THE FORMATION OF A “SPIRIT OF CAPITALISM” IN UPPER GERMANY:
LEONHARD FRONSPERGER’S (1564) “ON THE PRAISE OF SELF-INTEREST”

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Abstract

In 1564 Leonhard Fronsperger, a military expert and citizen of the Free Imperial City of Ulm in Upper Germany, publishes a booklet “On the Praise of Self-Interest” (“Von dem Lob deß Eigen Nutzen”). Using the form of a satirical poem, he demonstrates how the individual pursuit of self-interest can lead to the common good. Writing long before Bernard Mandeville and Adam Smith, Fronsperger presents a thorough analysis of all kinds of self-interested social, political and economic relations. His praise of self-interest demonstrates how over the sixteenth century the interplay of economic success (in particular in major trading cities), a more realistic conception of human behavior and some aspects of Humanism and the Reformation led to a new understanding of the origins of economic dynamics. This became the basis for what Weber (1904-05/2009) would later term “the spirit of capitalism”.

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I. INTRODUCTION

In 1564, the military expert and writer Leonhard Fronsperger¹, a citizen of the Free Imperial City of Ulm, located in the Upper German part of the Holy Roman Empire, publishes a booklet “On the Praise of Self-Interest”² (“Von dem Lob deß Eigen Nutzen”³) at the annual Autumn Fair in Frankfurt on the Main. The front page of the booklet depicts self-interest as a person whose chest is emblazoned with the striking claim: “Everything into my sack” (“Alles in mein Sack”). The work is dedicated to the connection between striving for the individual benefit, in particular in economic activities, but also in social and political affairs, and the common good of a society as a whole. It anticipates by 150 years and more the two famous theoretical concepts of economic analysis and social ethics that were developed in the eighteenth century by Bernard Mandeville and Adam Smith. In our view, Fronsperger’s early

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¹ Different spellings can be found for the name of Leonhard Fronsperger: the first name is sometimes also spelled as Leonhardt, Leonhart or Lienhart, while for the family name one finds also spellings as Frönsperger or Freundtsperger.

² In the following we will use the English term “self-interest” as the best modern language translation of the early modern German “Eigennutz” oder “Eigen Nutzen”. We are aware of the linguistic specificities and traditions in both languages and discuss them at length in Part IV below.

³ See Fronsperger 1564a.

contribution to this topic has not yet received the attention it deserves.⁴ There may be various reasons for the lack of recognition: Fronsperger only wrote this one work on the subject, his authorship is not clearly guaranteed, he wrote in German language and there has never been a translation into English or French. However, all these aspects should not obscure the fact that he belonged to a relatively small group of writers in Northern Italy and Upper Germany who already during the sixteenth century developed a revolutionary new conception of selfish human behavior and its consequences.

In the following we will provide a short biography of Fronsperger and then describe the origins and the publication of his booklet on self-interest. We will also comment on the role of the Frankfurt fair for the distribution of the booklet, on the particular literary form of the text and on the linguistic specificities of the German term “Eigen Nutzen” compared to related notions in other (ancient or modern) languages. Subsequently we discuss Fronsperger’s main theses within three different contexts: Firstly, we relate his views on self-interest to those contemporary writers (Niccolò Machiavelli, Francesco Guicciardini) who shared with him a new “realistic” conception of the driving forces of human behavior. Secondly, we find pronounced differences between the Lutheran Fronsperger’s view on the common good and the views of Martin Luther and most other German-speaking reformers. Finally, we put Fronsperger’s particular view on the benefits of self-interest into the context of the prospering Upper German trading cities, their ruling elites and their shared principles of moral philosophy that were very much inspired by the writings of Cicero. In sum,

⁴ So far, “On the Praise of Self-Interest” has only been discussed by German-speaking authors. Winfried Schulze [Schulze 1986; Schulze 1988] and Bertram Schefold [Schefold 2003] mention it without giving a detailed analysis of the text. Birgit Biehler [Biehler 2011] deals intensively with the text, its form and its origins, but does not reflect on its importance for the history of economic thought.

Fronspurger's praise of self-interest in our view demonstrates how over the sixteenth century the interplay of economic success, a more realistic conception of human behavior and some aspects of Humanism and the Reformation led to a new normative understanding of the origins of economic and social dynamics that would later be termed "the spirit of capitalism"⁵.

II. BIOGRAPHY OF THE AUTHOR AND GENESIS OF THE BOOKLET ON SELF-INTEREST

Leonhard Fronspurger was most probably born in Bavaria in 1520. Being of Lutheran faith, he joined the imperial army as a lansquenet and, after marrying a local woman and acquiring a house, became a citizen of the Free Imperial City of Ulm in 1548.⁶ At that time, Ulm was one of the most important Upper German imperial cities besides Augsburg and Nuremberg. Ulm merchants were actively trading both in Italy and at the Champagne fairs in France as well as along the Rhine and the Danube with their most important merchandise, the half-linen Barchent.⁷ From 1524 on, the Reformation was introduced in Ulm, initially by followers of the Zurich reformer Ulrich Zwingli. After an iconoclasm in 1531, however, Luther's influence increased gradually until Ulm became completely Lutheran in 1556.⁸ After Fronspurger had been a field court magistrate in the Turkish War of 1566, he held the office of an imperial commissioner and was appointed military counselor by the city council of Ulm.

⁵ Weber [1904-05] 2009.

⁶ See Weyermann 1829, pp. 114-115.

⁷ See Pronk 2012, pp. 2019-2020.

⁸ See Pronk 2012, pp. 2012-2013.

On May 23rd, 1575 he died in this function during an inspection of rifle shooters on the city's fortifications.⁹

Fronsperger is remembered as a military expert and writer above all. In addition to smaller writings on price tables in the wine and corn trade¹⁰ and a treatise on urban building regulations¹¹, most of his texts dealt with a wide range of questions related to warfare. He wrote about martial law¹² and military strategy¹³ as well as about artillery¹⁴ and the construction of fortifications¹⁵. In 1573 he combined his war-related works into a three-volume "War Book"¹⁶ ("Kriegsbuch"), in which he also integrated contributions by other contemporary authors.

The booklet on self-interest seems to be only loosely related to his other works. As a citizen of Ulm, however, Fronsperger must have been confronted with trade problems and innovations constantly because after all Ulm was an important trading hub for textiles in Upper Germany and housed one of the most important textile fairs in Germany, the "Ulmer Schau".¹⁷ Ulm, like Nuremberg and Augsburg, was home of merchants who used the good transport connections to the cities of Upper Italy, Flanders or Lyon, a European centre of

⁹ See Weyermann 1829, p. 115.

¹⁰ See Fronsperger 1556.

¹¹ See Fronsperger 1567.

¹² See Fronsperger 1555, Fronsperger 1565 and Fronsperger 1578.

¹³ See Fronsperger 1564c.

¹⁴ See Fronsperger 1557 and Fronsperger 1564b.

¹⁵ See Fronsperger 1573a.

¹⁶ See Fronsperger 1573b.

¹⁷ See Kellenbenz 1971, pp. 426-427.

textile trade.¹⁸ Innovations such as double-entry bookkeeping and inventions in insurance or cataloguing will also have been known to Fronsperger.¹⁹ In addition, his military position should have familiarized him not only with the problems of raising and managing funds, but also with the continuous technical improvements in the military system, which were massively promoted by the competing princely warlords.²⁰

In the preface of the booklet, Fronsperger reports that the original idea to elaborate a text on how self-interest relates to the common good came from a good friend of his, Oswald Gut, Chancellor of the Margraviate of Baden between 1530 and 1554.²¹ Apparently, the two friends had long discussions on this subject, until Gut's death in 1554:

... amongst other things we spent quite a good while on the common good / and yet doing so we found / that it has hardly ever existed / instead always and everywhere throughout the whole world / nothing / was done but for the sake of self-interest / which on top of that appears / in such a form: / should I have or get much / God may give [me] what my closest neighbor has or gets.²²

It has been suspected that almost the entire booklet was authored by the Margravian Chancellor²³ or that at least large parts of the work were written by Gut and that Fronsperger only added some notes and insertions.²⁴ In our view there are various reasons why

¹⁸ See Borst 1968, pp. 379-380.

¹⁹ See Kellenbenz 1971, pp. 448-449.

²⁰ See Stoll 2016.

²¹ See Kohnle 2007, p. 55.

²² Fronsperger 1564a, pp. 3-4. All translations from Fronsperger's book are our own; the original German texts can be found in the appendix.

²³ See Schulze 1986.

²⁴ See Biehler 2011, p.182-183.

Fronsperger's authorship should not be questioned. If the work had been largely completed by the time of Oswald Gut's death, it could have been published much earlier. But ten years passed before the booklet came on the market. The long period suggests a considerable personal contribution by Fronsperger, bringing contents and results of the discussions with his friend into written form. This also explains why Fronsperger published the book on self-interest exclusively under his own name mentioning Oswald Gut in the preface only.

III. PUBLISHERS AND PLACE OF PUBLICATION

Like his other works, Fronsperger had "On the Praise of Self-Interest" be published by Sigmund Feyerabend and Simon Hüter in Frankfurt on the Main. Feyerabend, born in Heidelberg and naturalized in Frankfurt in 1559, founded the book printer and publisher association "Companei", which Simon Hüter joined in the fall of 1562.²⁵ Under Feyerabend's leadership, the "Companei" quickly became one of the city's most successful printing and publishing houses, whose works were characterized above all by outstanding illustrations. The success can be attributed to Feyerabend's great entrepreneurial spirit, but also to his partly ruthless business conduct. It is known, for instance, that he was sentenced to an imprisonment of several days, when he reprinted illegally a number of popular works, including Luther's bible translation. During the sixties and seventies of the sixteenth century, Feyerabend's entrepreneurial skills made him one of the largest publishers in Germany and made Frankfurt one of the European centers for book printing and trading.²⁶

Sigmund Feyerabend also plays a central role for the institution that might have been the most important reason for Fronsperger to publish his books in Frankfurt and not elsewhere

²⁵ See Schmidt 1903, pp. 240-241.

²⁶ See Benzing 1961.

in the Empire. By some authors Feyerabend is mentioned as the founder of the Frankfurt Book Fair, which underscored the city's central role not only in book printing, but also in the distribution of printed products in the German-speaking world in the sixteenth century.²⁷ Being the place where the German kings were elected and, since 1562, the coronation site of the Roman-German emperors, the Free Imperial City of Frankfurt was not only one of the capital cities of the Holy Roman Empire. Having hosted important trade fairs since the thirteenth century due to its favorable location, Frankfurt had also excellent commercial relations throughout Germany and Europe.²⁸ The expansion of intra-European trade in the course of the sixteenth century led not only to the exchange of goods but also to the communication of ideas in the form of books, which quickly spread throughout Europe via established trade routes. It can be assumed that Fronsperger – in pursuit of his individual self-interest – wanted to use these locational advantages for the widest possible dissemination of his works, all of which were published in Frankfurt. In 1564 the bookseller Georg Willer from Augsburg presented the first printed catalogue of newly published books at the Frankfurt Autumn Fair. From that year onwards such catalogues appeared regularly twice a year at the spring and autumn fairs so that one can speak of institutionalized Frankfurt Book Fairs.²⁹ Fronsperger's booklet on self-interest is listed in this very first Frankfurt Book Fair catalogue of 1564 in the chapter on "German Books on the Holy Bible by the Protestant Theologians" ("Deutsche Buecher inn heiliger Schrifft / der Protestierenden Theologen").³⁰

²⁷ See Pallmann 1881.

²⁸ Already for Johannes Gutenberg, whose printing works were located not far away in Mainz, Frankfurt had offered a much better market for the sale of his products; see Wittmann 1991, p. 34.

²⁹ See Kapp 1886, p. 479.

³⁰ See Willer 1564, p. 17.

Indeed, the importance of the Frankfurt fairs for the book trade had also made it a central place for dealing with the emerging ideas of the Reformation after 1517. Successfully making use of modern image, sound and text media helped Martin Luther to gain acceptance for his new theological positions as well as for his German translation of the Bible.³¹ The authorities of the Holy Roman Empire responded to the spreading of Luther's ideas by attempting, among other things, to censor or prohibit writings related to the Reformation. According to a decision at the Imperial Diet of Worms in 1521, the Emperor had the oversight of all printed products in the Empire. Since the effectiveness of censorship in the territorial states of the Empire was restrained, the imperial authorities concentrated on the control of the imperial cities and here above all on the book fairs in Frankfurt. Until 1569 the task of public book censorship lay with the city's magistrate that had no interest in hindering the growing book trade at the annual fairs. When the magistrate was not any longer willing to cooperate with the imperial authorities, a new institution for the censorship of printed products, the Imperial Book Commission, was created. It was under the control of the Empire's Chancellor, the Archbishop of Mainz.³² When the new commission tried to tighten the control over all printed publications written, printers and book sellers began to move from Frankfurt to other cities, in particular to the Saxonian city of Leipzig, where censorship was not as strict and the publication of works sympathizing with the Reformation was thus easier.³³ The publication of Fronsperger's booklet thus falls within the last years of relatively uncensored book trading in Frankfurt.

³¹ On the role of music, printing and art in the successful dissemination of the Reformation, see Eichel 2015, pp. 95-97.

³² See Wittmann 1991, p. 68; a detailed description of the role of the Imperial Book Commission can be found in Kapp 1886, pp. 580-581.

³³ See Ziolkowski 1997, p. 71.

IV. LITERARY TRADITIONS AND LINGUISTIC SPECIFICITIES

The fear of censorship may have been one reason for the peculiar literary genre of the book, of which the narrative perspective is the most salient feature: Fronsperger has self-interest (“Eigen Nutzen” or “Eigennutz”) assume the role of the first-person narrator, at least in the first part of the book. This characterizes the literary genre of the satirical encomium, a particular form of poetry, in which a vice is praised ironically in order to indirectly depict and criticize its social grievances.

The traditional encomium is a classical form of poetry praising a famous and honourable person. In the period of humanism, the traditional genre was transformed into a satirical expression of criticism and as such it enjoyed great popularity.³⁴ Addressing a politically and theologically problematic topic in a satirical manner made it possible for the author to voice dissenting opinions without seeming to be an advocate of deviant or subversive attitudes without running the risk of having to bear legal consequences.³⁵

Fronsperger was by far not the first to reflect upon the origins and effects of human vices using the form of a satirical encomium. Famous forerunners are Sebastian Brant’s “Fools’ Ship” (“Narrenschiff”)³⁶ from 1494, being the most successful German book before

³⁴ See Biehler 2011, pp. 183-184.

³⁵ Biehler 2011, p. 184 suspects that Oswald Gut and Leonhard Fronsperger might have deliberately chosen this literary form, since they were quite aware of the political (and theological) problems of their theses.

³⁶ Brant [1494] 1962. Sebastian Brant (1458-1521) was a Professor of Law at the University of Basle and later Chancellor of the Free Imperial City of Straßburg.

the Reformation, and Erasmus of Rotterdam's "Praise of Folly" ("Moriae encomium")³⁷ from 1509. Compared to Brant or Erasmus, Fronsperger's handling of the literary genre is less strict. He starts with an ironical portrayal of self-interest, but changes the narrative perspective in the second part of the booklet, where the first-person narrator is replaced by a distanced third-person narrator providing a descriptive and reflective depiction of society. Erasmus is explicitly mentioned by Fronsperger and is blamed for attributing the responsibility for many forms of human behavior to folly instead of selfishness.³⁸ Nevertheless, taking into account the shared philosophical precursors, Erasmus' concept of self-love ("philautia"), that is widely developed in the "Praise of Folly", and Fronsperger's concept of self-interest are closely linked.³⁹

Both authors refer to Aristotle who had discussed self-love explicitly in the "Nicomachean Ethics"⁴⁰ without giving the term only a negative social connotation. He condemns those obsessed by the pursuit of money, fame or sensual indulgence, but he also acknowledges another form of self-love that can be observed in those striving for morality, equity and wisdom. This form has to be understood as an esteemed characteristic trait of human beings. Heavily influenced by Aristotle, Cicero treated self-love as one of the central motivations for the acting of a human being in his three books "De officiis" ("On Duties")⁴¹ that is an important reference for both, Erasmus and Fronsperger. Cicero speaks of "sum

³⁷ Erasmus [1509] 1994. The first German translation of Erasmus' "Praise of Folly" was printed and published in Ulm in 1534.

³⁸ See Fronsperger 1564a, p. 9.

³⁹ See Schefold 2003, p. 110.

⁴⁰ Aristotle 1980, pp. 1168a–1169b

⁴¹ See Cicero 1913

commodum”⁴² or “sua utilitas”⁴³ when he talks about individual interest or self-love. He sees it as something useful as long as the interests of others are not hurt. On the other side he states that a society would not be able to survive if everybody only acted according to his individual utility neglecting to respect the common interest at the same time.

In the first German translation of Cicero’s book by Johann von Schwarzenberg and Johann Neuber, printed in Augsburg in 1531, “sua utilitas” and “suum commodum” are both translated as “*eignen nutz*”⁴⁴. In other German writings of the first half of the sixteenth century this same term stands for selfishness or egoism and is widely used as being similar to the negative form of self-love in Aristotle’s work.⁴⁵ Selfishness was understood as a negative behavior of human beings in a society, while people and governments should strive to realize the common good. In Fronsperger’s book this view is challenged. Referring to “De officiis” several times Fronsperger reintroduced again the Aristotelian position that self-love or self-interest is neither a negative nor a positive characteristic of humankind, but just the driving force behind human actions. It could lead to good or bad developments for individuals and for the society depending on the regulating and framing devices in place.

⁴² Cicero 1913, Book III, 24.

⁴³ Cicero 1913, Book III, 42.

⁴⁴ See Cicero/Schwarzenberg/Neuber 1531, p. 71. In the first English translation of “De officiis” (Grimald 1556, p. 125) the term “owne profit” stands for “sua utilitas”. Later “self-interest” was commonly used as an English equivalent to the German term “Eigennutz”, see Bailey 1736. It did not appear in economic writings, however. Adam Smith, who was particularly influenced by Cicero’s ideas, preferred to speak of “own interest”, see Hawley 2019.

⁴⁵ See Sachs 1535 and Arnold 1982, pp. 298-300

V. THE NEW CONCEPTION OF HUMAN BEHAVIOR

Fronsperger's conception of human behavior is no longer bound to religious norms but driven by "human affects" ("menschliche affection") and "natural desire" ("natürliche begirlichkeit").⁴⁶ This "realistic" view began its rise at the beginning of the sixteenth century and became the basis for important philosophical and political thinkers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, including Thomas Hobbes, Baruch de Spinoza, Giambattista Vico and Jean-Jacques Rousseau.⁴⁷ Before Fronsperger, it was pioneered in particular by the Florentine Niccolò Machiavelli (1469-1527). In chapter XV of his book "The Prince" ("Il Principe") – written in 1513, printed in 1532 and already placed on the index of books forbidden by the Vatican in 1557 – the famous distinction between "the real truth of the matter" and "the imagination of it" appears. Just as Machiavelli criticizes there that "... many have pictured republics and principalities, which in fact have never been known or seen because how one lives is so far distant from how one ought to live ..."⁴⁸ Fronsperger presents the concept of the common good as a chimera:

... since no one ever saw or recognized it / and no one knew / or knows / where it
is from / or what it looks like.⁴⁹

Later he dedicates the whole chapter XVIII of the booklet to the insight that "[n]o one has ever recognized or seen the common good" ("Niemand hat den gemeinen nutzen nie erkannt oder gesehen") and summarizes:

⁴⁶ See Fronsperger 1564a, p. 13.

⁴⁷ See Hirschman 1977.

⁴⁸ Machiavelli [1513] 2014, p. 86.

⁴⁹ Fronsperger 1564a, p. 3.

There is much talk of a common good / but nobody knows it / Me, however, Self-Interest, everyone knows well.⁵⁰

There is no evidence that Fronsperger knew Machiavelli's work, even though both wrote intensively on the art of war.⁵¹ Nevertheless, their "realistic" views on the sources of human behavior are remarkably similar. While the notion of self-interest (or a related one) is not used by Machiavelli, it plays a central role in the thinking of another influential contemporary Florentine writer, Francesco Guicciardini (1483-1540). In his *Maxims* ("Ricordi") written between 1512 and 1530, he stated:

In this world of ours, the men who do well are those who always have their own interest in mind and measure all their actions accordingly.⁵²

A central implication of Fronsperger's new view is the impact of individual self-interest on the overall welfare or the common good:

... in the following it is to be proved and shown / with clear and comprehensible arguments / that I [Self-interest] myself am not as evil / as my unappreciative children claim / but that through me within a good order and administration / the whole world / would attain peace and constancy / and that it has [thus] been

⁵⁰ Fronsperger 1564a, p. 94.

⁵¹ See Machiavelli [1519-20] 2002.

⁵² Phillips 1977, p. 77. Guicciardini either spoke of "interesse suo" or "interesse proprio". His *Maxims* did not become public during his lifetime. The first publication of the Italian text happened in Paris in 1576, followed by a French translation one year later that became very influential for the French moralists of the seventeenth century, see Heilbron 1998, pp. 79-80.

sustained from beginning on / and without me could and would not be maintained.⁵³

Fronsperger tries to prove that individuals acting according to their self-interests will not lead to chaotic social structures but will contribute on the contrary to stable social institutions and the common good. The analysis of how self-interest helps to establish and to maintain social institutions begins with marriage. For Fronsperger, marriage is not only an institution prescribed by the Bible, but also the most appropriate form of cooperation between human beings: based on rational considerations, it aims at preserving the species and thus serves the central purpose of human life.⁵⁴ Last but not least, human beings also pursue (selfish) economic interests through marriage.

And while there are many good reasons for him / he desires marriage because / without it he could not run a household adequately / and consequently he does not seek anything other than his own self-interest.⁵⁵

Similarly, Fronsperger argues for the existence of friendships on the grounds of self-interest because they ease human life, bring stability to the involved individuals and thus increase their well-being.⁵⁶ And just as nobody would be born and educated, if it were not for (the parents') self-interested motivations, further existence is guaranteed by other people pursuing their own interests, which leads to the provision of food and the assurance of a stable government.⁵⁷

⁵³ Fronsperger 1564a, p. 3.

⁵⁴ See Fronsperger 1564a, p. 12.

⁵⁵ Fronsperger 1564a, p. 13.

⁵⁶ See Fronsperger 1564a, p. 15.

⁵⁷ See Fronsperger 1564a, p. 16.

In his analysis of basic market transactions, Fronsperger conjectures that human beings can cover their demand for nourishment only because of the food producers pursuing their self-interest. In this context he employs the example of the exchange between a peasant, a merchant and a craftsman, which strikingly reminds the reader of one of Adam Smith's most famous passages in "The Wealth of Nations"⁵⁸:

To begin with I ask if / ever a peasant has been found or will be found / who
mostly for the sake of common good / and in consideration of the same would
have cultivated the fields / or who with a plough would have broken the grounds /
unless self-interest had made him do so.

The same holds for merchants and craftsmen / For which merchant has ever
crossed the sea / risking his body and his life / to bring spices or other goods from
India which serve men not only as their food / but are also beneficial for their
health / for the sake of common good / unless self-interest or greed tempted him.

Which craftsman has ever desired to work / for the sake of common good / or for
the love of it / unless either lack or defects of nourishment / or his insatiable greed
/ made him do so.⁵⁹

With the same arguments that Adam Smith uses to describe the advantages of the division of labor 212 years later, Fronsperger explains here why human satisfaction is ensured by self-interest in a much more efficient way than by acting in explicit accordance with the common

⁵⁸ "It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest. We address ourselves, not to their humanity but to their self-love, and never talk to them of our own necessities but of their advantages." (Smith [1776] 1957, p. 13).

⁵⁹ Fronsperger 1564a, pp. 18-19.

good. All agents are connected in this process like links in a chain, so that no one can exist separately from the others.

For someone to get engaged in agriculture / does not the art of carpenters and smiths have to be there before / and the smiths' melters in turn necessarily depend on the art of winning ore / Now for those who win ore / to remain in their field / they need / to be covered / for which the weavers / and those who can make houses / are required / So for ever and ever / each thing needs one another / and investigating further / you would find / that all things are connected to each other.⁶⁰

Finally, the need to exchange with others out of self-interest is not limited to individuals. The same principle also holds true for entire countries, since no country is so well endowed with resources that it does not need to exchange with others.

... in his eternal wisdom God the creator has arranged all things in such a way / that one country is in need of the other / and even so much in need / that one cannot or does not wish to lack or want anything / and no man can live without others' help.

Therefore you will see / that no country is so poorly endowed / that God has not given it something / which another country lacks / so that this country can feed and sustain itself through the other / and at the same time no country is so well endowed / that it does not lack something / which has to be brought there from another country.⁶¹

⁶⁰ Fronsperger 1564a, pp. 27-28.

⁶¹ Fronsperger 1564a, pp. 26-27.

VI. THE INFLUENCE OF THE REFORMATION

Self-interest is characterized by Fronsperger as someone who does not follow prescriptions from political or religious authorities. On the contrary, the selfish individual exclusively and consequently weighs only personal benefits and acts accordingly. Individualization of thought and questioning of traditional authorities were undoubtedly also causes of the Reformation, which reached most parts of Central and Northern Europe after 1517. The influences of Reformation thinking on Fronsperger's work that was classified at the Frankfurt Fair as the book of a Protestant theologian and that ends like a prayer with "Amen"⁶² are yet rather indirect. It is even noticeable that in central points Fronsperger, who is a believing Christian but certainly not a Lutheran theologian, disagrees with the statements of Martin Luther or some other authoritative reformers.

A central component of Martin Luther's theology was the assumption that for a true Christian the original sin cannot be overcome through the good deeds, but only through the grace of God. The expression of the individual's sinfulness is self-love, which displays detachment from God and must be replaced by God's love in order to attain redemption. Luther calls for human action to be guided by the model of charity, behind which the concern for one's own material prosperity must take a back seat. True charity occurs only where it is exercised with all one's heart and religious conviction. The good Christian must therefore overcome self-love in order to attain salvation through God.⁶³ In consequence, any individual acting according to self-interest is rejected.⁶⁴

⁶² Fronsperger 1564a, p. 48.

⁶³ See Biehler 2011, pp. 38-39.

⁶⁴ For a detailed appraisal of Luther's economic approaches, see Rössner 2015.

The effects of Luther's teachings on early modern political and social theory can be seen, for example, in the work of Johannes Ferrarius (1486-1558), the first rector of the Protestant University of Marburg.⁶⁵ His work "On the Common Good" ("Von dem Gemeinen nutze")⁶⁶, published as early as 1533, represents the standpoint in post-Reformation, Protestant literature, which is literally opposite to Fronsperger. He makes a strong case for the common good:

And is therefore the common good called / that in this case no one should see on
his own thing alone / but stand up for them / that his neighbor is thereby alone not
hindered / but also (where it seizes the need) demanded.⁶⁷

And he emphasizes in particular the idea of charity propagated by Luther:

... even those who did not grow up in the community shall see on the common
prosperity ... / So seek their use / that they may not forget the neighbor / or at least
never want to harm him.⁶⁸

In Ulm, after the Reformation, Luther's views competed with Ulrich Zwingli's teachings that swept from Switzerland to Upper Germany, and later those of Zwingli's pupil Johannes Calvin. Since Max Weber's studies in sociology of religion⁶⁹, Calvinism has been regarded as the form of Protestantism that supports individuals in maximizing their self-interest in order to achieve economic success. It must not be forgotten, however, that the Calvinist attitude is also oriented towards divine salvation, i.e. it does not pursue self-interest as an end in itself.

⁶⁵ See Eckert 1976, pp. 10-12.

⁶⁶ Ferrarius 1533.

⁶⁷ Ferrarius 1533, pp. 19-20. The original German text can be found in the appendix.

⁶⁸ Ferrarius 1533, p. 50.

⁶⁹ See Weber [1904-05] 2009.

Economic success ultimately has no other objective than a religious, completely immaterial self-assurance. The pursuit of self-interest does by no means aim at the increase of the welfare of society as a whole, and any form of material luxury and worldly pleasures is rejected.⁷⁰ According to Calvin, economic success most importantly serves the individual as an indicator for having the right faith and being chosen by God.⁷¹

Fronsperger's explanation on how societies function on the basis of self-interest is only loosely related to any kind of religious objective. For him, even if he does not question the validity of the religious promises of salvation in heaven, a major part of human happiness must already be sought and found on earth. Only rarely he seems anxious not to get into complete contradiction with Protestant theology and then tries to integrate some elements of charity into his practical recommendations for human action:

He be ready / to serve his neighbor / with all / that God has bestowed upon him /
be it his body / reason / skills / honor or goods / and to help sustain / the afore-
mentioned great order for the praise and honor of God.⁷²

The reference to God reveals the two major reasons for Fronsperger's optimism that self-interested behavior will actually contribute to the common good. Firstly, there is his strong belief that by its nature and by God's intention self-interest will make people communicate and cooperate, so that from the awareness of mutual dependence respect and love for each other will develop:

⁷⁰ See Freudenberg 2009, pp. 3-5.

⁷¹ See Gordon 2009.

⁷² Fronsperger 1564a, p. 34.

So in his eternal wisdom God ordered all this in such a way / that human beings
have reasons / and are forced / to talk / and to love each other / so that they see /
that no one would achieve anything without the other.⁷³

Secondly, Fronsperger is convinced that Christians will have strong selfish incentives to do good since this will grant them access to eternal life.

Through self-interest God is praised and extolled. For what do you think / how
many good deeds would be performed by human beings / if it were not for self-
interest / that is / one hopes / to attain paradise and everlasting life by virtue of
good deeds.⁷⁴

In the concluding chapter of the book Fronsperger then denies any conflict between individual self-interest and Christian values as long as self-interest is not abused, in particular in the form of greed.

... it will always be necessary for us / to give preference to spiritual goods over
material goods / and to make us overcome the abuse of self-interest and
unnecessary greed.⁷⁵

VII. THE MORAL PHILOSOPHY OF THE RULING ELITES

As we have seen, the influence of the Reformation on the Lutheran Fronsperger and his booklet on self-interest lies in the emancipation of thought, by which traditional theological dogmas were questioned and the individual was placed right at the center of analysis.

Reformation thinking therefore proved to be flexible enough to adapt to the different needs of

⁷³ Fronsperger 1564a, p. 28.

⁷⁴ Fronsperger 1564a, p. 39.

⁷⁵ Fronsperger 1564a, p. 48.

the local congregations in the practical questions of economic and socio-political relevance.⁷⁶

Leopold von Ranke saw one of Martin Luther's greatest merits in the clear distinction between bourgeois and religious life.⁷⁷ With his doctrine "Of the two empires and two regiments"⁷⁸ Luther on the one hand demanded the observance of divine law and on the other hand called for obedience to the secular rulers. But the latter did not necessarily imply renouncing the pursuit of one's own benefit. As a consequence, the reformers above all became pioneers of individualistic thinking in economic life, albeit against their own will.⁷⁹

The understanding of self-interest as an essential part of human nature and as a driving force for public welfare links Fronsperger's work to the debates about the relationship between the pursuit of commercial interests and the common good taking place in the powerful trading cities north and south of the Alps during the sixteenth century. In the Upper German Free Town of Augsburg, the humanist and politician Konrad Peutinger (1465-1547) had reflected on the role of commercial self-interest for the common good even more than thirty years before Fronsperger, albeit in a different form and with a different focus. Dealing with the problems of trade monopolies at the Imperial Diet of Speyer in 1530, he defended the view that a merchant, who in pursuit of his own profit accepts troubles and risks to provide the domestic market with exotic goods, increases public welfare.⁸⁰ In 1588, Giovanni Botero (1544-1617), born in the Northern Italian Piedmont, published the treatise "On the Magnificence and Greatness of Cities" that became the first economic bestseller of modern

⁷⁶ See Eucken [1940] 1950, pp. 84-86.

⁷⁷ See Ranke 1925, p. 151.

⁷⁸ See Luther [1532] 1962.

⁷⁹ See Schmoller [1900-1904] 1923, p. 81.

⁸⁰ See Schefold 2003, p. 106. Peutinger translates "commodum proprium" in the German "aigennutzig handtierungen"; see Bauer 1954, p. 37.

times with forty editions up to 1850.⁸¹ As the major driving force for a successful development of cities he mentions commerce and profit (“commodità” and “utilità”) that he considers essential elements of human nature.⁸²

Such writings document that the (commercial) usefulness of an action or an object represented a very central value in the urban communities.⁸³ What Schumpeter regarded as the basic ingrediencies of capitalist development, namely entrepreneurs, fairs, stock exchange, commodity speculation and a differentiated financial system, had been present in the prospering trading cities since the end of the fifteenth century at the latest.⁸⁴ It can hardly surprise that against this background the normative formation of a new moral philosophy for the ruling elites, in particular the economically successful merchants, took place that included a new way of dealing with self-interest.

In the Upper German Imperial cities that had all introduced the Reformation during the first half of the sixteenth century this normative formation centered around a very intensive reception of Cicero’s writings on practical philosophy and in particular of his three books “De officiis” (“On duties”). Following several commented editions of “De officiis” by Erasmus between 1515 and 1528 a whole series of new editions, comments, translations – including the first German translation of 1531 – and pamphlets came to be published within the Protestant communities.⁸⁵ The debates in these publications tried to clarify to what extent

⁸¹ See Reinert 2016.

⁸² See Botero [1588] 1606, pp. 11-12.

⁸³ See Kern 2010, pp. 107-108.

⁸⁴ See Schumpeter 1954, pp. 12-14.

⁸⁵ See Eusterschulte 2018, pp. 324-326. Philipp Melanchthon (1497-1560), the leading Protestant philosopher of his time and promoter of a comprehensive educational system in the

the moral aspect of individual actions was governed by metaphysical rules of theological ethics (“lex divina”) or rather by practical principles of human nature (“lex natura”). Having acknowledged that both exist paved already the way for a steady expansion of the non-metaphysical approach that became particularly important for a new self-consciousness of the ruling Lutheran elites in economic and political matters.

Fronsperger refers explicitly to Cicero and the debates about “De officiis”:

This is what Cicero writes and says: it is not undue that someone looks after his self-interest more diligently than after his fellow’s interest. / Also nature does not allow for our wealth or fortune to increase at someone else’s expense. It is not alone a natural law for all mankind to make use of what belongs to each one in a fair and honorable way. It is also incorporated in the written laws of nations, by means of which the good government of any community makes sure that no one damages the other for the sake of one’s self-interest.⁸⁶

Self-interest can thus be morally accepted as long as it respects the natural laws of humanity – that include the basic rules of Christian life – as well as the written laws that are the basis of good governance in each community. Fronsperger continues by quoting Cicero’s example of a race in which each competitor should run as fast as possible in order to win but should not

Lutheran communities, included “De officiis” in the obligatory reading list (“rationes studiorum”) for secondary schools, see Eusterschulte 2018, p. 339.

⁸⁶ Fronsperger 1564a, pp. 41-42.

deliberately hinder or foul other runners.⁸⁷ With these framing devices self-interested behavior could become recognized as a positive contribution to the common good.

His optimism about the generally positive effects of self-interest makes Fronsperger also turn against demands for radical social justice and a classless society, as they were raised during the Peasant Wars following the Reformation.⁸⁸ In his view, the striving for poverty demanded in the Bible does not mean material poverty, but rather poverty in spirit. For logical reasons he considers the act of giving one's worldly possessions to the poor to be of little use:

If one gave everything to the poor / the poor would become rich / and the donators would become poor / and would afterwards depend on / the same poor / selling again / what they [who were poor in the beginning] had been given by those [who were rich in the beginning] / and give it / to the poor / who had been rich before.⁸⁹

In the City of Ulm two goals of urban politics were dominant throughout the whole early modern period: the consolidation and expansion of urban autonomy on the one hand, and securing prosperity and safeguarding the acquired commercial interests on the other.⁹⁰ When the construction of Ulm's new city hall was finished in 1540 the building was decorated on its outside walls by a series of paintings that illustrated the sources of good government.⁹¹ Many of these paintings were motivated by illustrations in a comprehensive German edition of the

⁸⁷ See Fronsperger 1564a, p. 104. The same metaphor from Cicero's "De officiis" is used much later by Adam Smith in the "Theory of Moral Sentiments" to illustrate the importance of an "impartial spectator" who will blame any unfair competitor; see Hawley 2019, p. 12 f.

⁸⁸ See Goertz 2015, pp. 159-161.

⁸⁹ Fronsperger 1564a, p. 33.

⁹⁰ See Pronk 2012, p. 2010.

⁹¹ See Tipton 1991.

works of Cicero (“Der Teutsch Cicero”) that was published in 1534 by Johann von Schwarzenberg and included his German translation of “De officiis” of 1531.⁹² They included also a painted confrontation of the common good (“Gemeiner Nutz”) and self-interest (“Eigen Nutz”) where the latter is given a clearly negative connotation in the inscriptions, similar to tyranny and falseness.⁹³ This demonstrated the orthodox Lutheran view of Cicero’s moral philosophy and of good city government.

When Fronsperger, who must have known these paintings on Ulm’s city hall, wrote “On the Praise of Self-Interest” in 1564 the political context in the Free Imperial City had undergone important changes. In 1548, the year when Fronsperger became citizen of Ulm, Emperor Charles V. suspended the old constitution of the city that had established a balance of power between merchants and craftsmen and introduced a new constitution that clearly favored the economically more successful merchants in the city council against the craftsmen and their traditional guilds. The guilds were even suspended for some years.⁹⁴ In the light of these changes Fronsperger’s book with its positive connotations of self-interested behavior can be regarded as an apology of a power shift that clearly privileged the more self-interested calls that had also become the new ruling elite.⁹⁵

VIII. CONCLUSIONS

⁹² Cicero/Schwarzenberg 1534.

⁹³ See Tipton 1991, pp. 98-99 and 117.

⁹⁴ See Pronk 2012, pp. 2013-2014.

⁹⁵ It is interesting to note that when the paintings on the outside wall of Ulm’s city hall were renovated in 1905 the painting of “Eigen Nutz” was replaced by a painting of “Sträflicher Nutz” (“culpable interest”) indicating that self-interest was no longer given the earlier negative connotations; see Tipton 1991, pp. 98-99.

Fronsperger's text on self-interest, written in the form of a satirical encomium and presented to the public at the Frankfurt Autumn Fair in 1564, stands out in the German post-Reformation literature dealing with the motives of social, political and commercial activities. The author presents a new, realistic conception of human behavior that is similar to the views of Machiavelli and Guicciardini in Italy who had applied it to political science and history and that differs significantly from the ideas of the leading German reformers. Fronsperger develops the thesis that self-interest in everyday life is not to be condemned, but on the contrary promotes general welfare. He finds this connection in all social relations, but most clearly realized in economic actions that he sees motivated by the fact that all actors strive for the best possible pursuit of their own benefits. He even goes one step further towards outlining a world economy where trade and the international division of labor and trade follow the same principles as exchange between individuals. The motivation for Fronsperger's argument is undoubtedly his experience of prosperity in Ulm and other cities in Upper Germany, that were able to come to terms very well with the Reformation's separation between secular and religious life and where economically successful merchants had become the new ruling elite.

Fronsperger's positive view on the effects of selfish behavior on social dynamics (understood in a very broad sense) owes very much to the rediscovery of Cicero's writings "De officiis" during the Humanist era. It has little in common – except the literary genre – with the cynical analysis of self-interest that Bernard Mandeville presented in the "Fable of the Bees"⁹⁶ about 150 years later. It is much closer to the views of Adam Smith on self-interest developed in particular in "The Theory of Moral Sentiments"⁹⁷ of 1759. While Smith

⁹⁶ Mandeville [1714-1732] 1929.

⁹⁷ Smith [1759] 2016. For a comparison of the views of Fronsperger, Mandeville and Smith on self-interest see Klump/Pilz (2019).

sees a natural, in-born sympathy as the main framing device for individual self-interest, Fronsperger is still much more influenced by traditional religious considerations. For him, a strong motivation for good deeds to others should be the self-interest to enter paradise after a life pleasing to God. Other framing devices come from written laws that form the basis for any good government.

To sum up, Fronsperger's book on self-interest breathes the spirit of a new era, in which economic activities are increasingly following their own logic based on self-interest. Since Max Weber (1904-05/2009), this spirit has been termed the "spirit of capitalism", and thanks to Albert O. Hirschman (1977) and Pierre Force (2003) we know how long its normative formation and explicit formulation have taken. It spread in the economically prosperous trading cities of the Holy Roman Empire, most of which joined the Reformation in order to secure – quite selfishly – the foundations of their success. The economic dynamism in Upper Germany broke down at the latest with the outbreak of the Thirty Years' War. When a new culture of profit-oriented management then developed in the Netherlands and in England, it was also accompanied by the emergence of a liberal economic and social theory, that is still well-known in the world of today, while Fronsperger's work on self-interest fell into oblivion.

APPENDIX

Original German texts by Fronsperger and Ferrarius (English translations are our own):

“...unter anderem haben wir auch von Gemeinem Nutzen viel und mancherley weil und zeit verbracht / unnd doch darneben ermessen und befunden / wie solcher nie fast bedacht oder

gewesen / sonder je und alwegen durch die ganze Welt hinauß / anderß nichts / denn umb deß
Eigen Nutzen wegen allein zu thun gewesen / unnd noch also darmit geschaffen ist / solcher
gestalt / hette oder bekeme ich nur vil / Gott geb was mein nechster Nachbawer hat oder
bekeme.“⁹⁸

“...da doch denselben nie jemand gesehen / gekennt / noch gewißt hat / oder noch weiß / wo
er her / oder wie er gestalt sey...”⁹⁹

“Man redet viel von einem gemeinen Nutzen / aber es kennet ihn niemand / Mich Eigennutz
aber kennet jeder wol.”¹⁰⁰

“...hernach mit bedeutlichen und begrifflichen Argumenten / sol bewisen und dargethan
werden / daß ich [der Eigennutz] nicht allein nit so böß bin / als mir meine undanckbare
Kinder zulegen / sonder auch daß die ganze Welt / durch mich in guter Ordnung und Policej
friden / bestand und wesen erhalten würd / und von anfang erhalten worden ist / one mich
auch nicht bestehen köndt oder möchte.”¹⁰¹

“...Und wenn es gleich gute ursachen bey im hat / so begert er der Ehe darumb / daß er one
den Ehestand nicht füglich kann haushalten / und also sucht er doch darin nichts andersts
denn sein eigen nutzen.”¹⁰²

⁹⁸ Fronsperger 1564a, pp. 3-4.

⁹⁹ Fronsperger 1564a, p. 3.

¹⁰⁰ Fronsperger 1564a, p. 94.

¹⁰¹ Fronsperger 1564a, p. 3.

¹⁰² Fronsperger 1564a, p. 13.

“Welcher Handwercksmann hat je begert zu arbeiten / gemeinem nutz zu gutem / oder auß liebe desselben / wenn in nicht entweders mangel oder gebrechen der Narung / oder aber der Geitz so ni zu ersettigen ist / darzu gebracht hette.”¹⁰³

“So sich jemand auff den Ackerbauw gibt / muß nicht zuvor da seyn die Kunst der Zimmerleut und Schmid / vor deren Schmelzer denn widerumb die Kunst des Erzgrabens von nöten / vorgehet / Nun denen die Erzgraben / darmit sie auff dem Feld bleiben mögen / ist von nöten / daß sie bedeckt seyn / zu welchem Weber / und die Heuser machen können / erfordert werden / also für und für / je eins das ander erheischt / und so du das ersuchst und erforschest / so würdest du befinden / daß alle ding an einander geknüpft seyen.”¹⁰⁴

“...so hat Gott der Schöpffer als durch sein ewige Weißheit alle ding dahin gericht / daß je ein Land deß andern nottürfftig ist / und so gar nottürfftig / daß man nichts kann oder mag entrahten oder emberen / und kein Mensch one deß anderen hilff und zu stand leben kann.

Derowegen so sehet ihr / daß keine Landts art so rohe ist / Gott ir etwas geben / daß eines anderen Landts art mangelt / darmit sich dises Land durch das ander ernehren und erhalten möge / und ist dargegen kein Land so gut / daß nicht etwas mangelt / daß man einem andern herbringen muß.”¹⁰⁵

“Und wird darumb der gemein Nutz genannt / das in dem fall keiner auff sein eigen sache alleine sehen soll / sondern denen also furstehen / das sein nachpaur dadurch allein nit gehindert / sonder auch (wo es die noth ergreift) gefordert werde.”¹⁰⁶

¹⁰³ Fronsperger 1564a, pp. 18-19.

¹⁰⁴ Fronsperger 1564a, pp. 27-28.

¹⁰⁵ Fronsperger 1564a, pp. 26-27.

¹⁰⁶ Ferrarius 1533, pp. 19-20.

“... auch die / so nit bevelch haben in der gemeyn sollen auf des gemeyn gedeyen sehen ... / iren nutz also suchen / das sie des nachpauern nit vergessen / oder auff das wenigst ihm je kein schaden wolten.”¹⁰⁷

“Also daß er bereit ist mit allem dem / das im Gott verliehen hat / es sey an Leib / Vernunft / Kunst / Ehr oder Gut / seinem nechsten zu dienen / und obgemelte grosse Policey Gott zu Lob und Ehr / helffen zu erhalten.”¹⁰⁸

“Nun hat Gott die ewig Weißheit diß alles also geordent / damit die menschen ursach hetten/ und gleich also zu reden / gezwungen würden / aneinander zu lieben / so sie sehen / daß keiner on den andern nichts vermöcht.”¹⁰⁹

“... Durch Eigen Nutz wirt auch Gott gelobt und gepreyset. Denn wie viel meint ir / daß gute Werck von den Menschen geschehen würden / wenn der Eigen Nutz nit were / also / daß einer verhofft / dardurch den Himmel und das ewige Leben zu erlangen...”¹¹⁰

“...so wil uns in allweg von nöte sein / das wir die geistlichen Güter für den zeitlichen suchen / und uns nicht also den mißbrauch des Eigen Nutz und überflüssig geitzigkeit überwinde lassen.”¹¹¹

“Es schreibt also Cicero / unnd spricht: Es sey nicht unbillich / das einer sein selbs Eigen Nutz fleissiger den seins naechsten suche / Her widerumb gibt auch die Natur nit zu das unser reichthum oder vermöglichkeit mit ander leut schaden und beraubungen zuneme. Denn solchs

¹⁰⁷ Ferrarius 1533, p. 50.

¹⁰⁸ Fronsperger 1564a, p. 34.

¹⁰⁹ Fronsperger 1564a, p. 28.

¹¹⁰ Fronsperger 1564a, p. 39.

¹¹¹ Fronsperger 1564a, p. 48.

is nicht allein von natürlichem gesetz / das sich alle menschen (das ir ist) mit billigkeit und ehren gebrauchen. Es wirdt auch von den geschriben rechten der völcker / dadurch ein jede statt in ihrer gemeiner Regierung / das keiner dem anderen umb sein Eigen Nutz schaden zufüge.”¹¹²

“Sol man denn auch alles den Armen geben / so würden die Armen reich / unnd die Geber arm werden / und darnach die notturfft erheischen / daß dieselben Armen / das von inen geben / auch wider verkauffen / und den Armen / so vor reich gewesen / geben.”¹¹³

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¹¹² Fronsperger 1564a, pp. 41-42.

¹¹³ Fronsperger 1564a, p. 33.

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