The Catholic Bishops and the Economy: A Debate
Douglas Rasmussen and James Sterba
New Brunswick: Transactions Books, 1987, 118 pp.

James Sterba and Douglas Rasmussen, both philosophy professors at Catholic universities and "steeped in the Catholic tradition," according to the introduction, set out in this book to debate the philosophical foundations of the Catholic bishops' pastoral letter on the U.S. economy, published in its final form in 1986. What emerges is a disappointingly small amount of debate about the letter itself.

The first problem is that Sterba, who wants to defend the bishops' policy recommendations, leads off. But a defense presupposes an attack. Since Rasmussen has not yet attacked, Sterba must first construct the arguments he wants to refute. He does not confront the criticisms of a real opponent until his eight-page "Response to Rasmussen" at the end of the book, and even then the response is directed more toward Sterba's own version of a libertarian position than to Rasmussen's actual arguments.

Sterba does spend a few pages near the beginning of his essay answering some of those who have argued that the bishops' policy recommendations will not work. But the treatment is superficial as well as brief, and obviously a mere preliminary to what Sterba takes as his main assignment: a *philosophical* defense of the economic pastoral.

That is the second problem. What constitutes a specifically philosophic defense of a set of economic policy recommendations? Can a philosophic argument be separated from theological and economic arguments when discussing the implications of a theological perspective for economic policy? There are indeed ways of arguing that could be called peculiarly philosophic because they only impress professional philosophers. Unfortunately, they rarely *persuade* anyone, professional philosophers least of all. Sterba's "philosophical defense" is a prime example. He attempts to prove that libertarians, socialists, and welfare liberals who value human dignity will all consent to the bishops' policy proposals once they have been shown the implications of their own positions. I leave it to the reader to decide how many people will change their views about welfare legislation upon being shown that neither John Rawls nor John Harsanyi has quite correctly grasped the implications of choice behind the veil of ignorance.

Rasmussen has an easier task because he can attack the arguments of the letter itself. He does so by attempting to show "that the Catholic Bishops have failed to grasp both the fundamental character of human dignity and the nature of the free market." He begins by accepting the principle of human dignity and the normative foundation for the bishops' understanding of that dignity, namely, the belief that human beings have the natural function or purpose of "flourishing" or achieving "self-actualization." But he denies that the rights and duties asserted by the bishops follow from the dignity humans possess and claims that they are in fact antithetical to it.

The bishops hold that because flourishing requires such goods as food, clothing, shelter, rest, medical care, education, employment, and healthful

working conditions, these are all human rights. Justice therefore requires that each individual be able to claim all of these, in adequate amounts, as a matter of legally enforceable right, and, as a necessary consequence, that others have a legally enforceable obligation to supply all of these goods or the means to obtain them. The assertion of such positive rights, however, entails the denial of negative human rights. People cannot have the right to use their own time and other resources as they choose, free from interference by others, if others have the right to commandeer those resources whenever they lack the means necessary to their flourishing.

Rasmussen contends that, on the bishops' own normative grounds, human beings are in justice entitled to negative rights that preclude the positive rights for which the bishops argue. Any positive rights that people possess must be derived from the negative rights that are the precondition of self-directedness or autonomy, an essential constituent of human flourishing.

Sterba's response seizes upon Rasmussen's contention that negative rights are absolute but can nonetheless be disregarded in emergencies, and argues in effect that society will be in a chronic state of emergency unless it contains the sort of welfare institutions that Sterba himself favors. Rasmussen's response objects to Sterba's conception of liberty as the power to do whatever one wants, unconstrained by other persons. The liberty for which Rasmussen contends is a normative conception; liberty requires only that people be unconstrained by others in doing what they have a *right* to do. Mere wants do not generate rights.

I would have liked to have seen much more discussion of this last issue. Everyone is in favor of liberty, but as Rasmussen notes, liberty is not a univocal notion. The argument over positive versus negative rights raises fundamental questions about the proper way to define liberty. It would have been instructive to see Sterba and Rasmussen elaborate, apply, and defend their conflicting definitions of liberty in debating the bishops' proposals. That would have compelled them to pay attention to questions of practical implementation and probable consequences, matters into which Sterba in particular seems reluctant to enter. While that would also have carried them outside the realm of philosophy narrowly conceived, philosophy cannot be narrowly conceived if it is going to assist in the discussion of public policy.

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Impulse to Revolution in Latin America
Jeffrey W. Barrett
New York: Praeger, 1985, 360 pp.

Jeffrey Barrett's volume is part of an encouraging trend among scholars to view the economic development problems of Latin America in more realistic terms. By employing an analytical framework that emphasizes the role played by indigenous political and cultural values, Barrett provides a useful corrective to prevailing leftist theories. In particular, he effectively undermines