamental base of his life and to incorporate this personal understanding into a reflection on an appropriate ethical basis for economics.

John is an unassuming, not-in-your-face person, so that even those who know him personally may be unaware of his deep Christian faith. A clue is a short monograph entitled *The Root of All Evil*, which begins by quoting Jesus' statement that one cannot serve both God and mammon (i.e. wealth) and these words of Epistle writer Paul to Timothy:

If we have food and clothing, with these we shall be content. Those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and hurtful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction. The love of money is the root of all evil. (I Timothy 5:8-10)

John goes on to quote the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, who once remarked that the role of Christianity is 'to afflict the comfortable', as well as 'comfort the afflicted' and to write that he hopes his writing will 'give pause to those who are complacent about the way our economic system operates' and to explain to the radicals his judgement that 'capitalism should be modified, not destroyed' (Nevile, 1979).

John is not the sort of Christian who is obsessed with attaining and maintaining personal perfection, either his or others'. He has written that 'religion is concerned with the ordering of society as well as with the way individuals conduct their lives' (Nevile, 1979: vii). A central theme of much of his writing is that 'if capitalism is to work in morally acceptable ways, the majority of people in the economy must let altruistic motives moderate the naked self-interest of the acquisitive motive' (Nevile, 1979: 8). Unlike Wittgenstein, John realised early on that achieving perfection was an impossibility and that tolerance, compassion, kindness and, when required, quietly expressed righteous anger at injustice were much more relevant and important. Therefore, John's faith has led him always to be involved in communities, small and large, and to work with people of all beliefs, or none, in institutions, the aims of which have been to move towards the creation of just and equitable societies.

Like others who follow similar paths, he is a realist (though not a critical realist). John knows that even though a cause is just, there is no guarantee in our imperfect world that it will prevail. This has never stopped John from keeping on trying. He has led and still

leads a very busy life and works very hard.¹ Over the years, he has served on and contributed to many public enquiries and committees as well as being Head of School and Faculty Dean for periods of time no one would countenance these days. Not that all work and no play characterise his existence. A devoted family man, he is an avid theatregoer and is very well read in Australian and English classics, ancient and modern. He was a better than average rugby player in his youth, and he enjoys gossip and telling jokes.

Theoretical development

John Nevile's approach to economics and how he developed it provide fine role models. While he is not what would now be regarded as an orthodox economist, he was for much of his career a highly respected and prominent member of the Australian economics profession – a leading macroeconomist. His work was mainstream Keynesian with a few twists, and he can be seen as Australia's first empirical Keynesian in the sense that his judgments were explicitly guided by a macroeconomic model of the economy. He was very much in the thick of the battle against Monetarism. Later, as money and finance and rational expectations and neo classical ideas penetrated the mainstream, he became less and less enamoured of modern macroeconomics (as were others like Solow) and focused his attention on broader societal issues.

Not all strands of John's analysis evolved simultaneously (though he would rightly stress the importance of the process of mutual determination; see Kriesler and Nevile, 2002). Rather, his intellectual progress has been sequential and recursive. His earliest graduate work gave him a firm grip on the general nature and details of the dynamics of modern advanced economies. Few economists understand Roy Harrod's (1939, 1948) seminal and now classic contributions more deeply and thoroughly than John Nevile. Over the years, he has continued to write on Harrod and Harrod-like issues, as indicated by his most recent article in the *Cambridge Journal of Economics* (Nevile and Kriesler, 2011).

With this background, John used his comparative advantage as an outstanding applied economist and econometrician to provide the first econometric model of the workings of the Australian economy (Nevile, 1962).² He went on to tackle many issues, especially those associated with the impact of fiscal measures and with their optimum coordination in an Australian setting.³ His modelling exercises always served the purpose of devising practical and humane policies that could bring about and sustain full employment, tackle inflationary pressures, sustain growth and be combined with measures aimed at achieving distributions of income and wealth, which would not have occurred unaided from the workings of the Australian economy, even had these other economic goals been attained.

Thus, John Nevile is known for his combining of policy objectives with a close examination of ways to achieve and protect human rights. Many of his most important articles are concerned with the workings of labour markets and policies to make them work better for individuals and in aggregate. He recognised early on that sustained full employment could only come about if combined with permanent incomes policies reflecting the history, sociology and institutions of each society. Thus, he was a great supporter of the Commonwealth Conciliation and Arbitration Commission (now Fair Work Australia) and the centralised incomes policies associated with it, especially in the early years of the

Australian Prices and Incomes Accord – an agreement between the Labor Government and the peak union movement during the 1980s whereby wage moderation was compensated by ‘social wage’ measures such as guaranteed superannuation access. The deliberate dismantling of central labour relations institutions and policies since the mid-1990s has not met with John’s approval.

Ethical underpinning of Nevilian economics

Early in his career, John abandoned the false claim that the economist’s trade is a value-free objective social science – a canard that is still taught to most undergraduates and accepted by the well-trained, technically able, but uncritical cogs of capitalism which modern graduate schools tend to produce. John argues that because ‘economic actions, institutions and policies affect people’ they have an ethical dimension (Hawtrey and Nevile, 1986: 1). He profoundly regrets that the ethical foundations of economics, described by Adam Smith, for example, in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, are now tacitly embedded and at best implicit in economic analysis, rather than being made explicit. He emphasises, with Max Weber, that entrepreneurs will not retain the confidence of their customers and employees unless they have ‘highly developed ethical qualities’ (Hawtrey and Nevile, 1986: 2).

A clear expression of ethical values was his 1998 critique of the nature of so-called ‘economic rationalism’, as ‘social philosophy masquerading as economic science’ (Nevile, 1998: 170). He claimed that worldwide there had been ‘a deliberate political campaign to change the prevailing political ideology to that held by the economic rationalists’ (p. 170). He argued that ‘one of [economic rationalists’] many tricks is to present their policy recommendations as no more than the logical consequences of orthodox economics’ despite the dependence of these policies more on ‘values than on the theorems of economics [perhaps, in their case, lemmas]’. He emphasised that the principal change resulting from the implementation of economic rationalist policies had been the displacement of full employment as a goal of public policy and the elevation in its place of inflation control as the pre-eminent goal – a reversal of ideological priorities (p. 170).

The fact that controlling inflation should oust the goal of full employment reflects both odious human values and perhaps also the possibly unconscious realisation that capitalism needs unemployment if it is to continue to ‘work’, to survive. Why? The argument is that it will not work unless unemployment is maintained at levels which make the ‘sack’ an effective weapon with which to control the working class. Kalecki’s argument about the need for unemployment in a capitalist society is one answer which is well known and which is accepted by John, who also accepts that there are always basic contradictions present in capitalism. He emphasises an underlying structural flaw in modern capitalism, namely, that when the very well off engage in personal gratification, or conspicuous consumption, and their increases in income are highlighted by the media, this harms the work ethic on which capitalism depends.

For those who support John Nevile’s strong commitment to the idea that economics is not value free, the question arises of how to determine appropriate values and ethics that might underlie economics. Economics started as part of Moral Philosophy, and it is important that its moral aspect not be forgotten. Economic analysis informs important

policy decisions, which influence the lives of most of the population. This, as already argued, is why John saw ethical judgments, explicit or implicit, as unavoidably lying at the heart of economic analysis.

The attempt to divorce economic analysis from its ethical impacts has been formalised in mainstream economics in the normative versus positivist science debate. John's rejection of the idea, taught by 'most economic departments that positive economics is value free' (Nevile, 1998: 175) is based on the argument that

... positive economics rests on value judgements in at least two respects. ... in general positive economics is not just a matter of deductive reasoning. It also requires an appeal to empirical studies. Moreover, the facts that an economist studies are not facts produced in carefully controlled conditions in a laboratory. They are facts thrown up by real-world situations and some judgement is required in interpreting them. This judgement is heavily influenced by the values of the person making them. ... The second reason why positive economics is not value-free is the human tendency to give more weight to empirical observations that tend to support one's preconceived ideas than to those that tend to disprove them. (Nevile, 1998: 175–176)

The basic ethical judgement in economics is the Pareto one. However, we know that this is extremely problematic. Pareto efficiency implies the power of veto of any policy by any one member of society. Sen (1970), in particular, has been extremely critical of Pareto optimality, arguing that 'a society or economy can be Pareto optimal and still be perfectly disgusting' (p. 22). In addition, Sen has argued that the Pareto optimality criterion clashes with the basic concepts of liberalism. The fundamental problem with the Pareto criterion is that almost any imaginable change, no matter how much it improves the welfare of the general population, is likely to make at least one person worse off. As a result, the change will not satisfy the Pareto criterion.

The alternative to the Pareto criterion is the use of interpersonal utility comparisons, but these have remained theoretically problematic despite the best efforts of neoclassical theory.⁴ Thus, the Pareto criterion, despite its flaws, remains the tacit policy guide to 'value-free' economists. John saw the impotence of this criterion as lying in the reality that all policy has winners and losers:

The gains of the winners may be greater than the losses of the losers, but this, in itself, does not mean that economic analysis supports the implementation of policy change. (Nevile, 1998: 175)

Some economists have suggested that if winners could compensate losers, then it would be acceptable to implement the policy. There was much debate in the 1930s and 1940s about the Compensation Principle, as it was called, and it clearly provides the rational for cost/benefit analysis (for an overview of the Compensation Principle and this debate, see Chipman, 1987). Clearly, if winners actually did compensate losers, then the policy would lead to a Pareto improvement. Much economic policy has been predicated on these principles. However, according to John, whether winners actually compensate losers is a political and a moral issue, and economists opt out and forget to tell people (Nevile, 1994, 1998).

With characteristic balance, John acknowledges that the so-called ‘economic rationalists’ have made a contribution to Australia by turning it from ‘an inward looking country emphasising protection to an export oriented country’ (Nevile, 1994: 42). But he goes on to emphasise ‘that the great bias of economic rationalists against acknowledging market failure leads to flawed policy advice’ and to note the

... even more important ... widespread tendency of economic rationalists to ignore, or at least downplay the distributional consequences of their policy recommendations. (Nevile, 1994: 42)

An alternative to the utility approach, which some economists have advocated as a good foundation for ethical economic analysis, is Rawls’ analysis of justice as fairness. Rawls derives his analysis of fairness from what he calls the ‘original position’ where all citizens of a society get together under a veil of ignorance as to their actual social, racial, gender or economic position, in a society whose political, social and economic parameters are unknown. These citizens then agree to the basic principles of justice, which will be incorporated into their actual society. From this analysis emerges a ‘difference principle’, which is the cornerstone of Rawls’ ethical criteria and requires any change to be in the interest of the ‘worse off in society’. Included in this is the idea that it is acceptable for inequality to increase, as long as the worse off are in a better absolute position.

Given that one of John Nevile’s main interests is in employment and work, a more telling criticism of Rawls is that his analysis focuses on distribution and exchange, with agents not caring about how things are produced or about labour processes, only how final commodities are distributed. As a result, it ignores production and, in particular, the work process. In addition, it disregards important questions relating to the ownership of the means of production such as those concerned with issues of class and power in society. This means that it would be very difficult to use Rawlsian analysis to meaningfully discuss the right to full employment or the right to a decent job, both of which feature prominently in John’s writings.

In his 1979 book *The Root of All Evil*, John had the foresight to advocate the introduction of a prices and incomes policy as a way of directly addressing the underlying cause of inflation – the competition for income. He recognised that this would require union and corporate restraint but argued that this might be acceptable if it was demonstrated that it would prevent most of the costs of anti-inflationary measures being born by those forced into unemployment. In his ethical evaluation of the Accord when it subsequently became operational after 1983, he argued that access to work is essential to self-fulfilment and in order to enable men and women to serve one another and to help the needy. Furthermore,

the over-riding principle is the emphasis in the Bible on the necessity for justice in community economic relationships. ... it is unjust for the weak to be penalised for the benefit of the powerful. (Hawtrey and Nevile, 1986: 14)

Yet that is exactly what happens when contractionary fiscal and monetary policies are used to constrain economic activity so as to reduce the rate of inflation. ‘The

Bible is very scathing about those who secure their own economic well-being at the expense of others' (Hawtrey and Nevile, 1986: 20). In contrast, the Accord attempted through a cooperative framework of voluntary wage restraints to provide a basis for expansion of the social wage, which would lead to simultaneous reduction of unemployment and inflation. This worked for about 6 years from 1983 to 1989 during which time unemployment fell from over 10% to under 6% and inflation also steadily declined. John saw the Accord as promoting cooperation rather than confrontation, which was also of value from a Christian ethical standpoint. He saw the Accord as 'an attempt to break the yoke of unemployment imposed through tight monetary and fiscal policy' and quoted Isaiah 58: 6 as one of many supportive biblical passages:

Is not this what I require of you as a fast;
 To loose the fetters of injustice,
 To untie the knots of the yoke.⁵

John also supported the Accord because he saw it as enabling the economy to run at a higher level of economic activity and at an agreeable rate of growth. He argued that this economic progress was vital if the needs of the vulnerable are to be adequately met, which he saw as the main purpose of wealth creation. There was a lovely example of John's integration of the biblical emphasis on justice with his policy recommendations when, in an interview on his retirement, he was asked if he still believed in a guaranteed minimum income for all. He replied that he did,

... or, even better, a guarantee to all that they will be able to earn a minimum income by acceptable means. When I read the Old Testament prophets I am struck by the emphasis, in their visions of an ideal society, on everyone owning their own plot of land. In the agrarian society of ancient Israel that was another way of saying that everyone should be guaranteed the means to obtain a reasonable minimum standard of living. (Lodewijks, 1994: 27)

These values are entrenched in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. In essence, these provide the basic requirements for a decent life and something which we are all, as humans, entitled to.

According to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights – Article 23:

1. Everyone has the right to work, to free choice of employment, to just and favourable conditions of work and to protection against unemployment.
2. Everyone, without any discrimination, has the right to equal pay for equal work.
3. Everyone who works has the right to just and favourable remuneration ensuring for himself and his family an existence worthy of human dignity and supplemented, if necessary, by other means of social protection.
4. Everyone has the right to form and to join trade unions for the protection of his interests.⁶

The recognition of these fundamental rights underlies much of John Nevile's work. In a series of articles for well over a decade, John has been examining the implications of policies and their consequences for the advancement of these rights. Importantly, he sees economic rights as nested in other individual and social rights, as a synergistic entity, rather than purely in their own terms.

Conclusion

It is through an acknowledgement of and concern with fundamental human rights that the most vulnerable in society can be cared for. John's work has indicated an extremely important way in which to evaluate economic policy, by ensuring that policies always respect the rights of those affected. This means trying to ensure full employment of the labour force, with decent jobs and equitable pay so as to enable people to be included as full members of society.

John is an Australian prophet, advocating the primacy of social justice in national policy through the centrality of equity and opportunities of work for all and feasible strategies, which would contribute to those goals. In a cynical age, he is a quiet, brave and good man who leads by example and through the intellectual strength of his writing, teaching and speaking. Australia is a more inclusive and less damaged society because of the influence of his life and work.

Acknowledgements

This closing article in the symposium is unashamedly a personal as well as a professional tribute. John has long been a mentor, role model, colleague and friend, someone whom we greatly admire, whose company we much enjoy and for whose steadfast support, we are profoundly grateful. It is based on the premise that honesty in the 'dismal science' calls for a disclosure of values. The authors thank the participants participants of the Symposium in honour of Emeritus Professor John Nevile, Raja Junankar, Wylie Bradford and the anonymous referees for their comments.

Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Notes

1. It is my (G.C.H.) great fortune to share an office with John at the School of Economics, so I am able to observe his great powers of concentration as well as to enjoy well-deserved breaks for chin-wags.
2. We now know that Trevor Swan had made a Keynes-style model of the Australian economy in the 1940s. It is in a brilliant article that was only published after his death (Swan, 1989). However, the applied work in it is not econometric in the modern sense. This is not a criticism, just a statement about a different approach.
3. Books and articles on fiscal policy listed in his curriculum vitae (CV) easily outnumber entries under any other heading. They include Nevile (1970, 1975, 1983, 1999, 2000, 2003) and Nevile and Kriesler (2012).
4. The originators of neoclassical economics thought that the problem of making interpersonal utility comparisons would be solved sometime in the future. However, we now know that this is not the case.

5. The authorised King James version has the phrase 'and to let the oppressed go free', which, as one of our referees commented, 'seems appropriate'.
6. These views are reaffirmed and expanded in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights: Article 7. The States Parties to the present Covenant recognise the right of everyone to the enjoyment of just and favourable conditions of work that ensure, in particular, the following:
 1. Remuneration that provides all workers, as a minimum, with the following:
 - (a) Fair wages and equal remuneration for work of equal value without distinction of any kind, in particular women being guaranteed conditions of work not inferior to those enjoyed by men, with equal pay for equal work.
 - (b) A decent living for themselves and their families in accordance with the provisions of the present Covenant.
 2. Safe and healthy working conditions.
 3. Equal opportunity for everyone to be promoted in his employment to an appropriate higher level, subject to no considerations other than those of seniority and competence.
 4. Rest, leisure and reasonable limitation of working hours and periodic holidays with pay, as well as remuneration for public holidays.

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Author biographies

GC Harcourt AO is currently a Visiting Professorial Fellow at the University of New South Wales. He holds a PhD and DLitt from Cambridge and has been honoured for his major contributions to the development of post-Keynesian thought through the following awards; FASSA (1971); AcSS (2003); Distinguished Fellow, Economic Society of Australia (1996); Distinguished Fellow, History of Economics Society, USA (2004); Honorary Member, European Society for the History of Economic Thought (2004); Veblen–Commons Award, Association for Evolutionary Economics, USA (2010) and Distinguished Fellow, History of Economic Thought Society of Australia (2012).

Peter Kriesler gained his PhD at Cambridge University. He is Director of the Australian Society of Heterodox Economists and Deputy Director of the Centre for Applied Economic Research at the University of New South Wales, where he teaches in the School of Economics. He has published widely on the history of economic thought, heterodox economics, the Australian economy, labour economics, impacts of globalisation and economic perspectives on human rights.

John Langmore is a Professorial Fellow in the School of Social and Political Sciences in the University of Melbourne. Between 1963 and 1976, he worked in Papua New Guinea as a public servant and university lecturer. Between 1976 and 1984, he was an economic advisor to the Labor Party and proposed the negotiation of the Accord. From 1984 to 1996, he was an elected member of the House of Representatives and led the planning of its first comprehensive committee system. From 1997 to 2001, he was Director of the UN Division for Social Policy and Development in New York and then served for 2 years as Representative of the International Labour Organisation to the United Nations. He organised the 24th special session of the General Assembly, the first world conference to agree on a global target for halving serious poverty. He has published extensively in books, journals and the media.