

# Anthropological Foundations of the Family and the Common Good

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**Abstract.** *The family and the common good are often related to each other in contemporary discourse and debate, generally in a functionalistic sense: the family is taken to be either necessary or not for the civil common good. However, the family is not itself considered a common good. In fact, however, the family is the paradigmatic example of an “integral common good” because it is the family in which the members are most obviously integrated and related in a community which is in itself a good. Western liberal thought, on the other hand, is unable to conceive the family except in its own image, as a fundamentally constructed reality composed of self-initiating and autonomous individuals. Yet in reality, the family shows us the ontological foundations and meaning of natural human communities, ontological foundations that must be respected and promoted by civil society if it is to be authentically human.*

**Keywords:** *truly human, family, common good.*

I would like to begin by laying out my proposed thesis, which I will then spend the rest of my time elaborating.<sup>1</sup> It is this: For society to be truly human, it must be rooted in an adequate sense of both the family and the common good. Now, my thesis requires me to specify what I mean by the three elements: truly human, family, and common good.

**The Truly Human.** First, let me say a few words about what I mean by the phrase “a truly human society.” Of course, much could be said about the truly human from any number of contexts. For our present needs—the question of the anthropology of the family and the common good—I simply mean to point to the idea that civil society and its institutional, political, and legal structures need to be rooted in and take account of what is *true* about people. The pertinent truth for our purposes is twofold: first, we are *inherently communal beings* and, second, we are also *rational free agents*, who by nature desire and seek personal fulfillment. I am guessing that neither of these two aspects of what is true about people is likely to be too controversial, at least until we begin to speak about what they mean.

By the first of these truths—that we are communal beings by nature—I do not mean only that we naturally seek the society of others. I mean that we come to be only in community and that community is therefore inscribed in our beings prior to any act of choice or freedom on our part. This is a point that Western liberalism tends either to forget or to which it tends to give insufficient

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ontological weight. The important point here is that we are communal, not only based on our acts of will, but more fundamentally. Indeed, our acts of will are rooted in, and depend on, our prior ontologically communal nature (Schindler 1996).

What do I mean by saying that our communal nature is inscribed in our being prior to any act of freedom on our part? We often hear among communitarians that we are naturally social beings, that we should reject or modify the classical liberal notion that begins with the unencumbered or sovereign individual. Yet, communitarian thinkers typically do not ground the idea of community deeply enough in the human person because they typically fail to consider its profoundly ontological sources.

How can we understand this ontological grounding? Some examples are both obvious and well known. No one gives himself language. And yet language is fundamental to the properly human (See e.g. Aristotle 2002, p. 11 [bk. 1, ch. 7, 1098a 3-6]). We are born with the undeveloped aptness and inclination for language, which can only be realized or fulfilled in a community of language users. In other words, an anticipation of the presence of a language community is already implicitly present in us prior to any use of language on our part. What is important to see, then, is that the possibility of a community of language users is always already inscribed in our beings. Not only are we born apt and ready for such a community: in fact, were we denied such a community, we would not be able to grow into and possess a fully human sense of ourselves. Similarly, no one gives himself life, but we are all born of a mother and a father. Our being given life through a mother and father mean that we always bear within us a visible likeness to others, prior to any act of freedom on our part.

Each of these examples points to the idea that we do not simply “enter into” society for some individual purpose or good we envision, but that we always find ourselves already in community and whatever good we realize as members of the community arises out of the reciprocal relation we possess with it. The human person is inconceivable without this basic starting point: we do not give ourselves to ourselves at the most fundamental level, although we do in part, through our free choices, cultivate what is given us. Rather, we are always given to ourselves by a community.

Collectivist notions of society tend to accept the idea that we are social by nature. But, again, my examples offer evidence of a deeper metaphysics of community, which collectivism tends to neglect. As we shall see more completely, the family is the first sign of this deeper ontological truth.<sup>2</sup>

But first, we need to address the second half of our twofold truth about people, their being *rational and free agents*. Because we are rational agents we are also free. This again is a basic affirmation of the general lines of traditional philosophy, from Aristotle to Kant. Reason implies its practical use, which is reason’s grasping of ends or goods (or, in Kant’s case, reason’s giving itself moral law) and the possibility of deliberating about and choosing ways to pursue them. That we are rational and free means that we are not merely *reducible* to the various roles and positions we have in the various communities of which we are members. So while we are naturally communal (in the sense I just set out), we also possess a *free* and *reciprocal* relationship with the

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<sup>2</sup> Angelo Scola uses the term “asymmetrical reciprocity” to refer to the relationship between the sexes, but the basic observation—inspired by John Paul II—of mutual and correlative implications of male and female (Scola 2005, pp. 92-96) can be readily extended to the familial relations in general (Crawford 2014).

communities of which we are members. If collectivist notions of society tend to lack an adequate metaphysics of the person and community, they also neglect or downplay the reciprocal nature of the relationship between community and individual. In fact, that community is inscribed in our very beings in no way diminishes the integral identity of the individual. It is only because we are rational, and therefore free (since rationality is also practical), that we can belong to genuinely *human* communities in the manner of men and women rather than ants or bees. Not only do we always already belong to a community, but we must also freely take up the order inscribed in us by community. We must not only recognize our belonging, but also freely give ourselves.

Now, as I said, my thesis is that for a society to be *truly human*, it must be rooted in an adequate sense of both the family and the common good. Obviously, the tricky part of this formulation is how to understand “rooted in.”

**Common Good.** Before we take up that question, however, I need to specify more completely what I mean by “common good.” Generally, when people speak of the common good, they mean the common good of civil society. Hence, when they speak of family and the common good, they generally mean to say how the family (which from this point of view is treated as a *private* good) does or does not, or in what ways or under what conditions it does or does not, contribute to the common good of civil society. Of course, this is a perfectly legitimate way to talk about the family and the common good. However, I will take a slightly different approach.

In what follows, I would like to focus on what I will call “integral common good,” that is to say, common good in a comprehensive sense, which as we shall see can only apply to civil society in an analogous way. Insofar as both the family and civil society are human communities, they are both common goods, albeit different in kind. My integral sense of common good will apply more directly to the family. But from it, we might be able to draw a sense of what the civil common good might be, and what it means to speak of the truly human civil society as *rooted in* the family and the common good.

First off, we should note that the idea of the common good is a difficult one. Various writers have given it various meanings. As Murphy points out, the point on which all agree appears to be merely verbal or definitional, even tautological: the common good must be both *common* and *good* (2005, pp. 133-34).

That the common good must be *good* means that it must relate to, perfect, and be appetible to those who are members of the community. On the other hand, the common good cannot be simply reducible to individual goods of the members of the community, lest it lack true *commonness*. Hence, at first sight, the idea of “common good” might appear to contain a paradox or tension.

Let me highlight two potential meanings. First, we often think of the common good as a kind of collective term for all of those *goods* that flow *from* a community. Sometimes, those goods could be directed outside of the community itself. So, for example, a charitable community exists for the sake of the good it offers those to whom it gives assistance. More commonly, however, these goods are those that flow back to the members of a community by virtue of their membership in the community.

Notice that this first sense of common good focuses on goods or benefits bestowed on individuals. In this sense, while it highlights the *goodness* of the common good, it also downplays the aspect of *commonness*. According to this first view, the common good is really the good or

goods of *individuals*, albeit received from a community. The commonness pertains only to the idea of the good or goods flowing from common action or property, *not from the idea that the good or goods are themselves common*. Indeed, this sense of common good assumes that those goods that flow to the members of a community are good only in the sense that they can be converted to private or individual benefit. What is common here, then, is the activity, or conditions, or property, and not the good itself, properly speaking. Hence, the community and its “goods” are good only as a means or in an instrumental way. Liberalism in the Anglo-American tradition tends to understand common good exhaustively in this sense.

While the idea that the common good is good for individual persons cannot be gainsaid as part of any adequate notion of common good, we might consider another aspect that will help to round out the idea. This second aspect will correlate with what I said earlier about the “truly human” encompassing the idea of our being naturally communal. This second sense of common good, with deep roots in the philosophical tradition, sees the common good as the goodness that is the community itself (cf. Kempshall 1999, p. 104). That is to say, instead of seeing the common good as goods that flow to individuals, it understands the common good as the good that is the *integral wholeness* of a human community itself. This is why I earlier called it the “integral common good.” As the good that *is* the community, this sense of common good is not reducible to the goods of the members, although it is not simply separate or different from their individual goods either (cf. De Koninck 1943).

At first, this integral sense of common good seems alien to us. Goods seem to pertain always and only to human persons, and for us this boils down—ultimately—to individual persons. So how can the community *itself* be considered a good that is not simply reducible back to its individual members?

In order to give a sense of the integral common good, we might ask whether it is ever rational for someone willingly to give up his life for a community, whether his family, his faith, or his country. If our understanding of common good is only and strictly that it is the goods that flow to individuals, then perhaps it is not (cf. MacIntyre 2006, p. 163). After all, if the rational basis for my belonging to a community is reducible to only the goods I receive from it, why would I give my life for it? And yet, we view those who do give up their lives for a larger community as heroic, rather than irrational.

How can we further specify the integral sense of common good? First of all, the good generally is related to the idea of fullness or completeness. A man or woman is said to be good when his or her inclinations and choices are what they should be, that is to say, when they are lacking nothing. Such a person is said to possess all the attributes a person should have. To be good, he or she must be personally well integrated as a human being. We see here the sense of fullness or completeness, the complete or well-ordered person.

A community, then, is said to be “good” when it is a well-integrated *whole*, when it possesses perfection as a community. When we speak about a “well-integrated whole,” we immediately recognize that such a whole must first of all contain an intrinsic order of members to the whole, which also means to each other. Any whole, properly considered, possesses an order among its parts. This is the difference between a whole and a heap.

Here we have come upon a classical analogy for the relationship between a community and its members: the parts/whole analogy. The classical tradition had often compared the members of a community to parts in relation to a whole (Crawford 2014).

What is interesting in this analogy—and it is, for reasons I will state in a moment, *only an analogy*—is that it highlights the deeper ontological basis for community. Earlier, I gave examples illustrating the naturally communal aspect of the truly human, and I said that those examples only point to a deeper ontological truth about persons. The parts/whole analogy brings out the way in which persons are always already, from an ontological point of view, naturally communal. This is because the parts/whole analogy brings out the way in which the human person is always and, from his or her beginnings, already relational. *For parts are only parts insofar as they are parts of a whole.* Indeed, the whole is ontologically *prior* to the parts. In fact, parts take their meaning from the whole, which is not reducible to its parts, but transcends and perfects them, as form transcends and actualizes matter (Crawford 2014).

Crucially, the interrelation of parts and whole is intrinsic. A genuine integrated whole cannot be simply a collection of random things. If the parts really are parts of the whole, insofar as the whole really is an integrated whole, rather than a heap, the parts must be the specific parts that they *are* in order for them to be parts at all. Rather, a genuine whole can only *be* because its parts are integrated with each other. Hence, *the parts are what they are in view of the whole and in view of each other.* Their very being or form is radically given shape by their constituting parts of the whole.

Now the parts/whole analogy allows us to bring out the crucial element necessary for us to speak of common good in the integral sense, that is, in the sense that the common good is the good that the community *is*. Just as the whole is a higher *good* than the part, so too the community is a higher and more encompassing *good* than individual good. This means that the community good is also more *lovable* than the individual good (Gallagher 1996).

We shall bring out some crucial qualifications of this in a moment, but for now it is important to understand precisely what I mean. I do not mean that the human individual is subordinate to the community in such a way that he or she is simply subsumed and dissolved into it. Rather, I mean that it is natural for the individual person, in his or her rational and free decision, to love the genuine common good, that is to say, the community itself, more than his or her own individual good.

It would *not* be disordered to love oneself more than a heap of other, parallel individuals, but it *would* be disordered to love oneself more than one's family, or one's church, or one's country, or the communal whole of humanity, or the whole universe.

This brings us back to the question of why it would ever be rational to sacrifice one's life for a community. If we hear, for example, of a mother who sacrifices her life for her infant, we would probably think the action had been badly misunderstood if it were described as an "irrational gesture of love." To the contrary, we might respond that such an action is supremely rational. If the comment were on the other hand that the action must have been due to the mother's desire to self-realize, or in other words her *own* good, we would again likely think the action had been badly misunderstood, even if we would not want to deny that such a woman was not only salvaging the

good of her infant but acting in a way that realized her own good as well, albeit in a less obvious way. If the mother and the child are taken only as parallel wholes, then the sacrifice of one for the other does not yet arrive at the rational core of the mother's love. In fact, hidden just below the surface is a good that is not simply reducible to either the infant taken simply as such or the mother taken simply as such. Without in the least diminishing the love the mother has specifically for her infant, in fact confirming it, her love is also and simultaneously directed to the good that is the communion she and the child share, what she and the infant have together. In so acting, she is in fact perfecting that community. That she loves the child to such an extent that she would sacrifice herself for it indicates that she loves the child as *hers*, and therefore she loves the child as the other part of the whole that is their communal relationship, and therefore she is also loving herself for the sake of that whole. In this way, her sacrifice, while genuinely a sacrifice, is also supremely rational. What this suggests is that there always is a "more" in personal communities and that this "more" is always set within a hierarchy that is part of the structure of human nature and God's good creation.

Indeed, it is a basic precondition of participation in a truly common good in the integral sense that it must be the common good of a community that is worth dying for; if it is not, then it is also not really a *common* good, at least in the integral sense, and therefore it is not really a community in the strictest sense, because it is not capable of being loved more than oneself. The reverse is also true: *only* a common good in the integral sense is worth dying for because it is only an authentic common good that allows us to desire and love a perfection that is both ours and beyond us.

I said that there are crucial qualifications to the parts/whole analogy. As I said, it is *only* an analogy. Here is where the other part of the truly human comes into play. People are not merely parts, but also wholes. Indeed, they are what we call *substantial* wholes. *Their* parts (brains, hearts, livers, and so forth) really are only parts entirely subsumed in the whole. Human communities, on the other hand, are only wholes in a secondary (but nevertheless real) way: they are wholes whose parts are already wholes in their own right. The human person—as the Second Vatican Council put it—is a *someone*, created by God *for his own sake* (*Gaudium et spes* 24).

However enlightening the parts/whole analogy, the actual understanding of common good is therefore yet more complicated. That the human person is not only a part but also a whole in his own right means that our "partness" is always reciprocally related to the community as a whole: if we exist for our communities, our communities also and only exist for us. This means that our being communal is *unlike* the sort of "society" we find in the anthill or the beehive. Individual bees exist exclusively and only for the whole, for the hive. If the hive is threatened, then any given bee or group of individual bees is expendable without qualification, just as the lizard sheds its tail as a mere part entirely subservient to the whole. The beehive, in lacking the absolute dignity of the individual, also lacks the dignity of what I am calling community or society in the strict sense. This is because the idea of community as a whole depends on the free and rational action (the "yes") of its "parts" in order to remain an *integral* and well-ordered whole.

So, we are created for our own sake, and not simply for the sake of a larger whole or some abstract good outside of himself. But notice that the parts/whole analogy, when properly understood, sees the integral common good, not as an "abstract good outside" the human subject, but as radically above that subject and yet also radically the possession of that subject.

What remains of the parts/whole analogy, once we take into account the rational and free nature of the person as a substantial whole in his or her own right, is that our natural communal constitution as persons is inscribed in our very beings from the beginning of our existence. But it also means that the relationship between community and member is a reciprocal one. In other words, we are *wholes* within a reciprocal relation to a communal whole, of which we are simultaneous with being wholes also constitutive parts whose “partness” is defined by the whole.

**The Family.** What I have said about the integral common good seems to apply most directly and obviously to the familial and marital communities. So now, having spoken of the truly human and the common good, I will turn to the final element of my thesis concerning the truly human society: the family.

Here we come back to the point I made a moment ago: that my examples of ways in which we are always already in community points to a deeper metaphysics. This deeper metaphysics is visible in the familial community. The first thing that we observe when we think of the family is that the members of the familial community and their relations—husband/wife, mother/father, parent/child, brother/sister—are characterized by the principle of non-exchangeability. Husband and wife, mother and father, and so forth, are absolutely non-exchangeable ways of being within the familial community. The father cannot be the mother and the mother cannot be the father; the child cannot be the parent, and the parent cannot be the child. Only a mother can bear a child, and only a father can beget one. Only a child can make a woman a mother and a man a father. By definition, only a woman can be a wife, and only a man can be a husband.

By “natural” here, therefore, I mean the inherent non-exchangeability of persons within the familial community. It is “natural” because—*nota bene*—this “non-exchangeability” is *given*, rather than *constructed*. Key here is that this givenness both precedes any act of freedom on the parts of the family members, and it also is inscribed visibly and symbolically in their very beings. Hence our fitting together within the irreducible triad—mother, father, child—is both visible in our bodies and precedes any choice on our parts.

When a man and woman join together in the manner proper to marriage the fruitfulness of the child is already implicit in the teleological order inscribed in that union. Hence, while it is true that the union of a man and woman is by its nature free and dependent on their choice, the act of freedom in question is already contained within an *order*—inscribed, visible, and (often) efficiently causal in their embodied being. The act of freedom proper to husband and wife therefore is already given a proper *form* within this given order. The act of freedom can only be viewed as *taking up* that order, rather than generating it *ex nihilo*. This order is what gives the free act its very being. Without its already being contained within the order the act simply could not be at all. Hence, the act of freedom is always already contained within—and a taking up of—that order. It is only this naturally given order that makes the free act to be possible at all as a certain kind of free act. Natural order gives rise, therefore, to freedom.

This free taking up of an order is a crucial and strictly human and personal moment. It shares only the outer structure with subhuman animals. For animals are not free, and therefore cannot deliberately take up and freely act within a given order. Rather animals are always strictly following an order which entirely defines their actions. Properly speaking, they do not act at all (cf. Th. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I-II, q. 1, a. 1). Whereas husband and wife freely act in a way made possible by the given order, which allows their free act to be an act of personal love.

*Properly speaking, in other words, our actions are always and can only be constituted as taking up a given order.*

Again, this is a crucial and decisive point. The child, for example, is already implicit within the kind of act proper to husband and wife. The child cannot be reduced to the *product* of the free acts of the parents. Rather, the child is already implicit in the kind of love proper to a man and a woman. Hence, the child's source—and this informs the child's experience of his or her own life—is metaphysically earlier than the parents' act of choice. The child is certainly the fruit of a free act of the parents' love, but is also already teleologically implicit in the *kind* of act of love that is proper to man and woman considered as such. And this *kind* is specified by the order in which it is contained, an order that gives it a primordial structure precisely *as* an act of freedom. Again, this order and structure is only and always given rather than itself constituted in an act of freedom. For this reason, the child's source is never simply reducible to the free choice of the parents, but is always owed to an earlier reality—viz. the order inscribed within the parents' very beings and visible in their bodies.

Why is this so important? Because it means that the child cannot be subordinated to the choice of the parents, but always in his or her very origins transcends that free act. In the Christian tradition, this fact points to the origin of the child in the creative act of God, so that the procreative act of the parents is always and only *participates* in God's creative act. But this further theological point is not crucial at this point. What is crucial is only that the child knows and experiences his or her life as originating in an order that precedes and gives rise to the parents' procreative acts. This accords with a dignity possessed by every human being: in principle, no human person's being or existence can be absolutely subordinated to the free act of his or her parents. Contrary to our modern and postmodern assumptions, it is only an adequate sense of *nature as order* that allows for the full dignity of the individual person as a free and rational being.

Here is where the idea of the family helps us to see the meaning of common good in the integral sense. For any whole to have an intrinsic order, its parts cannot be simply interchangeable. For them to be well-ordered to the whole while also being well-ordered toward each other they must be non-exchangeable. Otherwise, what we really have is not a whole but a mere collection or heap. In order to have a common good that is genuinely common, we need a whole, and in order to have a whole we need to have intrinsic or integral order.

Of course, in our day and age this non-exchangeability has been radically challenged. The development of *childless* sexuality, of *sexless* childbearing, of "marriage" without sexual differentiation of the partners, of "assisted reproductive technologies" of all kinds, including the possibility of cloning, all *obscure* what is *natural* to human beings. We typically fail to notice, however, even these developments are *only parasitic* on the natural foundations and dynamic force within the irreducible triad: man, woman, child. Even same-sex unions can gain some plausible semblance to "marriage" only because they can be thought by a process of abstraction as possessing some resemblance to the man-woman relationship. Even cloning, which seems to do away all together with the dynamic energy of the sexual difference of parents, would only be possible because of the continuing life force of the union of man and woman in the somatic cell from which the cloned person would be generated.

These practices are able to *obscure* the natural only because they are *parasitic* on it, and therefore seem to displace and redefine human relationships in terms of themselves. They confuse



technique or technology with the given and the natural, so that technique not only appears to be nature but, it follows, nature appears to be simply a primitive form of technique. They therefore obscure the origins of the person prior to the free acts of those who are responsible for his coming to be. Indeed, they fragment those origins into “contractual parents,” “biological parents,” “gestational mothers,” doctors and technicians.

What is lost is deeply human. When a man looks into the mirror in the morning and sees in his own face the visage of his father, this is a moment of existential clarity. It reveals to him in a simple and human way a philosophically rich truth. It reveals to him his own mortality, his destiny and the weight of being. When a woman looks into the eyes of her children and sees a harmonious melding of her husband and herself, or even of her husband’s and her own parents, this too is a moment of personal and existential depth. Even the adopted child experiences these bonds by their very absence, that is to say, as a loss. Such examples could be multiplied, but the point is simple: we experience in the very faces of our familial community the truth of our own personal and social identity at the deepest level. This inalienably crucial human experience is being systematically obscured and lowered to merely “material” importance.

From what I have said, it is clear that the best and most important example of the integral common good is contained in the marital and familial communities. We can also see that it is a sense of common good that is amenable to the Church as understood by Christians, which is conceived as a body and a bride, and which has clear non-exchangeable “members” of that body. The Church is the eschatological family, we might say. Clearly, this sense of common good cannot to the same degree be applied to the political, legal, or civil communities. As Aristotle points out, the city must not be confused with the family, because they possess different degrees of unity (2013, p. 26 [1261a 15-21]). This is despite their close and analogous relationship. Yet, if one’s country would be worth dying for, then it too in its own way—*mutatis mutandis*—possesses at its heart the integral common good.

**The Common Good of Civil Society.** Now, neither the family nor a true sense of common good is very intelligible in our modern world. Collectivism seeks to destroy all intermediate and natural communities, such as the family, because it must have nothing interposed between the individual and an all-powerful state. It seeks to assure that one’s personal loyalties are most secure within the civil, artificial “family.”

On the other hand, Western liberal countries have an analogous, surprisingly similar, problem. Rather than seeing the civil common good as an outgrowth of and reflection of families, a community of families, they reconfigure the family into the image of civil society, understood as the non-natural and voluntary relations of self-interested and rights-bearing individuals. I can describe to you briefly why this is so.

First of all, modernity in general treats all human communities as constructed. This is part of the larger picture, concerning how we moderns tend to understand knowledge. At the dawn of modernity, Francis Bacon famously sought to improve the human condition by means of a new science, which he explicitly opposed to the ancient and medieval emphasis on contemplation of unchanging or non-contingent being, or put differently, of things in themselves (Jonas 1966).

For Bacon, the purpose of knowing reality is to put it to use for the material advancement of humanity. In effect, we improve the human condition by constructing or producing our world.

Hence, for Bacon, *the given*, that is to say, what comes from nature and the creation, serves as material for human construction (Jonas 1966).

This emphasis on making and construction brings with it a revolution in the way we conceive reality as a whole. If the purpose of knowledge is to construct and produce things, then in fact *what we know* is what we have produced or constructed. What we *do not* produce is therefore strictly speaking unintelligible.

Leo Strauss put it this way in the context of Thomas Hobbes' political thought:

We understand only what we make. Since we do not make the natural beings, they are, strictly speaking, unintelligible. According to Hobbes, this fact is perfectly compatible with the possibility of natural science.

Man can guarantee the actualization of wisdom, since wisdom is identical with free construction. But wisdom cannot be free construction if the universe is intelligible. Man can guarantee the actualization of wisdom, not in spite of, but because of, the fact that the universe is unintelligible. Man can be sovereign only because there is no cosmic support for his humanity... Since the universe is unintelligible and since control of nature does not require understanding of nature, there are no knowable limits to his conquest of nature (1950, pp. 174-75).

This statement might seem *prima facie* wrong. We assume that it is precisely the modern sciences that tell us what things are in the most certain way.

Yet, when we focus on what we can *do* with things, we necessarily focus our attention on their mechanical properties, rather than on their essential being. We no longer view things in terms of *what they are* but rather in terms of the functional interaction of their parts. When our focus is then shifted to one of those parts or properties, *it too* is then analyzed into its parts and processes, and so forth *ad infinitum*.

If we pursue this far enough, say to subatomic particles, mass, energy, and so forth, we run out of road and are confronted with the basic unintelligibility of reality *in toto*. This ultimate unintelligibility, however, is not disadvantageous, because we are able nevertheless to construct our world. In fact, to follow Strauss' point to the end, *we are liberated* to construct our world precisely *because* things are inherently meaningless.

A few implications flow out of these developments:

If the underlying unintelligibility of things is a precondition for our absolute free construction, then given and natural meanings oppose free construction. In other words, nature, truth, and the given are seen as subtly opposing human freedom and self-realization.

Now, if beyond their mechanical properties things are unintelligible in themselves, they also are unable *to point to anything* beyond themselves. They can have no depth of meaning, because they are reduced to sheer facticity. They lose their fundamentally sacramental meaning. It is therefore useless to speak of their *inner* truth.

In the apparently kinder and gentler John Locke, we find an analogous desire to construct our world in the social and political sphere. We counter political oppression—and just as importantly for Locke, we multiply wealth—by constructing our political, economic and legal orders. This is what the idea of a social contract is about. For human communities to be fully rational, that is to say, fully intelligible, they need to be constructed by us.

We can see this even in relation to his conception of “pre-contractual” societies, such as the family. Even those ostensibly pre-contractual societies or communities bear a striking

resemblance to the contractual society to which they are preliminary (2003, pp. 122-40). Where Locke does not represent them in this way, they seem to veer toward patriarchal absolutism—that is to say, toward the arbitrary and non-rational forms of society he seeks to defuse (2003, p. 145).

Similar or analogous patterns of thought can be found, not only in the classical liberalism of a Locke, but also in the nineteenth century liberalism of a J.S. Mill and the contemporary liberalisms of a John Rawls (2005), an H.L.A. Hart (1997, p. 36; 1994, p. 185), or a Ronald Dworkin (1978).

Needless to say, much good has been brought about by this focus on the individual and his freedom. Legal protection of the individual as a free and rational actor and the respect accorded personal conscience are in fact signal accomplishments of liberal democracies.

Yet at the same time, what we are seeing in liberalism is the gradual erosion of natural communities, especially the marital, familial, and ecclesial communities. This is because the constructive/productive manner of reason—in cosmological, political and legal terms—cannot possibly conceive the family as a natural community and an integral common good not reducible to the benefits and interests of the individual members. Rather than seeing the natural family as the primordial reality from which the state and civil society—for all of their important differences from the family—take their being and purpose, they see the family as a potentially oppressive and ultimately pre-rational order that must be regulated and rationalized by the state’s technological form of rationality. Indeed, the integral common good of the marital and familial (as well as ecclesial) communities is simply invisible to the form of rationality of the modern state, which can only see such communities as the voluntary interactions of interest bearing individuals.

To put it in a nutshell, rather than the seeing the marital-familial-ecclesial person as a *principle* of the structure and meaning of civil order and state law, liberalism tends to see marriage, the family, and the Church as only *objects* of state *policy*, necessary to protect the interests of their members over and against the community itself.

There is a kind of inevitability of this outcome. Indeed, policing the interactions of freedoms becomes a crucial state role. Under liberalism, the state is a constant, as is the freely choosing individual. But intermediate communities can only be considered realizations of particular chosen interests, wants, conceptions of the good, and vocations. Since it is the individual who is the subject of rights—who is the one who chooses his goals and therefore his notion of the good—in significant part these rights must be protected precisely *from* such communities, which have the potential of concentrating the social influence of their individual members over others.

The effect then is to understand these “intermediate” relations or communities in the image of modern, generally liberal thought, that is to say, the effect is to envision not only civil society and the political order as constructions whose members are treated, not naturally or organically related in the manner discussed above, but as forming merely a voluntary association. In other words, political discourse and reason, given these starting points, can only conceive of communities in terms of the free individuals who constitute them.

I will conclude: without the marital, familial, and faith communities taken seriously as natural, as preceding the state, we are left only with the individual choice over and against civil law, state institutions, and bureaucracies. In effect, we are left only with the individual and the state. In effect, there is nothing then that is really and truly outside of the state. However “benign” the state’s care of individuals and their communities, such as the family, insofar as these communities

are not understood to proceed the state, they are also inevitably understood to be the creatures of the state. But if there is nothing outside of the state, then we have nothing other than a soft form of totalitarianism, a possibility both Saint John Paul II (1994, no. 20, cf. also no. 70) and Joseph Ratzinger (2005), the future Benedict XVI, found both real and disconcerting. The most pernicious form of totalitarianism may turn out to be the one that is most invisible.

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