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## Jesus as a Philosopher: At the Interface Between Ethics, Economics, Politics, and Civics Over 2000 Years Ago

Michael Emmett Brady<sup>1\*</sup>, Donald Fling<sup>2</sup> and Clark Tang<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Adjunct Lecturer, College of Business Administration and Public Policy, Department of Operations Management, California State University, Dominguez Hills, 1000 East Victoria Street, Carson, California 90747, USA. E-mail: [mandmbrady@juno.com](mailto:mandmbrady@juno.com)

<sup>2</sup>Research Scholar, 2601 E 28th, Street Suite 308, Signal Hill, California 90755, USA. E-mail: [lewisdonald118@gmail.com](mailto:lewisdonald118@gmail.com)

<sup>3</sup>Independent Research Scholar, 2601 E 28th Street Suite 308, Signal Hill 90755, USA. E-mail: [clarktang@icloud.com](mailto:clarktang@icloud.com)

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### Abstract

Over 2000 years ago, Jesus faced nearly the same kind of economic, institutional, political, and social problems that confronted Socrates over 400 years earlier in Athens, Greece, as well as Adam Smith in Scotland in 1772. A certain segment of the upper-income class in Jerusalem, called Sadducees (Adam Smith's projectors, imprudent risk-takers, and prodigals), who were allied with Israel's aristocrats, were engaging in practices that were damaging the economic and social health of Israel. The Sadducees were the priestly class who controlled the Temple in Jerusalem. Like the Sophists and Sycophants in Plato's Dialogues, they were severely impacted, in a very negative way, the economic living conditions of the lower and middle-income citizens of Israel. The Temple in Jerusalem had been turned into an economic mechanism for the extraction of economic profits from the lower and middle classes, thereby draining the overall economy of resources that could have been used to improve the overall, macro, living standards of the population. Jesus was a teacher of ethics and moral philosophy in Israel. Ethics dealt with the self (starting with those actions that provided security and safety through prudent behavior for the individual) while moral behavior concentrated on the interactions between one's self and other-selves (benevolence). Jesus's main philosophical concern was teaching, applying, and living virtue ethics. Jesus's main teaching tool was the parable, which was usually a short, fictitious story that made a clear cut ethical or moral point.

**Keywords:** *Corruption, Virtue ethics, Utilitarian ethics*

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### 1. Introduction

The paper will be organized in the following fashion. Section Two will examine Jesus's views on the role of economics. Section three will examine Jesus's politics and views of government. Section four will examine Jesus's decision to confront the Sadducees openly in the Courtyard of the Gentiles, an area about the size of 3.5 and 4.5 football fields, after his entrance into Jerusalem shortly before the celebration of the Passover and finally section five concludes the paper.

\* Corresponding author: Michael Emmett Brady, Adjunct Lecturer, College of Business Administration and Public Policy, Department of Operations Management, California State University, Dominguez Hills, 1000 East Victoria Street, Carson, California 90747, USA. E-mail: [mandmbrady@juno.com](mailto:mandmbrady@juno.com)

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Over 2000 years ago, Jesus faced nearly the same kind of economic, institutional, political, and social problems that confronted Socrates over 400 years earlier in Athens, Greece, as well as Adam Smith in Scotland in 1772. A certain segment of the upper-income class in Jerusalem, called Sadducees (Adam Smith's projectors, imprudent risk-takers, and prodigals), who were allied with Israel's aristocrats, were engaging in practices that were damaging the economic and social health of Israel. The Sadducees were the priestly class who controlled the Temple in Jerusalem. Like the Sophists and Sycophants in Plato's Dialogues, they were severely impacted, in a very negative way, the economic living conditions of the lower and middle-income citizens of Israel. The Temple in Jerusalem had been turned into an economic mechanism for the extraction of economic profits from the lower and middle classes, thereby draining the overall economy of resources that could have been used to improve the overall, macro, living standards of the population.

The economic practices of this upper-class segment of the population in Jerusalem bear striking similarities in their economic behavior and impact to Augustine's citizens of the Earthly City, Adam Smith's prodigals, imprudent risk-takers, and projectors, Karl Marx's bourgeoisie, Veblen's Captains of Finance, and Keynes's rentiers, speculators, and "...the forces of banking and finance...".

Jesus was a teacher of ethics and moral philosophy in Israel. Ethics dealt with the self (starting with those actions that provided security and safety through prudent behavior for the individual) while moral behavior concentrated on the interactions between one's self and other-selves (benevolence). Jesus's main philosophical concern was teaching, applying, and living virtue ethics. Jesus's main teaching tool was the parable, which was usually a short, fictitious story that made a clear-cut ethical or moral point.

Jesus's version of virtue ethics was very concise, brief, and to the point. Jesus taught that there were only two laws or rules, not many laws or rules that had to be memorized, consulted, and considered before being implemented. The practice of these two laws was all that was required in order to obtain salvation. These two laws were to a) love your God and b) love your neighbor as yourself or as you love yourself. Either law implies the other either directly or indirectly. If you love yourself as you love your neighbor, then you are also loving God. If you love your God, then you will love others as you love yourself. The crucial word here that is reflected in all of his teachings is Jesus Christ's emphasis on the word love, although sometimes what is required is "tough love". Christian love is benevolence from those who have to those who do not have, where we are dealing with needs, not wants. Needs must be fulfilled or the person in need will be unable to have a fulfilling life.

Jesus's emphasis on these two basic or fundamental laws encapsulates the other virtues of temperance, courage, and justice that lie between the virtues of prudence and benevolence. The order of application always begins with the virtue of prudence. Successful prudent behavior is always required first because it allows one to build up a surplus of wealth or money. Part or all of this surplus can be used to assist others in NEED. Next comes the virtue of temperance. Temperance means the minimization of one's wants. Temperance can then be combined with courage, as done by Adam Smith, to attain self-command or self-control of one's desires or wants. Desires or wants are not needed to attain a fulfilling life. Self-Command trains one to ignore, downplay or minimize the attractions of wants, which Adam Smith categorized as being mere toys, trinkets, baubles, ornaments, and trifles. Jesus completely rejects the economist claims about insatiable wants that can never be satisfied, so that everyone is assumed to have insatiable wants, whereas economists have adopted Bentham's maximizing utility principle as an ethical system. Once the individual has mastered the virtue of self-command, he is then in a position to work to assure that Justice (fairness) follows.

Jesus's emphasis on only two laws also put him in direct conflict intellectually with the Pharisees, who accepted the standard conclusion that there were 619 laws that were directly descendant from Moses. The Pharisees, like Jesus, understood that the Sadducees were misusing the Temple in Jerusalem to amass great wealth. The definition of a good Jew for a Pharisee meant that one knew all the laws, as well as their correct interpretation, or always was carrying or had available for immediate personal use documents containing the written laws that one could then consult and implement as needed. Jesus and the Pharisees split over this issue of knowing precisely and exactly what the written law entailed as well as knowing how to correctly interpret the law.

Both Jesus and the Pharisees opposed the Sadducees, whose concerns were primarily utilitarian in the sense of Benthamite utilitarianism so that only the financial consequences of interactions with other Jews were their main concern. Some of the Pharisees were still attracted to Jesus's dedication, intensity, overwhelming debating style, skills, and flair (Jesus was buried in the tomb originally built for Joseph of Arimathea, a prominent Pharisee and member of the Sanhedrin), even if they could not accept his argument that there were only two laws, since they felt that this emphasis by Jesus on only two laws undercut the entire concept of knowing Mosaic Law, although Jesus correctly argued that he was actually fulfilling the law, and not destroying the law, since Christ's emphasis on a) and b) came directly from Mosaic law.

Given the Sadducee's views concerning the use of the Temple to amass a fortune in money, the conflict between Jesus and the Sadducees was foreordained, inevitable, and merely a matter of time. The Sadducees used the Temple tax and requirement to sacrifice in the temple as a way of generating very large amounts of revenue since only a particular type of coin would be accepted in payment for Temple services and only animals blessed in the Temple were fit for sacrifice. This conduct set up a direct, unavoidable confrontation between Jesus (Virtue ethics) and the Sadducees (Utilitarian ethics) that would end in Jesus's death.

It is often argued that Jesus brought on his own death by going into the courtyard of the Temple and violently forcing out those who were trading, selling, and buying. However, Jesus really had no alternative course of action, unless one is arguing that Jesus should have abandoned the actual implementation and application of virtue ethics in his life, while still continuing to teach virtue ethics as a mere idea. However, since, for both Socrates and Jesus, in one's life, what is true is virtue ethics, abandoning the application of virtue ethics would mean that one abandons virtue ethics in practice. This would entail abandoning the practice of the virtue of courage and would severely weaken a central tenet of virtue ethics.

## **2. Jesus and Economics: Do Not Turn My Father's House into a Marketplace**

Jesus understood the vital importance of the marketplace in society. This is where the exchange took place between producers and consumers. The marketplace allowed the practitioners of Virtue ethics to demonstrate their God-given skills and talents, which they could put to use effectively to satisfy their basic needs by earning a living. Thus, free and open markets, available to all members of society to use, were necessary in order for all individuals to practice the virtue of prudence so that they could amass a surplus. More importantly, selling one's goods for a profit in the marketplace allowed every member of society to build up a surplus. Building up such a surplus was a necessary condition for the successful application of the virtue of benevolence because, without prudence, there can be no benevolence. The application of the second virtue, temperance, allowed the successful practitioner of prudence to limit and control his wants and desires. Of course, such self-command requires the virtue of courage (fortitude) to withstand the urge to self-indulge. The notion of justice comes into play as one interacts with others, recognizing that many are not meeting their basic needs. The last act is to love your neighbors as yourself by practicing benevolence, which means using part of your surplus to assist others in need.

The application of this virtuous chain starts with the efficient use of resources, inputs, that, through hard work and effort involving a production process, transforms them into a saleable output that leads to revenue and profit. Jesus worked as an apprentice to Joseph in the carpentry trade for 18 years. Joseph was very successful, as he had other wives beside Mary. Thus, Jesus understood well the important role of the market mechanism in creating the ability to build a surplus. Unfortunately, the economics profession stops here, misinterpreting the application of the virtue of prudence as being the same thing as maximizing Bentham's utility. Bentham's view is that Profit (surplus) is used to satisfy the supposedly insatiable wants of the self(ish) interested utility maximizer. This view directly conflicts with the virtues of temperance and courage (self-command). Of course, it is impossible to be benevolent if you have spent all of the surplus funds generated through the practice of prudence on yourself, so as to satisfy an endless stream of wants. For instance, economists greatly confuse Adam Smith's emphasis on the importance of economic gain and maximizing profits with Bentham's similar advocacy, failing to see that the ultimate purpose of the gain or profit is completely different for both Smith and Bentham. For Bentham, profit and gain are to be used to satisfy the insatiable desires and wants of the utility maximizer, while for Smith gain and profit are to be used to expand one's business and practice benevolence.

Therefore, economics and markets are important, but only for initially starting the ball rolling so that all of the other virtues can eventually come into play and be effectively deployed in the end in acts of benevolence.

Another severe error made by economists is to confuse and conflate benevolence with altruism. Altruism is not a virtue. Altruism translates as always loving others, but do not love yourself. This violates Jesus's second law. Marx also made this error since his "new economic man" "is supposed to sacrifice himself for the representative of the others, which is the state.

Jesus was apolitical in the sense that he was not interested in substituting one type of political administration and control, Roman, for another, very similar Israelite government that would be controlled by Herod and the Sadducees. The main purpose of the Temple was for allowing the middle and lower income class Israelites to be able to put into practice satisfying the first law-Love your God. The Temple existed only for this reason and not for any other reason. The economic and social function of the market was to allow one to acquire the necessary means of generating a surplus so that the rest of the virtues could be implemented. Jesus, like Adam Smith after him, realized that a citizenry committed

to the implementation of virtue ethics individually in each of their lives would also become opulent as a whole, due to the positive externality effects that would be generated and transmitted between the upper, middle, and lower-income classes. There can be no class warfare or disturbances if all members of society are committed to the practice of virtue ethics. Negative impacts on this type of macroeconomics would have to come from outside the economy as a whole from the plague, famines, pestilence, war, etc.

### 3. Jesus's Political Philosophy

Jesus's political philosophy is an expression of his belief that tyranny must be overcome by the transformation of each individual by changing each individual's behavior in society through his message of love. A large majority of citizens, each practicing virtue ethics, would transform the way society was organized, structured, and governed.

Jesus's approach can be categorized as being Hobbesian (Thomas Hobbes) and/or Burkean (Edmund Burke). Jesus faced three tyrants (despots) in Caiaphas, Herod, and Pilate on the day before he was crucified. He was well aware of how all three were engaged in economic, political, and social repression and oppression. At no point in the three years of his public ministry did Jesus advocate rebellion, revolution, or civil war as an answer to the oppression and corruption that was taking place in Israel. Jesus can be contrasted to Judas, his most trusted apostle, and his treasurer, who was also a member of the Zealots. Judas advocated the violent overthrow of the Herod-Roman-Sadducee dictatorship by force, not realizing that the result of such actions would lead to reprisals which would be much worse than the existing situation was under Herod, Pilate, and the Sadducees. Jesus realized that such violent actions would lead to a situation that would result in an outcome that was far worse than the existing situation of dictatorship.

Jesus believed that violent actions in opposition to the existing rulers would not lead to an improvement in the life of the average citizen. Jesus sought to change the rule by dictatorship by changing people's hearts through love via the teaching of virtue ethics. This change in behavior would then lead to a change in the way society was ruled at the top.

### 4. The Great Confrontation in the Court of the Gentiles

The use of the Temple to make profits for the Sadducees had been going on for many years. It is highly possible that Jesus had spoken out against this on a number of other occasions in the past. However, it is clear that Jesus's admonitions against turning the Temple into a highly profitable, money-making machine were ignored. The virtues of courage and justice, which Jesus taught and practiced, meant that it was now time to put up or shut up. Jesus had absolutely no other option or alternative, given that he was committed to the practice of virtue ethics. The yearly rip-off of anywhere from 300,000 to 500,000 pilgrims crowded into the city of Jerusalem to celebrate the feast of Passover led to Jesus's actions.

Let us consider the gospel accounts of Mark and John. We note that all four (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) of the Gospel accounts are bare-bones descriptions that are ambiguous and vague on many very important details about an event which is of central importance in Jesus's public life as a teacher and practitioner of virtue ethics since this event leads directly to Jesus's crucifixion. We consider two examples of descriptions of Jesus cleansing the area outside the Temple in the Court of the Gentiles:

Then they came to Jerusalem. And he entered the temple and began to drive out those who were selling and those who were buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold doves; and he would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple. He was teaching and saying, "Is it not written,

'My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations'?

But you have made it a den of robbers.'"(Mark 11:15-18)

And

Since the Passover of the Jews was near, Jesus went up to Jerusalem. He found in the temple area those who sold oxen, sheep, and doves,\* as well as the money-changers seated there. He made a whip out of cords and drove them all out of the temple area, with the sheep and oxen, and spilled the coins of the money-changers and overturned their tables, and to those who sold doves he said, "Take these out of here, and stop making my Father's house a marketplace.'"(John 2:13-15).

We have read many, many different accounts of this event. What we find is the argument and claim that Jesus never hit, hurt, or injured any of those that he was confronting and driving out of the Temple. Supposedly, the whip was only for moving the animals. Thus, according to this account, all of the moneychangers (hundreds) made no effort to repeal or stop Jesus physically. Neither did the hundreds of sellers of animals or pigeons attempt to stop or repel Jesus

physically. They all fled as Jesus tore their wooden cages apart. The same holds for all of the other hundreds of vendors selling food and drink in the Courtyard. None of the Temple guards attempted to restrain Jesus or restrain him physically, even though that was precisely what they were paid to do. They just watched as the event unfolded before them. However, even if this is the case, the economic, political, and social costs to the Sadducees and aristocrats must have been immense. The Court of the Gentiles would have been strewn with the wreckage of hundreds of destroyed wooden cages, tables, rotting food, etc.

If this was the case, then why is “a great multitude” of heavily armed men, including some 300 Roman legionnaires, needed in order to arrest Jesus later?

Even if Jesus had caused no physical injuries, the financial and monetary injuries, which he imposed on those who had set up a very large, physical marketplace in the Court of the Gentiles, were tremendous.

The accounts of Jesus’s trial in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John concentrate only on the attempt by the Sanhedrin to establish that Jesus had committed a sacrilege by blaspheming when he answered the question “Are you the Messiah?” by stating “Thou hast said it”. However, the Sadducees could have cared less about Jesus being the Messiah. We believe that the severe and devastating financial and monetary costs and losses the week before his arrest were the overwhelming reason he was brought to trial.

## 5. Jesus and Government

Jesus’s main concern is that government must not be corrupt so that government officials must be prevented from taking donations (bribes) from the upper-income class in order to provide special treatment or make laws favoring the interests of a particular income class. Jesus’s answer to the Roman centurion about what he had to do in order to attain eternal life was simple and direct—don’t bully and be fair. These recommendations would also form the foundation for Jesus’s views of the role of government officials enforcing the laws and regulations of the state—be fair and don’t bully people. The Tax collector should be fair and not bully or threaten citizens when collecting the taxes. The elected representatives should be fair. Thus, the important role of government is to administer justice for all, not the few that, like the Sadducees, sought to obtain special favors that would benefit only themselves. The serious damage to the state created by the corruption of government officials was of major concern to Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle in Athens. So it was in Jerusalem for Jesus.

## 6. Conclusion

The clash between Jesus (Virtue ethics) and the Sadducees (Utilitarian ethics) could never have been avoided. Jesus’s view of a just, ethical and moral society, from an economic, social, and political perspective, is diametrically different from that of the Sadducees. As long as Jesus made no attempt to alter how the existing institutions (for instance, the Temple) operated for the benefit of the few, the Sadducees could have cared less about the coming of the Messiah. However, once Jesus acted physically against them during the Passover celebrations, the Sadducees decided that they would use those institutions to make sure that they were able to repel the threat that Jesus represented. Jesus had become too much of a direct threat that had to be removed.

As an advocate, proponent, teacher, and practitioner of Virtue ethics, Jesus knew that at some point he would have to confront the Sadducees. He did and was executed for practicing virtue ethics, not for confirming that he was the Messiah, which he was.

Jesus’s version of virtue ethics was very concise, brief, and to the point. Jesus taught that there were only two laws or rules, not many laws or rules that had to be practiced in order to obtain salvation. These two laws were to a) love your God and b) love your neighbor as yourself or as you love yourself. Either law implies the other either directly or indirectly. If you love yourself as you love your neighbor, then you are also loving God. If you love your God, then you will love others as you love yourself. The crucial word here, which is reflected in all of his teachings, is Jesus Christ’s emphasis on the word love, although sometimes what is required is “tough love”. Christian love is benevolence from those who have to those who do not have, where we are dealing with needs, not wants. Needs must be fulfilled or the person in need will be unable to have a fulfilling life. Jesus’s emphasis on only two laws also put him in direct conflict intellectually with the Pharisees, who accepted the standard conclusion that there were 619 laws that were directly descendant from Moses. The Pharisees, like Jesus, understood that the Sadducees were misusing the Temple in Jerusalem to amass great wealth. The definition of a good Jew for a Pharisee meant that one knew all the laws, as well as their correct interpretation, or always was carrying or had available for immediate personal use documents containing the written laws that one could then consult and implement as needed. Jesus and the Pharisees split over this issue of knowing precisely and exactly what the written law entailed as well as knowing how to correctly interpret the law.

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