

Virtues and Economics

Luk Bouckaert · Knut J. Ims · Peter Rona  
*Editors*

# Art, Spirituality and Economics

Liber Amicorum for Laszlo Zsolnai

 Springer

# Virtues and Economics

## Volume 2

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Editors

# Art, Spirituality and Economics

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*Editors*

Luk Bouckaert  
Catholic University of Leuven  
Leuven, Belgium

Knut J. Ims  
Department of Strategy and Management  
Norwegian School of Economics  
Bergen, Norway

Peter Rona  
Blackfriars Hall  
University of Oxford  
St. Giles, Oxford, UK

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# About the Authors

**Zsolt Boda** is a researcher in political science and business ethics. He holds an MA in economics and a Ph.D. in political science both from the Corvinus University of Budapest. He is a research chair and director of the Institute of Political Science, at the Centre for Social Sciences of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. He is also part-time associate professor at the Business Ethics Center of the Corvinus University of Budapest. He has been teaching at Paris 6 (France), the University of Nordland (Norway) as well as at the European University 'Viadrina' (Germany). He taught courses at various European universities in the programmes of the Community of European Management Schools. His research focuses on policy studies as well as the problems of global governance, development and international ethics.

**Luk Bouckaert** is emeritus professor of ethics at the Catholic University of Leuven (Belgium). He is a philosopher and an economist by training. His research and publications fall within the fields of business ethics and spirituality. In 1987 he founded with some colleagues the interdisciplinary Centre for Economics and Ethics at the University of Leuven. In 2000 he started the SPES Forum (Spirituality in Economics and Society) and in 2004 the international European SPES Forum which he chaired as president until 2014. He wrote several books in Dutch. Recent publications in English include *Spirituality as a Public Good* (coedited with L. Zsolnai, 2007), *Frugality: Rebalancing Material and Spiritual Values in Economic Life* (coedited with H. Opdebeeck and L. Zsolnai, 2008), *Imagine Europe* (coedited with J. Eynikel, 2009), *Respect and Economic Democracy* (coedited with Pasquale Arena, 2010), *The Palgrave Handbook of Spirituality and Business* (coedited with L. Zsolnai, 2011) and *Business, Ethics and Peace*, (coedited with M. Chatterji, 2015).

**Luigino Bruni** is professor of economics at the LUMSA in Rome and at the Sophia University of Loppiano (Florence). His research has covered many areas ranging from microeconomics, ethics and economics, history of economic thought, methodology of economics, sociality and happiness in economics. Recently, he has demonstrated great interest on the civil economy and economic-related categories, such as



reciprocity and gratuitousness. Luigino Bruni's current research focuses on the role of intrinsic motivation in economic and civil life. His latest book is *Civil Economy: Another Idea of the Market*, with S. Zamagni, Agenda, London, 2016.

**Daniel Deak** is full professor at the Corvinus University of Budapest. He teaches and does research inside and outside Hungary in the subject of comparative and international business law and taxation. He is the founding president of the Hungarian national branch of International Fiscal Association. In addition to be active as a scholar, from time to time he is also invited by Hungarian or European public agencies – including Hungarian ministries and the EU Directorate Generals of TAXUD and MARKT – to do expert opinion while being expected to promote Hungarian and community legislation. In recent years, he has been deeply involved in civil movements to act for the safeguard of interests in the Hungarian system of higher education.

**Rita Ghesquiere** (°1947) is emeritus professor of comparative literature at the Catholic University of Leuven (KU Leuven, Belgium). She holds a degree in philology and has written her Ph.D. on phenomenology and literary theory. Her research and publications fall within the scope of the history of European literature, juvenile fiction and spirituality. She published a Dutch literary companion on the history of European literature: *Litteraire Verbeelding. Een geschiedenis van de Europese literatuur tot 1750* and *Litteraire Verbeelding. Een geschiedenis van de Europese literatuur en cultuur vanaf 1750* (2 vol. Leuven, Acco 2006 and 2008). *Het Verschijnsel Jeugdliteratuur* (2000<sup>7</sup>) now revised as *Jeugdliteratuur in perspectief* (2009) is a well-known manual on children's literature. Together with Knut Ims she is the editor of *Heroes and Anti-heroes: European Literature and the Ethics of Leadership* (2010).

**Carlos Hoewel** has a Ph.D. in philosophy (UCA, Argentina) and Master of Arts in the social sciences (University of Chicago). He is professor of history of economic and political ideas, economic ethics and philosophy of economics in the Department of Economics of the Pontifical Catholic University of Argentina and of social philosophy in the Department of Philosophy of the University Santo Tomás de Aquino. He is also a director and researcher of the Center of Studies in Economy and Culture and of the *Journal Cultura Económica*. Some of his publications include *The Economy of Recognition: Person, Market and Society in Antonio Rosmini*, Springer, London, 2013; 'Spirituality and international development', in Zsolnai and Flanagan, *Routledge International Handbook of Spirituality and Society*, Routledge, London, 2017.

**Katalin Illes** is a principal lecturer and acting head of department, Leadership and Professional Development, at the University of Westminster in London. She is a passionate promoter of transformational change through leadership development. Her recent publications include 'The role of spirituality in business education', in *Society and Business Review*, 2015 Vol. 10; 'Spiritual-based entrepreneurship:

Hindu and Christian examples’, in Chatterji, M. and Zsolnai, L.(eds) *Ethical Leadership*, Palgrave-Macmillan, 2016; and ‘Contemplation in leadership and leadership development’, in *Society and Economy (forthcoming)* with P. Jennings.

**Knut J. Ims** is professor in business ethics at the Norwegian School of Economics (NHH) in Bergen. He has a Ph.D. from the School of Economics and Legal Science, Gothenburg University, in 1987. He is active member of the business ethics faculty group of (CEMS) – Global Alliance for Management Education – and has been teaching at a number of European universities. He is fellow of the European SPES Institute and has been visiting scholar at Corvinus University of Budapest; Universidad Catholica Argentina (UCA); Weatherhead School of Management, Cleveland; University of Illinois at Urbana Champagne; and University of Oslo. He has been the chairman of Center for Ethics and Economics at NHH and taught courses at Ph.D. level from 1983 and courses at MBA level including CEMS blocked seminars from 2001. He has published a number of books, book chapters and articles in international journals.

**Ove Jakobsen** is professor in ecological economics at the Nord University Business School. He holds master degrees in marketing, business administration and philosophy and a Dr. Oecon. degree from NHH (Norwegian School of Economics). His teaching and research interest are process philosophy, creativity and utopian thinking in the context of ecological economics. He has published a great number of books and articles in ecological economics and business ethics internationally.

**Josep M. Lozano** was awarded a Ph.D. in philosophy by the University of Barcelona and a degree in theology by the Theology Faculty of Catalonia. He also holds a degree in executive management from [ESADE Business School](#), Barcelona. He is currently full professor at the Department of Social Sciences at ESADE and senior researcher in CSR at the [Institute for Social Innovation](#). His academic and professional activity focuses on the fields of CSR, ethics, leadership, values and spirituality. Josep M. Lozano has published many articles on these issues, and he is a frequent newspaper contributor.

**Sanjoy Mukherjee** is associate professor of business ethics and corporate social responsibility at the Indian Institute of Management Shillong. He is the chairperson of the Institute’s Annual International Sustainability Conference (SUSCON). A mechanical engineering graduate from Jadavpur University, Kolkata, he did his post-graduation in management from IIM Calcutta and Ph.D. from Jadavpur University. After a corporate experience of nearly 7 years, he had a long stint as a faculty at the Management Centre for Human Values of Indian Institute of Management Calcutta. His areas of interest and research include enlightened leadership, management by human values, Indian ethos in management, management and liberal arts and alternative sources and methods of learning. He has lectured and presented in conferences worldwide. For nearly a decade he was the editor-in-chief

of *Journal of Human Values*, the bi-annual international journal from Sage Publications. He has published several papers and articles in national and international journals. He has jointly edited two books from Oxford University Press and Globethics Publications.

**Eleanor O'Higgins** is adjunct associate professor at the College of Business at UCD and is an associate at the London School of Economics. She specializes in research, teaching and publications on business and professional ethics, corporate governance, corporate social responsibility and strategic and public management. She serves on the editorial boards of several international management, ethics and corporate governance journals. She is the author of numerous papers in academic and professional journals, newspaper articles, book chapters and case studies. Her book, coedited with Laszlo Zsolnai, *Progressive Business Models: Creating Sustainable and Pro-social Enterprise*, was published in 2017. Eleanor serves or has served on a number of state and NGO boards in Ireland and in leadership roles in the US Academy of Management.

**Hendrik Opdebeeck** is professor of philosophy at the University of Antwerp where he is affiliated with the Centre for Ethics. He studied philosophy and economics at the Universities of Leuven and Ghent where he obtained a Ph.D. with a dissertation on E.F. Schumacher (1911–1977). His research interest is focused on the cultural-philosophical backgrounds and effects of globalization. His publications in English include *The Foundation and Application of Moral Philosophy* (Peeters, Leuven, 2000), *Building Towers: Perspectives on Globalisation* (Peeters, Leuven, 2002), *Responsible Economics* (Peter Lang, Oxford, 2013), *The Point of Philosophy: An Introduction for the Human Sciences* (Peter Lang, Brussels, 2016) and *Rediscovering a Personalist Economy* in P. Rona and L.Zsolnai (Springer, Cham, 2017).

**Peter Pruzan** is professor emeritus at the Copenhagen Business School (CBS) and visiting professor at Sri Sathya Sai University in India. Among his organizational initiatives are co-founding, designing or governing bachelor's and master's programmes at CBS in mathematics and economics (1987) and in philosophy and economics (1996); the Institute of Social and Ethical AccountAbility in London (now AccountAbility, 1996); the Copenhagen Centre – New Partnerships for Social Responsibility (1998); the CBS Centre for Corporate Social Responsibility (2002); and the European Academy of Business in Society (now Academy of Business in Society, Brussels, 2002). His most recent books include *Rational, Ethical and Spiritual Perspectives on Leadership: Selected Writings by Peter Pruzan* (2009); together with his wife, Kirsten, *Leading with Wisdom: Spiritual-Based Leadership in Business* (2007, 2010); and *Research Methodology: The Aims, Practices and Ethics of Science* (2016).

**Peter Rona** is fellow of Blackfriars Hall, University of Oxford, where he teaches courses in economics and the philosophical foundations of the social sciences. He

obtained his BA degree in economic history (cum laude) from the University of Pennsylvania and his law degree from the University of Oxford (first class) in 1964. He was an associate of the Washington, D.C., law firm, Arnold & Porter, and a counsel to the US Department of Commerce before becoming the personal assistant of Lord Richardson, Governor of the Bank of England. He joined the Schroder Group in 1969 as the general counsel of its operations in the USA and became the president and chief executive of the IBJ Schroder Bank & Trust Co. in 1985. In 2003, he joined the faculty of Eotvos Lorand University where he taught public international law, and in 2006 he was made an honorary professor there. His published articles include a study of the Euro and an examination of the philosophical foundations of economics. He is general editor of the *Virtues and Economics* book series published by Springer with Laszlo Zsolnai as coeditor.

**Paul Shrivastava** is chief sustainability officer at the Pennsylvania State University, director of the Sustainability Institute, and professor of management. Prior to this he was the executive director of Future Earth. He served as David O'Brien Distinguished Professor of Sustainable Enterprise at Concordia University, Montreal, and leads the international chair for Arts and Sustainable Enterprise at ICN Business School, Nancy, France. His research focuses on unifying the arts and sciences, for holistic understanding and actions on transformation to sustainability.

**Vivi Marie Lademoe Storsletten** is Ph.D. candidate at the Nord University Business School. She holds a bachelor's degree in optometry and master degrees in business and administration (HHN) and ecological economics (HHN). Her research interests are ecological economics, business ethics and leadership theories. She is engaged in different transdisciplinary projects (both teaching and research) connecting health, economy and philosophy. She has published a number of articles in ecological economics and leadership and CSR nationally and internationally.

**Antonio Tencati** is full professor of management at the Department of Economics and Management and coordinator of the Ph.D. Programme in business and law at the Department of Law, University of Brescia, Italy. He earned his Ph.D. in corporate social responsibility from De Montfort University, Leicester, UK. He also serves at the Department of Management and Technology, Università Bocconi, Milan, Italy, and collaborates with SDA Bocconi School of Management. Tencati is a member of the Business Ethics Faculty Group of the CEMS – The Global Alliance in Management Education. His research areas include business and society, management of sustainability and corporate social responsibility, environmental management, innovation and operations management. His work has been published in leading international journals and academic books.

**Mike J. Thompson** is chairman of GoodBrand, a corporate social innovation firm. He was formerly a faculty professor at China Europe International Business School (CEIBS) and is now a visiting professor of management practice at CEIBS. He teaches responsible leadership and corporate governance on executive education

programmes in China including a series of MOOCs for UIBE Beijing. He is adjunct professor and member of the International Advisory Board at the Gustavson School of Business, University of Victoria. Some of his recent publications are ‘Economic Wisdom for Managerial Decision-Making’ in P. Rona and L. Zsolnai (eds) *Economics as a Moral Science*, Springer (2017); ‘How managers understand wisdom in decision-making: A phronetic research approach’ in W. Küppers and O. Gunnlaugson (eds) *Wisdom Learning*, Routledge (2017); ‘What is social in social innovation?’ *MRI Journal* (2017); *Suited Monk Leadership* with R. Adams, WOW Books (2015); and *Wise Management in Organisational Complexity* (co-edited with D. Bevan), Palgrave (2013).

**Stefano Zamagni** is professor of economics at the University of Bologna and adjunct professor of international economics at John Hopkins University, Bologna Center. He is the author of numerous books, including *Microeconomic Theory* (1997) and *Civil Economy and Paradoxes of Growth* (1997). He co-authored *History of Economic Thought* (1995 and 2005), *Living in the Global Society* (1997), *Non-Profit As Civil Economy* (1998), *Economics: An European Text* (2002), *Multiculturalism and Identity* (2002), *Relational Complexity and Economic Behaviour* (2002), *The Italian Nonprofit at the Crossroad* (2002), *A Civil Economic Theory of Cooperative Firm* (2005), *Economic Theory and Interpersonal Relations* (2006), *Civil Economy* (2007), *Cooperation* (2008), *Markets, Money and History: Essays in Honour of Sir John Hicks* (2008), *Dictionary of Civil Economy* (2009), *Avarice* (2009), *Cooperative Enterprise* (2010), *Family and Work* (2012), *Handbook on The Economics of Reciprocity and Social Enterprise* (2013), *Corporate Social Responsibility and Civil Market* (2013), *Market* (2014) *Prudence* (2015).

**Part I**  
**Introduction**

# Chapter 1

## Laszlo Zsolnai, Friend and Moral Scientist



Luk Bouckaert, Knut J. Ims, and Peter Rona

**Abstract** The *Liber Amicorum* in honour of Professor Laszlo Zsolnai's 60th birthday expresses a deep feeling of gratitude towards a colleague, who is a pioneering academic in the field of business and economic ethics. In the introductory chapter you will find an overview of his philosophy, career and publications. What binds together his work and life is a spiritual humanism inspired by Buddhist, Christian and eco-philosophical sources. His disinterested way of 'doing things' explains the circle of friendship around his person and work.

A *Liber Amicorum* means more than an academic publication in honour of a distinguished colleague at his 60th anniversary. For sure, the academic standards must be guaranteed. But besides academic quality, a *Liber Amicorum* expresses a deep feeling of gratitude towards a friend and colleague. We are indeed very grateful to Laszlo Zsolnai for his immense work as pioneering academic in the field of business and economic ethics. Elsewhere you will find an overview of his career and publications. In this introduction we only want to recall Peter Pruzan's appreciation of Laszlo Zsolnai's unique and disinterested way of 'doing things' which explains the circle of friendship around his person and work.

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L. Bouckaert (✉)  
Catholic University of Leuven, Leuven, Belgium  
e-mail: [luk.bouckaert@kuleuven.be](mailto:luk.bouckaert@kuleuven.be)

K. J. Ims  
Norwegian School of Economics, Bergen, Norway  
e-mail: [knut.ims@nhh.no](mailto:knut.ims@nhh.no)

P. Rona  
Blackfriars Hall, University of Oxford, St. Giles, Oxford, UK

**Fig. 1.1** Laszlo Zsolnai



I have never before encountered an academic who has used so much energy and talent to personally promote the thinking, writing and development of others who, more or less, share the world view that his lens creates and embraces. He has done this throughout his career and he continues to take initiatives, like an intellectual entrepreneur, motivating an ever wider circle of academics to focus their lenses on the ethical and spiritual dimensions of economics. (quoted in Zsolnai 2014: VII)

‘Only genuine ethics works’ is one of the main tenets of Zsolnai’s philosophy. In his Intellectual Self-Portrait he writes: “At the age of 13 I received a copy of Plato’s *The Apology of Socrates* from my father. I have remained impressed by the moral courage of Socrates displayed. I strongly felt that that Socrates was right: we should die for our truth if needed. And it is better to suffer from injustice than to commit injustice. For me this is the foundation of any genuine ethics”.

Another aspect of genuine ethics is its effort to prioritize the intrinsic and spiritual sense of things over their utilitarian and instrumental meaning. The disclosure of intrinsic meaning has always been at the heart of Zsolnai’s work. But how to unveil this intrinsic meaning, especially in the field of economics where instrumental and utilitarian reasoning is part of the DNA? Although there are different paths, this *Liber Amicorum* privileges one of them, the aesthetic experience. From his early years, Laszlo was interested in visual arts, and studied painting and photography and wanted to become an artist. The love of art in his life and work is not just a coincidence, it is a vital source of his search for meaning. Hence this *Liber Amicorum* is focused on the interrelations of art, spirituality and economics. We invited friends and colleagues of Laszlo to start their contribution by choosing and commenting an inspiring painting. Not all but a lot of the authors found an appropriate painting to cover their reflection.

As an introductory eye opener, we want to situate Laszlo Zsolnai’s intellectual legacy in the broader philosophical context of the Western Enlightenment. At the end of his famous *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781, 1787), Kant stipulates three fundamental questions: What can I know? What ought I to do? What may I hope? Later he added a fourth question: what is man? The reason for this fourth question was that we need a good understanding of the human person, in order to answer the three fundamental questions. Without that understanding, we are unable to disclose the right place and the limits of the different forms of human reasoning.



This Kantian philosophical agenda is a good compass to discover the coherence in Laszlo Zsolnai's work where the three fundamental questions are clearly present. *What can I know* echoes in his critique of economic reason and economic science. *What ought I to do* sustains his analysis of business and economic ethics. *What may I hope* opens the way to spirituality and art as genuine forms of human reasoning. But the threads of his theoretical, ethical and spiritual reflections come together and find their unity in the quest of the human *Self*. *What is man?* is the key and the anthropological cornerstone of his philosophy. The main point here is the discord between the ego-self and the Self 'beyond self' (Zsolnai 2014). In order to unveil the spiritual Self, the 'ego-self must die'. What binds together Laszlo's work and life is his *spiritual humanism* inspired by Christian, Buddhist and eco-philosophical sources.

At first sight spiritual humanism is far away from the agenda of Kantian Enlightenment. The human person behind Kant's theoretical and ethical *Critiques* seems to be a rational being thinking and acting according to the a priori principles in its mind. We think and behave rationally if we explain reality according to universal causal laws but also when we act according to universal moral laws. However, in his third and less known *Critique of Judgment* (1790), Kant explores a completely different form of human reasoning that we may call spiritual and artistic and which helps us to find an answer to the question *what may I hope?* It is a misconception to reduce Western Enlightenment to scientism or to a rationalist concept of ethics. In the garden of Western Enlightenment there are many neglected and unknown paths to spirituality. We believe with Laszlo Zsolnai that science and ethics – and economic science and ethics as particular cases – need spirituality to develop their full creative and social potential.

Originally Kant's idea was to call his third Critique the *Critique of Taste* because the first part deals with esthetic judgment which is a judgment of taste about what we consider as beautiful or sublime. Yet the second part deals with the critique of teleological reasoning: how do we find purpose in nature and in life? What unites both parts is a search for meaning which does not result from logical deduction or induction but has its source in another human faculty which Kant calls judgment (*Urteilkraft*) and Hannah Arendt in her Postscriptum to the *Life of Mind* (1977) the 'silent sense'. *We shall be in search of the 'silent sense' which – once it was dealt with at all – has always, even in Kant, been thought of as 'taste' and therefore as belonging to the realm of aesthetics.* (Arendt 1992:4).

But can we trust aesthetic judgments as a way to discover truth and meaning in life? Is art not the most individual and subjective expression of our emotions? *De gustibus non disputandum est.*, is a common saying. Although aesthetic judgments are characterized by individual subjectivity and feelings of pleasure and displeasure, yet the true aesthetic experience reveals a 'beyond self'. The aesthetic feelings are different from the well-known utilitarian feelings of pleasure and displeasure. The latter result from the satisfaction of our needs and the reduction of things to their functional use. The former are *disinterested*. They do not feel things as functional but as non-functional, as *intrinsic* beautiful and right in their own appearance. Here again we touch the core of Zsolnai's quest for meaning: art is a discipline to

disclose the inner meaning or presence of things in a non-egocentric and non-instrumental way. Zsolnai is not alone in his insistence on the ineliminable ethical meaning of all economic activity, but he is one of the very few who has intuited the deep normative role of aesthetics, the sense that, if economic theorizing is meaningless without an ethical component, that necessary ethical component is conditioned by aesthetic judgment. Rational ethics must be complemented by an art-driven, spiritual ethics.

Back to the content of this *Liber Amicorum*. Although all the contributions are situated on the cross roads of art, spirituality and economics, we organized the book in three parts, each of them with a different focus. The first part – the power of art – contains reflections and analyses which are directly inspired by a work of art. The authors look at reality through the lenses of the artist and his work. The second part focuses on the role of spirituality in ethics, science and management. It explores the way spiritual and aesthetic judgments transgress mainstream disciplinary boundaries and disclose new worlds and new motivations. The third part deals with the transformation of economics and illustrates the impact of spiritual-driven ethics in the field of economics.

All authors of this book are fellows and friends of the European SPES Institute. This *Liber Amicorum* is therefore at the same time an excellent opportunity to realize the mission of the Institute of which Laszlo Zsolnai is the current president.

The European SPES Institute is an international network of individuals and organizations promoting spirituality in economic and social life. It is our belief at the European SPES Institute that spiritually motivated actors who define success in multidimensional and holistic terms may serve the common good of nature, future generations and society. The mission of the European SPES Institute is expressed in the key word of SPES, being on the one hand an acronym for ‘SPirituality in Economics and Society’ and, on the other hand, the Latin word for Hope, the virtue that sustains our belief in a better future.

## **Laszlo Zsolnai’s Academic Career: An Overview**

In 1994 Laszlo Zsolnai defended his PhD dissertation, “The Challenge of Alternative Economics”, in the *Hungarian Academy of Sciences*. Zsolnai is professor and director of the Business Ethics Center at the Corvinus University of Budapest, a center he established with Jozsef Kindler in 1993 where he has been a supervisor of a number of PhD candidates, and a highly appreciated teacher in a diversity of business ethics courses, always approaching his audience *in medias res* emphasizing the essence of complex matters, and illuminating it with practical and innovative cases.

With Sandor Kerekes, Zsolnai founded the Business Ethics Faculty Group of the CEMS (Community of European Management Schools –The Global Alliance in Management Education), in 1997 and has since then served as chairman for the group. CEMS is a network of top business schools running joint programs in management education and research, and the groups have held blocked seminars in business ethics in a number of European countries. With Luk Bouckaert he founded in 2004 the European SPES Forum in Leuven, Belgium. He is co-founder of the

Buddhist Economics Research Platform, a collaborative venture of Buddhist scholars and practitioners. Zsolnai serves as co-chair of Future Earth Finance and Economics Knowledge-Action Network.

Zsolnai has been guest professor or visiting scholar at the University of Cambridge, University of Oxford, UC Berkeley, Georgetown University, University of Richmond, Concordia University Montreal, University of Antwerp, University of St. Gallen, Bocconi University Milan, and the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study.

Zsolnai has taken a number of initiatives to organize conferences and workshops in Europe and US. With George Brenkert he founded TABEC (TransAtlantic Business Ethics Conference) in 2002, which on a biannual basis collects 20 scholars (10 from Europe and 10 from US/Canada). Based upon the conferences, with Brenkert he founded the book series on Studies in Transatlantic Business Ethics published by Edward Elgar. From 2006, Zsolnai serves as editor of the “Frontier of Business Ethics” book series at Peter Lang Publishers in Oxford. In 2016, with Peter Rona, Zsolnai founded a new book series on Virtues and Economics published by Springer. In 2017, with Paul Shrivastava, Zsolnai has founded the book series Palgrave Studies in Sustainable Business in association with Future Earth. He has published more than 40 books and 300 articles and book chapters.

Website: <http://laszlo-zsolnai.net>

## Publications of Laszlo Zsolnai

Laszlo Zsolnai is a very prolific writer. He published numerous papers in Journals and books. However the following list of publications is restricted to the books he published as author, co-author or co-editor. The books are listed in a chronological order.

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## **Part II**

# **The Power of Art**

# Chapter 2

## The Essential, the Beautiful and the Economic: The Brotzeit by Eduard Grützner and Zsolnai's Philosophy



Carlos Hoevel

**Abstract** Eduard Grützner's painting *Brotzeit* synthesizes a way of understanding the relation of the human being to the material world that is both economic and beautiful. As in Grützner's painting, in Zsolnai's thought the condition for this is that economic life points to the essential. When human activity is based on this concentration on the essence that leaves out the superfluous, it frees the most authentic form of things that turns out to be also its most beautiful, more enjoyable and also more useful aspect. In the peaceful and contented countenance of the monk portrayed by Grützner is finally reflected another aspect of Zsolnai's philosophy: that in an economy based on the essential is also contained the possibility of brotherly coexistence with others.

### 2.1 An Evening in Leuven

Contemplating Eduard Grützner's painting *Brotzeit* (Fig. 2.1), which shows a monk in the middle of work preparing an austere but not less splendid food, I remember an unforgettable episode lived with László Zsolnai and other Spes' friends almost a decade ago during an autumnal evening in Leuven. In the middle of a seminar in which we reflected on a new way of seeing the economy, everyone present was invited to an underground tavern just a few blocks from downtown. The place offered a number of exquisite craft beers. To our surprise, while we were tasting the delicious drink, and our brains were rid of the numbness that even the best academic meetings almost always leave in the body, László delighted us all with a wonderful lecture. The subject was beer. Or, more exactly, the conditions of elaboration of a

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C. Hoevel (✉)

Department of Economics, Pontifical Catholic University of Argentina,  
Buenos Aires, Argentina  
e-mail: [carlos\\_hoevel@uca.edu.ar](mailto:carlos_hoevel@uca.edu.ar)

**Fig. 2.1 Brotzeit** by Eduard Grützner ([https://es.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Archivo:Eduard\\_Grützner\\_Brotzeit\\_1908.jpg](https://es.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Archivo:Eduard_Grützner_Brotzeit_1908.jpg))



well-known craft beer made by the trappist monks. I will never forget the way in which, from a meditation on a glass of beer, he managed to summarize with lucidity and simplicity what we had all tried to do, more or less fruitlessly, through lengthy reasoning in those 2 days of interdisciplinary work. That lecture still inspires me. And it does so to such an extent that I would like to present to you, dear reader, my reflections on Eduard Grützner's well-known painting, in the manner of a humble continuation of that masterly lesson that László gave us that evening in Leuven.

## 2.2 Everything in Its Place

What do I feel in the first place when I observe or rather contemplate Grützner's *Brotzeit*? My first impression is that in this scene everything is in place. The cheese on the plate is perfectly cut, the bread on the table has also been sliced in an extremely even way. Objects like the salt shaker and the beer jug, are also each in place. All form a harmonically arranged set. They suggest the idea that they are there, on that table of worn wood without dust or crumbs, set by someone who has done things carefully and calmly. Perhaps one would think that the wrinkled, probably wet, cloth that appears on the side of the table, falling sloppily on the edge, could be a sign of disorder. For me, on the contrary, that crumpled cloth left there