

PART III

The Moral Agent and the Common Good

The Self, Intersubjectivity, and the Common Good

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In an earlier article on human suffering, I tried to reveal the intrinsic objective goodness of the “being” of all persons¹ and the positive notion of justice that follows from this objectively demonstrable truth. There I attempted to demonstrate that justice is not merely a negative notion prohibiting certain actions but primarily a positive notion requiring that we act in a way that views the existence of other persons as a good to be preserved. Acts of omission, also, can be real acts of injustice. I also affirmed that any *bona fide* moral philosophy requires a knowledge of God derived from some version of St. Thomas Aquinas’s fourth way of proving God’s existence. Such a proof discovers God’s existence from our experience of the gradation of pure perfections in finite things. This is evident in our experience, for example, of life, unity, goodness, truth, and beauty. These pure perfections are also discovered by means of this proof to be identical with the *esse* of things, a metaphysical truth also necessary to understand the intrinsic goodness of the human person, whether suffering or not. I also demonstrated how the postmodern mind transfers the evil of the affliction of the suffering person to the very existence of the suffering person herself, who thus becomes an evil to be destroyed.²

¹The intrinsic goodness of each and every person from the moment of conception to the moment of a natural death.

²“Human Suffering and Our Post-Civilized Cultural Mind: A Maritainian Analysis,” *The Twilight of Civilization* ed. Peter Redpath (Notre Dame, Indiana: American Maritain Association/University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), pp. 201–214.

Nevertheless, while I am confident that I justified these various claims, my earlier article has been the object of certain criticisms. These criticisms fall into two groups. The protest of the first group is that I confuse justice, friendship, faith, and charity and thereby distort the philosophical notion of the common good. This group also charges that I have distorted what the moral law and/or the positive law should require of us—an objection that appears to be rooted in the view that the common good is merely a collection of private goods. This objection in the end claims that I have confused faith with philosophy and thereby have warped both. A corollary of this is that my argument is fideistic and Augustinian, but certainly not Thomistic—a very odd objection since St. Thomas's natural law ethics is heavily influenced by St. Augustine. This view seems to hold that a knowledge of the common good is possible without affirming the existence of God or the positive relationships that exist between persons. However, as I have already demonstrated, to grasp the realities of human relationships, one must know that God exists and that God has created all persons, both men and women. Whatever notion of the common good is at play within the view from which the above objections arise, it is definitely not a notion of the common good that could stand up to rational examination, nor could it in any way be attributed to Thomas Aquinas, Yves R. Simon, or Jacques Maritain.

The second group's criticism is that I assume that from conception to death humans are actual persons, in spite of the fact that an embryo or even a newborn suffering human being may not have all the specifying activities of an adult of our species. Thus, it was asserted that I misused the principle of *operatio sequitur esse* and that I ignored the popular opinion that the embryo is not a person until it is viable at a time late in pregnancy. Judith Jarvis Thomson's argument that an embryo is a mere parasite has been proposed as a refutation of my position.³

These objections can be met, provided that we examine the notions of the self, intersubjectivity, and the common good. It is the absence of a genuine understanding of these three principles that may be at the root of these objections. The intensity with which these realities

³J.J. Thomson, "A Defense of Abortion," *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, Vol 1, Fall (1971), pp. 47–66.

are denied or distorted today is a serious threat to the very survival of our humanity. A proper understanding of these truths is essential to the foundation of our moral life and the sustaining of a civilized society; however, one should not be surprised that the negation of these basic truths has become a fact of everyday experience. We live in an age permeated by myths and distortions exemplified by the fact that there has been an attempt to discuss justice in a way disconnected from reality and any substantive knowledge of self, other persons, and intersubjectivity.

This is clearly evident by the prominence of a distracted surrealist discussion of justice in our century in terms of Robert Nozick's⁴ crude radical individualism and John Rawls's⁵ argument from a veil of ignorance. One would have us blindly affirm the *status quo* as just, irrespective of what means were used to create the *status quo*. The latter would have our sense of justice and our relationship to others be rooted in self-interest which puts us into a condition not unlike Avicenna's "suspended man" in our attempt to discern justice. Neither Nozick nor Rawls can give us an intelligible reason for accepting his position as a foundation for justice. Neither view of justice has any relationship to the real; instead each would have us consent to an arbitrary construct. Harsher criticisms are possible given the absence of reality in their definitions of justice. There is no conformity of intellect to what is—neither in their concepts of a human being nor in their explanations of human interpersonal relationships; nor, consequently, in their notions of justice. The failure of contemporary philosophical movements (exemplified by the Anglo-American analytical movement)⁶ to understand that the intellect can grasp real being has rendered the current philosophical fashions impotent in addressing important moral issues.

The point here is that both in modern psychology and philosophy the self has disappeared from the realm of substantive realities, and along with the self, all social awareness of our social and interpersonal life. It is clear that we have entered into a Tower of Babel built

⁴Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State and Utopia* (New York: Basic Books, 1974).

⁵John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1971).

⁶See the writings of Richard Rorty and Kai Nielsen in *After the Demise of the Tradition* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1991).

by a deconstruction of the transsubjective nature of both man and God and we have opted for individualistic loneliness over the reality of community life. Others would have us opt for a vague distracted sentimental notion of our social nature. These views do such violence to our understanding of the reality of persons as knowing and loving beings that the very notion of personhood has lost its meaning today. In psychology we have the strange phenomenon of theories of personality without admitting the existence of persons. When John Locke said that “substance is and I know not what,” and Hume followed with “I am and I know not what: I am a mere bundle of perceptions,” they were predicting the disappearance of the reality of the self, the reality of other persons, and the reality of the common good in the consciousness of twentieth-century modernity.

With the disappearance of the self and of the intellect’s contact with reality, the possibility of obtaining truthful answers to the following questions also disappears: What is it to be a person or a human being? Who are to be identified as persons? Who are said to have rights? What is the nature of our interpersonal relationships? and What is the nature of justice? Any attempt to explicate and answer any of these questions becomes fruitless. Without a knowledge of how to answer these questions in terms of what is, one must depend on arbitrary answers and definitions that one somehow hopes others will accept. If they are accepted, they may become conventions. One hopes that they will be accepted willingly; if not, political force may be necessary. In such a context, any answer to the above questions is as good as any other; accordingly, no one can say that anyone’s definitions are true or false, or that moral judgments are right or wrong.

For example, the definition of an embryo as an indeterminate clump of cells, a parasite, claims equal consideration with any other definition. Nor is any criterion admitted to discern the truth of any proposition. A woman can claim that an embryo is part of her body, to be disposed of as she wishes, because of a conventional arbitrary definition of who is a person and a distorted notion of the right to privacy. The fact that the embryo is never part of her body is not important. The fact that, if this were the case, the woman would lose her organic integrity after giving birth (one of the parts of her body or an organ of her body would be missing) does not matter. Nor can we consider the fact that histologists can identify human development in an embryo within the first three days after conception and possibly treat genetic diseases at this stage of development.

The right to privacy cannot be invoked to grant one person the power to destroy another simply because one regards another as unwanted or an inconvenience. A private matter is one that only involves oneself as an individual. If there are two persons involved in any situation, the right to privacy cannot be invoked to deny the rights of either. This must be understood if the right to privacy is to have any intelligible meaning at all.

Scientific, philosophical, and moral facts have become irrelevant to our contemporary post-civilized cultured minds, for such minds live only in a world of their own making, a world where only “conventions” give it a veneer of moral objectivity and permanence. The facts are not relevant since what does not fit into one’s subjective, conventional world view simply does not have to be affirmed as real. The majesty of God and the goodness of other persons do not have to be affirmed because the individual becomes his own god. To sustain this view, a person must shut out of his world all other persons, including the real God.

Self-esteem, in this context, is something one can only shout about and wish for but it is difficult to obtain. The hope is that others will not question the arbitrariness of one’s foundation for self-esteem. However, contemporary history teaches us that there are those in the world who will reject human dignity, if its foundations are not clearly preserved. It is precisely because our postmodern world has failed to be able to preserve the genuine foundations of self-worth, that self-esteem has become elusive.

Two very important distinctions have been lost by the postmodern mind. The first is the distinction within beings between potency and act; the second is the distinction within beings between substance, power, and activity. The loss of the first distinction—between potency and act—causes one to conclude that potency is not a real, discoverable part of a being. However, the distinction between potency and act, as revealing that which is an intrinsic principle of a thing, is employed every day when one chooses what to eat. For example, if one asks why one prefers chicken and broccoli to sand and rocks, the answer is simply that the former has the potency to be genuine food, a source of real nourishment, whereas the latter, of course, does not. The potency of chicken and broccoli to become real food is an actual defining part of their natures. Thus, we say chicken and broccoli are foods and sand and rocks are not.

A germinating seed includes within its being the nature of a plant, the principles that enable it to actually develop into a fully mature

plant. The human embryo also possesses within its being the nature of a human person, the principles of *essence* and *esse*, potency and act. These principles, in turn, enable it to develop into a man or a woman. No substantial change occurs within the life of a human being between the moment of conception and the moment of death. Therefore, at any stage of human life, from the moment of conception to the moment of death, if one asks, “what is it?,” the truthful answer would have to be, it is a human being with all the rights that follow from this truth. In fact, all development in an embryo is from within, and specific activities manifest themselves as the organs necessary to perform these activities develop. However, all these activities, from the moment of conception, have a specifically human genetic code and characteristics that require a human life principle to be present. Any notion of a succession of forms has no place in contemporary genetic science.

In conjunction with the loss of the understanding of the realities of potency and act, there is a loss of the second distinction between substance, power, and activity. The absence of this distinction causes the postmodern mind to confuse the identification of substance and activity in a somewhat Cartesian manner. This error fosters the conclusion that a being must be actually performing all the activities of an adult of the species to have the specific nature of that species. According to this view, for example, if one were to stop thinking, one would stop existing as a human being. Thus, the modern mind distorts the principle of *operatio sequitur esse* by not understanding the nature of *ens* as manifesting within itself the distinctions between potency and act and the distinctions between substance, power, and activity. Once these genuine distinctions are recognized, one is able to understand and unite sound philosophical judgments with what contemporary histology and genetics have discovered. To perform any of the activities of a species in a way that is species-specific, one must have the nature of a member of that species. One must have the essence and *esse* of that species.

In our postmodern world, the absence of a recognition of the truth in conjunction with a blind commitment to a world of moral inventions has resulted in an absurd notion of justice. Here, justice becomes a mere word, a rhetorical clique, appealing to “individualism” and “privacy” as institutionalized isolationism. What has resulted is a visionless mass of lonely unhappy people who do not know who they are, why they are, where they are, and what they are supposed to do. Hell is other people! Hate becomes the only real human emotion. Disengagement of the self from all other persons, whether human or

divine, as unknown and unknowable unrealities, has become the only course of action. The conclusion is accepted that even though conventional morality and law are constructed on the flimsiest of foundations, they must be affirmed anyway. Law must merely be a call to non-action, leaving me alone to be alone, and act in whatever distorted view of self-interest I may happen to entertain for the moment.

The goal is to make law conform to my enclosed perspective *through the art of rhetorical persuasion, a skill the Sophists mastered*. Hereby, one convinces others to accept one's own egocentric preferences. This is Nietzsche's will to power in operation: the polytheism of human *egotheism*, the false gods of our present age. This effort presumably makes the best of an impossible situation, one which is, in reality, without meaning. In the absence of a notion of being and goodness, we are left only to muddle about within the parameters of evil. Without a perception of light, we only have darkness. As darkness is only known by reason of our knowledge of light, and evil is known by reason of our knowledge of the good, the absence of a knowledge of light and the objective knowledge of the goodness of being—in this case, the goodness of other persons—brings about the most profound kind of ignorance: willed ignorance of what it is to be and a willed ignorance of good and evil. This becomes a world where there exists, instead of a love of being (life, unity, goodness, and beauty), a love of nothingness: death (suicide, abortion, and euthanasia), disunion (disorder, disintegration), and the morally ugly (the grotesque). Nothing can be recognized as really good and nothing can be recognized as really evil. "Where there is no vision the people shall perish" *Proverbs*, 29:18. The result is the shrinking of the human life to the pathetic dimensions of the amoral.

The reason the self has disappeared is that it has no place in the various materialistic, deterministic philosophies of human knowledge and action that are prevalent today: philosophies that search for an empirical, purely physicalist notion of the self,⁷ an impossible quest which of necessity must conclude, as does Stephen Priest in his *Theories of the Mind*,⁸ that there are neither selves nor minds. One no longer sees oneself as a self among others; as the reality of the other

⁷Cf. Daniel Dennett, *Consciousness Explained* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1991). For an anthology of contemporary views see: *Self & Identity: Contemporary Philosophical Issues*, ed. Kolak & Martin Raymond (New York: Macmillan, 1991).

⁸*Theories of the Mind* (Boston, Massachusetts: Houghton Mifflin, 1991).

disappears, so does the reality of oneself. What disappears along with the self is all those communicable goods which become our common goods. The only notion of the common good possible in this enclosed view is a mutilated one, a dismemberment of the common good into a mere collection of individual private goods, or perhaps to some quantifiable notion of individual preferences—and this notwithstanding the fact that no material thing can be a common good.

In such a context, a community of persons is only an illusion of the mind without any substantive foundation. We are left with only “possessive individualism,” or “political atomism.” This is why in our postmodern age family life and, indeed, all forms of community life, break down. Today even religious life is threatened by corrosive philosophies and theologies that misunderstand the nature of “self” and “other” as the foundations of community life. Therefore, even many religious communities are experiencing numerous difficulties which threaten their very survival.

Human individuality and selfhood are not grasped through the image of material individuation, a principle of separation of one being from another in time and place. The self is only properly understood in light of the fact that, as persons, we can transcend our material individuation through transobjective, transsubjective acts of knowledge and love. Thus, we discover the spiritual principle of our individuality, a unitive principle, as I have previously demonstrated.⁹ It is precisely because a person’s individuality can be shared through knowledge and love that persons can concretize the common communicable goods at the foundation of social life.

The difficulty here is that there is no direct knowledge of the self nor is there any possibility of forming a material image of the self. Further, knowledge of the self as singular goes against the grain of the ordinary way in which our intellect operates. For the intellect ordinarily seeks to know the other *as other* by means of abstracting concepts from phantasms. The intellect forms universal concepts by prescind-ing from existence and singular characteristics. This is why God’s knowledge of us is perfect: He does not have to abstract His knowledge from

⁹Joseph Califano, “Maritain’s Philosophy of the Person and the Individual,” *Notes et Documents* (Rome), vol. 12, July-September, 1978. pp. 19–22, and “Maritain’s Democracy of the Human Person and Man as a Moral Agent,” *Jacques Maritain: A Philosopher in the World*, ed. Jean-Louis Allard (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1985), pp. 303–311.

phantasms. He knows things directly in their singularity. God is not rational in a discursive sense. He knows the individual soul directly and completely. His whole being is, as Yves R. Simon stated, His transsubjectivity.¹⁰ There are, accordingly, no real distinctions to be made within the reality of God. There is no distinction between His knowledge and His love. He is simple.

We are like God insofar as we are centers of liberty and the author of our actions. It is through reflection on our actions that we become aware of ourselves as ourselves. This is especially the case when a person takes herself in hand and gives her life a fundamental direction by virtue of interiorizing a law. This crossing of the threshold into moral life—which comes from free commitment and the exercise of self-mastery—is how we come to know ourselves, a truth Kierkegaard understood so well. These primal acts of freedom determine what I live for, what I hold to be good, what I ultimately love.¹¹ These free acts enable one to define and discover what she is, whereby she interiorizes a law, either given by God and rooted in reality, or a law of her own invention. This law will reflect the absolute love which one will live by: whether it be love of money, power, things, the body beautiful, novelties of one's own mind and will; or the love of objective truth, in and through God, which is the only authentic foundation of human life.

The degree to which self-revelatory choices commit us to virtue, in light of one's existential ultimate end, reveals to us the degree to which we achieve genuine selfhood and genuine self-knowledge. The degree they commit us to vice and move us away from existential truths and reality is, of course, the degree to which we fail to become an authentic self. In such a condition we withdraw from life into a world of *ens rationes*, a world which is indistinguishable from nothing. Without God and His truth, we can do nothing and be nothing. We can only come to self-awareness through a realization of the transsubjectivity of our nature as described above. A genuine grasp of ourselves and of our intersubjectivity only results from the recognition of the existence of God, the goodness of being, and the goodness of other persons. Only a positive commitment to the above makes us aware that interpersonal

¹⁰Yves R. Simon, *An Introduction to Metaphysics of Knowledge* trans. by Vukan Kuic and Richard J. Thompson (New York: Fordham University Press, 1990).

¹¹*Ibid.* See also Jacques Maritain, *The Range of Reason* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1942), ch. 6.

relationships are existential relationships that make community life a natural part of our being.

It is only in this context that the unanswerable questions of the postmodern mind, cited above, become answerable. Who am I? A word spoken by God in love, (although, not The Word Who is Christ). Where do I come from? From God. Where am I going? To God. How do I get there? Through love, through a love of God and the realities of His creation.

Parenthetically, it should be noted, that the root of the postmodern mind is a rejection of the authority of reality or of what exists: that is, God and nature as the epistemological ground of our judgments. This has occurred because postmodern men and women confuse a desire to be free from the various abuses and distortions of authority by oppressive governments, including religious institutions of the past, with a freedom from the authority of reality. Thus, freedom of thought becomes a separation from what exists, a freedom of the intellect and will from truth and goodness. Another way of saying this is that it becomes freedom from my nature, the nature of God, and the nature of other persons. For to give truth a place in our lives is to accept a self-discipline in respect to the real that the postmodern mind finds intolerable. Thus, to preserve my absolute independence from a relationship to anything other than myself, I must make the reality of God irrelevant. To preserve this absolute autonomy of the self, one must also make all human interpersonal relationships meaningless. All of these negations enable one to deny or ignore the goodness of what exists—for example, other persons and our interpersonal relationships. The result of these negative principles is that the common good becomes an unintelligible and irrelevant concept, except in the sense of an idolatrous separateness, which declares “leave me alone to do my own thing.”

On this view, I am free to give full authority to the products of my disassociated mind. I am free to view my self as a god, the absolute judge of what is true and false, good and evil. In this way, the world of the postmodern mind is invented by a human self and gives a distorted priority to individual rights, whereby one may readily rationalize the withholding of goods to others. At the root of it all, one usurps God for oneself. For if one were to admit the truth of the existence of God, then one could no longer claim to be free to do whatever one wanted. If God is allowed in the process of my own self-development, I could not claim to be the cause of myself and the sole truth for myself. The

fact that this pretense at human *aseity* is absurd, an impossible illusion, a result of a delusion of grandeur, has not deterred the postmodern mind at all. God, reality, and other persons cannot really be admitted into the postmodern metaphysics without destroying this exaggerated and arrogant individualism and without constraining and correcting its moral license. Therefore, God, real knowledge, and other persons must be rejected so that an “ethics” of the absolute autonomy of the self can be postulated, and they are all rejected in the name of freedom, of course. Egotheism wins the day. The irony of the postmodern mind is that, only by the recognition of that which it has rejected (namely, self, freedom, and the common good), can it find what it wishes: meaning in this ambiguous world.

As to the objection that I have confused charity, friendship, and justice, I offer the following for your consideration. If one affirms the existence of God, the goodness of being, and the existence of other persons, then one must also affirm that some level of friendship is a part of justice. If appreciating this point means that there is a philosophical analogue to supernatural charity in the natural order, then there is some kind of analogue of charity to be found in the natural law. For charity completes and perfects nature in its full amplitude; it does not replace nature nor does it destroy nature.

The great danger is to take an atheistic or secular model of what can be known naturally or as a standard for what can be philosophically discovered. Equally great is the danger of taking Aristotle’s secular, incomplete, exclusivist notion of justice as our model. A view that excludes women, artisans, and slaves from consideration in respect to justice is philosophically abhorrent. (Still further, it is an error to conclude that every moral teaching in Scripture cannot be discovered by reason.) St. Thomas, it so happens, follows St. Augustine, rather than Aristotle, in accepting an all-inclusive notion of justice, recognizing that all persons are children of God and somehow our brothers. In this respect as well as many others, St. Thomas is not an Aristotelian.

Personality, selfhood, is not a static material given, but a spiritual reality to be achieved through the conquest of our freedom and the discovery and realization of the intersubjectivity of our being. The person discovers community with God and other persons as necessary conditions for becoming an authentic self. Authenticity, then, becomes an activity of integrating the manifold aspects of the self by directing our freedom toward the goods of the existential order: God, being, and other persons.

All of this bears directly on a philosophy of the common good, which is a communicable, interpersonal good. The first universal common good is God, whose whole being is to be found in His communication of His goodness to us, for He has created us as actual beings out of love. The common natural law is also part of the common communicable good. These universal formal aspects of the common good must be known and willed for the possibility of any genuine notions of the material common good to be actualized through meaningful choices.

Society today seems to be collapsing because *de facto* people in general and specifically those who have the responsibility for directing society toward a material realization of the common good are not willing the common good, either formally or materially. Thus, the very foundations of civilized life are eroding before our eyes. Civilized society, even in the order of intention, is ceasing to exist. This is true both for the public and private sector of our contemporary world.

Yves R. Simon¹² has accurately pointed out that the proper functioning of society, and especially a democratic society, presupposes that all should intend the common good formally and that those in authority and public office must intend it both formally and materially. This is a necessary prerequisite for the survival of community life.

However, if the common good is neither intended formally by all, nor materially by those who are in authority in public life, then the common good ceases to be. In such a context, because there is no admitting of a common life, but only the positing of an invented, contractual notion of public good as a collection of individual private goods, then virtues, and especially, the virtue of justice, lose their meaning. Since virtue implies a love of the common good, and there is no common good to be loved, then virtue (especially the virtue of justice) has no implied object. Justice can have no place in our lives. A disinclination away from the good is instilled rather than a right inclination toward the good. The vice of injustice becomes *de facto* the rule. As a result, the disintegration of the self, intersubjectivity, and the common good become a traumatic fact of human life.

¹²Yves R. Simon, *Philosophy of Democratic Government* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993), Revised edition.