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March 2, 2019
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The Good as Resistance to Secular Collectivism and Individualism

My good friend, Owen Anderson, in his book *The Natural Moral Law: The Good After Modernity*¹, argues for the need for a natural moral law based upon the Good as the source of unity for humankind in the context of a “new global reality.” In this book, he cites the U2 song “The Wanderer,” written for Johnny Cash, in which Cash sings about the citizens who say they want the kingdom, but they don’t want God in it. It may be a strange thing to quote a pop-culture reference from the early nineties in an academic setting, but I think that the quote, and what Anderson gets to in his book is the reality of a “kingdom.” Similar to St. Augustine, I want to contrast what I will call “the kingdom of God” with the “kingdom of man,” to show how the Good is a source of unity for human life in “the new global reality” of which Anderson speaks. I want to use the analogy of “kingdom” as a form of polis that unites mankind in the “new global reality.” A kingdom is a way of thinking about the global unity of humanity under a unifying principle.

My paper is about the Good as a source of unity and resistance to contemporary collectivism on the one hand and individualism on the other hand. My method is an act of

¹ Anderson, Owen. *The Natural Moral Law: The Good After Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; 2012).

retrieval philosophy. This means I am going to the past to address philosophical questions of the present. I will be retrieving concepts of classical philosophy. My goal in presenting this paper is to challenge our thinking about the current political scene and mere political acts of resistance. I would like to show that there are philosophical assumptions that we are not addressing that give rise to the dominance of politics. This paper is inspired by ongoing conversations with my mentor, Surrendra Gangadean, whose original contribution to Ethics I hope to build upon in this paper, and Catholic philosopher Peter Redpath, who challenges us to see philosophy as the attempt to understand the one and the many, unity and diversity. Dr. Redpath also personally challenged me to go on the offensive in doing philosophy. This is my attempt.

The context of delivering this paper is the Ethics section of the American Academy of Religion West Coast conference, where the central theme is: *Religion and Resistance*. Ethics is one branch of philosophy. So my talk is in the area of the philosophy of religion. Philosophy is essentially the human soul's quest for the logos, so I argue in my recent work.² Eva Brann says that Western Philosophy begins with the dual concepts of *logos* and *ontos*.³ Reason and being. The logos is the word, reason, account, form, ratio, genus. It is Aristotle's formal cause. The logos is in humans as reason (our form), and it is in the world as rational principles that may be known by us (forms, laws, ratio). Philosophy's quest has been to explain the source of this logos – rationality – in us and in the world. That the world is knowable to us creates in us a sense of wonder. Philosophy begins with wonder. We wonder at the nature of things and try to name the things we discover.

² Burton, Kelly Fitzsimmons. *Retrieving Knowledge: A Socratic Response to Skepticism* (Phoenix:Public Philosophy Press; 2018).

³ Brann, Eva T.H. *The Logos of Heraclitus: The First Philosopher of the West on Its Most Interesting Term* (Philadelphia: Paul Dry Books; 2011).

Dr. Redpath says:

During the high points of ancient Greek culture and the high middle ages of Christendom, metaphysics was viewed as “first philosophy.” It was recognized to be the only discipline that existed capable of judging the nature, divisions, and methods of the different arts and sciences, the only human science that could rationally judge the other sciences and rationally explain how they relate to each other and justify their existence in relationship to human life as a whole.⁴

In another place Redpath says:

In its generic definition, *philosophy is chiefly a cooperative-and-transgenerational, individual and cultural, psychological enterprise (or organizational psychological habit) essentially devoted to contributing to our individual and cultural understanding of how to solve “The Problem of the One and the Many: how many individual things essentially become parts of one, composite, organizational whole and essentially act the way they do.”*⁵

I want to look at this part/whole relationship that Redpath points us toward in terms of the logos, the good, and a kingdom.

The early Greek philosophers had a difficult time grounding the logos in being. They assumed materialism and could not explain why or how matter should be ordered - supremely ordered - and rational. The early Christians, particularly the Apostle John, had an explanation for the source of the logos. God, the second person of the Trinity, is the Logos – the Word - through

⁴ Redpath, Peter. *A Not-So-Elementary Christian Metaphysics*, Volume 1 (St. Louis: Enroute Books; 2015), p10.

⁵ Redpath, Peter. “An American Perspective on the Christian Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas: Midwife to Birth of a New and Improved Global Civilization of Freedom.” Paper delivered at the Cardinal Wyszynski University, Poland, June 2018.

whom all things were made. John's Prologue describes the word in man as the light by which he understands. The logos is in the world as created by God – in natural law - by which man was to know God. The Psalms are replete with statements such as “the heavens declare the glory of God.” The created order is a revelation of the existence and nature of God. John also talks about the rejection of the logos and the grace of God in coming to his own through prophets bringing the word/logos of redemption. That too has been rejected, so the Logos – the Word – comes incarnate to redeem humankind from the sin of rejecting the logos in himself, in the creation, and finally in the scriptures.

So far, my story has been that of the Greek and the Christian search for the logos. This story and all that goes with it became the foundation for Western Civilization. Somewhere in our history the foundation cracked and is now crumbling.

My talk today is a hypothesis about where things went wrong, and how to re-orient ourselves for the future. I want to begin with the present. We no longer talk about philosophy as the Greeks, and early Christians did – as the search for the logos. Instead, philosophy has assumed a position of skepticism and a practice of pragmatism. We have many theories, but none of them can claim Truth. We have to get on with the business of living, so power, or politics, become the dominant force in our public life. Emotions run high, lawsuits abound, and we are all afraid of the fury of the mob. Where is the voice of reason? Philosophy should be the voice of reason.

We should return to the search for the logos. This is a talk about ethics. Is there a logos - an organizational principle – for ethics? A genus, as Redpath would say? Aristotle seems to think so. Yet, he may have been less clear than he could have been in giving us guidance in this area.

What he does give us are the main concepts of ethics — the good, virtue, and happiness. The good is the logos of ethics. It is the organizing principle for our values, choices, and action. It guides the virtues as means to achieving the good and happiness as the effect of possessing the good. The good for a being is based on the logos – the nature of – a being.

The good for human beings is based on human nature. Aristotle says humans are rational political animals. Plato thought that humans had a soul that was rational, emotional, and volitional. We have lost that concept of a soul today. Christianity affirms that a human is a body-soul unity. The body-soul unity is what makes humans distinct from angels and animals. That we are political means, we cannot escape the reality of human community - the polis. Our rationality is fundamental to and is to rule over our animal nature and to organize our political life together. In this sense, human beings are fundamentally rational.

The good for human beings is based on our rational nature. It is good for humans to use reason to understand the nature of reality, all aspects of reality, and reality as a whole. It is harmful to humans when they do not use reason to understand the nature of reality. When we fail to understand, we fail to choose and to act appropriately. The good is the end in itself, the goal of all goals, the *summum bonum*. As such it is the organizing principle for human life both individually and collectively and historically. The good is the source of unity for human beings. It is our logos for life. Philosophy should help us to discover the good and to choose wisely for the good.

In the Christian tradition, this end in itself is found in the words of Jesus “now this is eternal life that they might know you and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.” Eternal Life is a quality-of-life that abounds through knowing God. It starts in this life, and it extends for the rest

of eternity. The good for human beings is knowing God. Historically, this comes out in the Westminster shorter catechism question one: what is man's chief end? Answer: Man's chief end is to glorify God and enjoy him forever. Philosopher and natural theologian, Surrendra Gangadean, pulls these ideas together from the Westminster standards and summarizes this way: "man's chief end is to glorify God through all that whereby he maketh himself known, in all his works of creation and Providence" until the earth is full of the knowledge of the glory of God.

The goal of knowing God takes us back to the theme of the logos – the good for man is to know God through what God has revealed of himself in the created order (the logos in the world) and in Providence (redemptive rule in human history). How is man to know God? We know God through the original work of mankind, which is also our philosophical work, by naming things. We know God by understanding the nature of things – the logos in the world reveals the logos who created the world. We are called to rule, to have dominion. What is it to rule? What is dominion? These are philosophical questions. What *is* it? What does it mean?

Rule and dominion require work - intellectual work, understanding our own powers and the nature of things, and physical work, expending energy to develop the powers in the world. In the historic Christian tradition, this is called the cultural mandate. We are to go from the Garden of Eden to the City of God – the kingdom of God. After the fall, we have more work to do. We have to rule over sin in ourselves, in our families, in the church, in the state, and in the world. There is no need for the state pre-fall. That should tell us a bit about the nature – logos – of the state. It exists to restrain evil by means of the physical sword.

With God's grace in the story of redemption for the world comes the mission mandate: "go and make disciples of all the nations teaching them to obey all that I have commanded." This

does not do away with the cultural mandate. All the nations of the world were to come into the kingdom of God on the earth. The Lord's prayer says: "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in Heaven." How do we imagine this kingdom? What is its nature? Can philosophy and the search for the logos help us here?

Philosophy helps us to look at whole/part relationships as in the one in the many. What are the parts of a kingdom (a whole)? We can start with citizens. Citizens are people with diverse personalities, backgrounds, and talents who are born into a family, the first institution of any polis or kingdom. An institution is a unifying principle (Redpath's genus) that must have a goal. If we get the goal wrong, then disunity will result. What is the nature and purpose of a family? How is family related to the good? What is the purpose of children? Can ethics help us to answer these questions?

We live together as political beings, and under a fallen condition, with real evil in the world, so the kingdom must have a government. What is the nature and purpose of government? What are its form (logos) and function? What should be the basis of the legal code in a government system? What should be the relationship between governments? Should ethics be able to help us in this area?

We need to be taught to rule over our sinful nature; we need spiritual discipline. This is the nature and purpose of the church. The church is for discipleship of its members and worship of God. The church bears the sword of the spirit - the Word of God. Can ethics give guidance in the nature, purpose, and role of the church in the kingdom? Does the church have a genus?

How do we gain an understanding of reality, human nature and its capacities, the virtues and human excellence past and present? How do we gain an understanding of the physical world

and its potential? This is the nature and purpose of education. Including the humanities and the arts, and the sciences and technology. What is the nature and goal of education? Can philosophy help us to answer this question?

Education (as well as family, church, and polis) has a role in developing all humans and each unique human with their unique talent given by God for the good. Talent is how we achieve the good. Talent is how we exercise dominion and rule. It is how we create value and wealth. When we create value, and exchange what is of value, we have the need for an economic system. *Oiko nomos* is the law for the household; it begins as household management. It is the logos for the home. In the context of the kingdom of God, we must manage the resources of the whole earth. What is the wise use and management of our resources? Philosophy, as the love of wisdom, should be able to guide economics. Is there a best economic system for the good? What about capitalism? What about communism?

Both capitalism and communism assume that human beings own absolutely. The reality is that nobody owns anything absolutely, especially in a world where God creates. We all die, and we cannot take a thing with us. We are given talent for the purpose of the good. God gives talent equally and differently, but we do not develop our talent equally. This is where economic disparity comes in. Social justice should involve providing equal access to the development of talent for the good. We are managers, stewards, over what we have for a time and for the purpose of the good. The good should direct us in what we value. It should guide us in how we gain, use, and accumulate capital. The good should give us an economic ethic that respects the talent of the individual, the contribution of the community to the development of that talent, and the inheritance we leave to future generations who will also need the good and contribute to the

good. Ethics should be able to speak to us about value, talent, economic justice, and about wise applications in the institution of the economy.

If we pay attention to the nature (logos) of these institutions and the goal of the good (the logos of life) we should be able to rule with wisdom in each aspect of life now and into the future (everlasting life). Philosophy as the search for the logos informs us about the nature and goal of each thing that is. Philosophy helps us to identify and name the diverse aspects of reality and to understand the order and relations of reality. In addition, philosophy informs us about human nature, the goal of life, and the virtues and vices. Philosophy helps us to identify the institutions of the polis and the means of preserving and advancing the human project – building the kingdom of God.

What happens when philosophy ceases as the search for the logos? What happens when philosophers decide that there are no natures in things? When they decide human beings are not essentially rational but are essentially animal, driven by desire and not by reason? What happens when philosophers conclude that all is matter and that there is no God? When this happens, as has happened, we end up with the kingdom of man on the earth. The kingdom of man is what we see now when we look out on the political scene. It is the polis, soon to become the “new global reality” without God as Creator of natures/logos and determiner of good and evil for beings. In the city of man, because there is no logos to speak of and because man is not essentially a rational being, desire must be obtained and maintained by means of power.

The modern and postmodern philosophers may deny the logos in the world (a real genus), but they cannot avoid the logos of philosophy itself, which is systematic in so far as it is involved in undergirding worldviews, which are whole part relationship/organizations. The kingdom of

man has all the same organizational structures and formal philosophical assumptions that support those structures as the kingdom of God, it's just that the content of those assumptions is different. The kingdom of man denies that the world itself is rational (ordered by logos). It assumes that all is matter. It assumes that human beings are material beings driven primarily by desire. Consider Rousseau, Darwin, Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche as examples of proponents of the kingdom of man.

If the satisfaction of desire fundamentally motivates humans, then the good for this kingdom is happiness or comfort or pleasure. Imagine all the institutions of culture organized for the goal of pleasure. What is the family for? What is religion for? What is government for? What is education for? What is the economy for? What is the purpose of human effort and work? All are for the satisfaction of our desires. The organizational principle of all of culture is for the satisfaction of desire? Will that ultimately satisfy human beings? Or do we need more?

Here is where our contemporary political scene comes into play again. The kingdom of man is divided into the left and the right. Both seem to agree that the goal of life is the satisfaction of desire or pleasure. But what should take priority, the collective satisfaction of desire (what we in Ethics call utilitarianism), or the individual satisfaction of desire (egoism and/or hedonism)? Without the voice of reason, how do we decide this? Without reason, power decides. The state becomes the dominant sphere of the polis for the kingdom of man.

Let us consider each. On the left, there is a move towards a political collective where the state owns absolutely. And the state determines the nature of the other institutions of the polis such as the family, economics, religion, education. The goal seems to be the maximization of happiness for the greatest number of people. This is why the political is seen as all-encompassing

and why everything is economics on the left. It is consistent with Marxism and the view that what determines a person's standing is primarily class. Today we have changed class to race and gender and possibly even sexual identity. The highest virtue of this version of the kingdom of man is equality. We all need equal distribution of the means of happiness. Happiness requires income, so we need equality in terms of the distribution of income. Question: where are the virtues to check human vice in this view of the kingdom of man? I am thinking especially of the vice of sloth. Is a lifetime of work for the collective satisfaction of desire worth it? Why put forth the effort? Can satisfaction of desire be the goal of life?

On the right, there is a move towards self-rule where individual autonomy is prized above all else, and the highest value is freedom: freedom to pursue happiness (satisfaction of desire). However, how does this work with the institutions of the polis where an individual pursues their own satisfaction of desire to the exclusion of the collective? Does the individual determine the goal and purpose of the family? What is the purpose of the economy for the individual? Is it to maximize income so as to maximize happiness? What about the church? Is the purpose of the church determined by the individual? Is this why we see the dominance of individualism (and emotionalism) in religion today? What about the state? Does the individual pursuit of happiness lean towards libertarianism and the minimization of state regulation? This view tends to promote the privatization of everything. Does the individual own absolutely? Here is the problem for individualism: where are the virtues to check human vice, especially greed? Again, can satisfaction of desire be the chief end?

From a classical philosophical perspective, the contemporary swings to collectivism on the left and individualism on the right are mistakes. These mistakes stem from having the wrong

goal. The wrong goal comes from a mistaken view of human nature, ultimate reality, and finally the failure to search for the logos. It is a failure of contemporary philosophy, which has left off the search for the logos and has, in fact, become anti-logos. Neither the state directing the collective nor the autonomous self-direction of the individual is wise enough to know the good and the means to the good in every choice of life in every institution of culture. This is why we need to do philosophy, and this is why we need to do ethics. It is also why we need the cumulative insight of the past. We need a retrieval of the good - the logos of life. The Good serves as resistance to contemporary political divisions and is a source of unity for all of human life and activity. As an act of resistance to the kingdom of man, we need to retrieve the kingdom of God and the goal of that kingdom. But first, philosophy must return to the search for the logos.