

*The Vice of Luxury: Economic Excess in a Consumer Age.* By David Cloutier. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2015. xi + 336 pages. \$32.95. doi: 10.1017/hor.2017.92

David Cloutier offers a well-supported claim that an over-reliance on a principled approach to economic justice in the Catholic social tradition has rendered contemporary Catholic economic ethics less than capable of making evaluations of an illusory yet powerful dimension of the human as consumer: the desire for luxury, particularly in our “goods economy.” He claims that “a full ethics of economic action must recover an understanding and critique of luxury in order to pursue economic good. Insofar as economic activity is genuinely free and not ‘automatic,’ it involves choice; that choice needs to be subjected to moral scrutiny” (17). He suggests we can best accomplish this task by understanding luxury as a vice, and applying the virtue of prudence to order to rightly form ourselves to the dispositions and practices it engenders. He rests his main theological claim—that “the neglect of luxury as a problem requires a better understanding of the relationship between the material and the spiritual” (107)—largely on Thomistic virtue ethics, as well as Benedict XVI’s economic theory in *Caritas in Veritate*. Cloutier identifies the possibilities of what he calls Benedict’s “sacramental premium,” often applied in sexual ethics, for resisting the deadening idolatry of “the luxury premium” and for developing instead relationships of reciprocity and integral development in the context of economic activity on both the personal and the collective levels.

Engaging in this kind of scrutiny is particularly daunting, given the landscape of resistance to evaluations of luxury in a variety of disciplines, including Christian ethics, which Cloutier thoroughly maps. By persisting in doing so “from within the basic logic and structure of modern economics” (146), however, he illuminates the relational dimensions of luxury, which affect far larger swaths of consumers than the commonly assumed 1 percent, and offers constructive suggestions for creating more life-giving relationships to the excesses in our individual and communal lives than the more familiar detachment or renunciation strategies Christian ethics has traditionally espoused. Particularly compelling are four guidelines for evaluating what might constitute “excess” and how to orient our disposition toward luxury goods beyond “the artificial lack” that the “goods life” induces toward a good life of flourishing: cultivating (1) “shared goods” like those developed in cooperatives; (2) “festival goods,” which heighten generosity on significant occasions or milestones; (3) vocational goods, which foster integration of our preferences and commitments; and (4) “enrichment goods,” which stimulate personal growth rather than merely providing comforts.

Cloutier exhaustively relies on resources from the social sciences, engaging a wide array of thought leaders, both historical and contemporary, from psychology and political history to marketing and finance; not to mention a variety of subdisciplines within economics: historical, political, behavioral. He situates questions of luxury at the heart of other ethical conversations in contemporary economic ethics, both theological and secular: work and leisure, debt, happiness studies, and cost-of-living comparisons. His bibliography is an extensive litany of classic and contemporary economists from both sides of a variety of debates as to the function and merits of consumerism. Cloutier's participation in an NEH-sponsored colloquium on the history of economics is also evident here, particularly in his explanations as to why notions of luxury dropped out of Christian consciousness and never gained much traction in modern economic theory. This historical sweep—primarily in areas of economics, although also in philosophy and theology—illuminates the dispositions and practices around different forms of excess, which shape our contemporary understanding of luxury.

At times, the sheer volume of conversation partners makes it difficult to track Cloutier's scaffolded arguments or to understand fully their significance for Catholic economic ethics. But his clear writing style and engaging personal examples, which draw upon his pedagogical strategies in undergraduate courses on ethics and private property, reflect Cloutier's passion for making these timely debates as accessible to nonexperts as possible. For constructive suggestions about how the Christian community might respond to the important questions Cloutier raises here, which are only amplified by the results of the 2016 presidential election and the economic policy being proposed by the new administration, this book is a must-read.

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*The Revelatory Body: Theology as Inductive Art.* By Luke Timothy Johnson. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015. x + 246 pages. \$25.00.  
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*The Revelatory Body* is, by my count, Johnson's thirty-fourth book since 1973. Drawing on a life of New Testament scholarship, teaching, and writing for both scholarly and popular audiences, Johnson plays on Sandra Schneiders' 1999 title *The Revelatory Text* to propose human bodies as a "privileged arena of divine disclosure" (iv). The seductive power of words means that the constructions of theologians might just be "the most subtle and