

The Ethics of the Unseen

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Purpose: Claude Frederic Bastiat was a political economist in France during the 1800s. Bastiat's brilliance was in his ability to apply the concept of opportunity cost when explaining the effects of every day events and institutions, including laws and government policies, in a way that often seems counter-intuitive. He titled one of his most famous essays, "That Which Is Seen, and That Which Is Not Seen."¹ Bastiat explained the difference between a good economist and a bad economist: ". . . the one takes account of the visible effect; the other takes account both of the effects which are seen and also of those which it is necessary to foresee."² The purpose of my proposal is to demonstrate to students that a "bad" economist, per Bastiat's definition, is also being a "bad" ethicist. For example, do ethical inquiries require that all effects be taken into consideration when discussing government policy? Regardless of what ethical standard is used, shouldn't all of the effects that are understandable (foreseen) be considered – not only to obtain a thorough understanding of the economic effects, but also to make an ethical judgement about a policy?

Perspective: One theoretical framework used is the economic analysis of the concept of opportunity cost. With respect to ethics, more than one framework will be used to analyze the seen and unseen effects of a policy; including both consequentialist and non-consequentialist theories.

Modes of Inquiry: Theoretical works in both economics and ethics.

Results, Etc.: The result of (and justification for) my research will be the development of a teaching strategy that will demonstrate to students how important, not only from an economic standpoint, but also from an ethical standpoint, to analyze the "unseen" consequences of government policy.

Significance, Etc.: Bastiat's economic analysis is obviously not original with me. However, tying his economic analysis to different ethical standards and then developing a creative way of teaching this analysis to students would be both original and significant.

Keywords: Economic Policy, Unseen Effects, Bastiat

¹ First published in 1850.

² Bastiat, Frederic. *The Bastiat Collection*. , 2nd ed., Ludwig von Mises Institute, 2011, p. 1.