



The One and the Many. Unity, Plurality and the Free Society

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There is perhaps no older nor more enduring philosophical problem than that of the one and the many. Whether we are talking about Milesian speculation about first matter—a single sort of stuff from which all else emerges—or about the controversies between Heraclitus’ world in flux and Parmenides’ unity of all things, problems of change and permanence, diversity and unity, dominate philosophy in the Western world from the outset.

Theologians, too, often struggle with similar themes. In 2001, Cardinals Joseph Ratzinger and Walter Kasper famously faced off in opposing articles in *America* magazine on the question of the relationship between the universal Church and the local churches.¹ The unity of the faith and the plurality of theologies is another area where this strain can be observed, and where the Magisterium has needed to step in on more than one occasion.² Such theological tensions between the one

¹ Walter Kasper’s essay, bearing the title “On the Church,” was published in the April 23, 2001 issue of *America* Magazine (Vol. 184 No. 14). Ratzinger’s response, entitled “The Local Church and The Universal Church,” appeared in the November 19, 2001 issue (Vol. 185 No. 16).

² In its 1990 *Instruction on the Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian* (May 24, 1990), the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith declared: “The freedom proper to theological research is exercised within the Church’s faith” (no. 11). Indeed, as *fides quaerens intellectum*, theology supposes as its point of departure the one faith of the Church, which sets very real bounds on the forays of theological speculation. The Congregation deemed it necessary to reiterate this point in its recent “Notification on the works of Father Jon Sobrino, SJ,” (November 26, 2006), which noted that it is only in the ecclesial faith “that all other theological foundations find their correct epistemological setting.” The notification goes on to say: “The theologian, in his particular vocation in the Church, must continually bear in

and the many can also be observed in the areas of soteriology (think of *Dominus Iesus* or the CDF's response to Jacques Dupuis' *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*³), liturgy (think of the question of inculturation versus the universality of the one liturgy) and moral theology (think of the virulent responses to John Paul's 1993 encyclical letter *Veritatis Splendor* as the supposed imposition of one "school" over others).

Yet tensions between the one and the many are not restricted to the domain of academic speculation. They are, in fact, especially evident at the level of socio-political organization and of culture. Many of today's most heated controversies whirl around these very tensions. Thus while "political correctness" seeks to reign in cultural heterodoxies and homogenize speech and customs, "multiculturalism" exerts a contrary centrifugal force on society by celebrating diversity in its manifold expressions. How do we achieve unity in the midst of multiplicity? Which should take precedence? By what criteria and on what grounds should one be sacrificed to the other? How can harmony be achieved between them, and in what does it consist? This paper will examine the relationship between the one and the many in the context of the free society. Striking the correct balance between the two, and indeed correctly positing the nature of their relationship, is essential to the right ordering of human society.

Individualism and collectivism

At the socio-political level, the two extreme positions regarding the one and the many generally go by the names of individualism and collectivism. Individualism would refer to a social theory emphasizing the liberty, rights, and independent action of the individual, whereas collectivism would refer to the socialist principle of control by the people collectively—or the state—of all means of production or economic activity. Our generation instinctively rejects attempts at homogenization and recoils from anything that resembles walking in mindless lockstep. Diversity is not only recognized, but celebrated and promoted. At the same time, people recognize a need for universal principles or common values that would serve as moral glue to cement a group of individuals

mind that theology is the science of the faith. Other points of departure for theological work run the risk of arbitrariness and end in a misrepresentation of the same faith" (no. 2).

³ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Notification on the book «Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism» by Fr. Jacques Dupuis, S.J., (January 24, 2001).

into a true human community and protect minorities from the hegemony of the many.

In a 1961 essay, Karol Wojtyła characterized these two extremes in the following way:

On the one hand, persons may easily place their own individual good above the common good of the collectivity, attempting to subordinate the collectivity to themselves and use it for their individual good. This is the error of individualism, which gave rise to liberalism in modern history and to capitalism in economics. On the other hand, society, in aiming at the alleged good of the whole, may attempt to subordinate persons to itself in such a way that the true good of persons is excluded and they themselves fall prey to the collectivity. This is the error of totalitarianism, which in modern times has borne the worst possible fruit.”⁴

Now some would assert that the very nature of a “free society” would favor individualism over collectivism. Where socialist collectivism restricts the freedom of its citizens, liberal individualism would seem to guarantee it. Actually the solution proposed by Pope John Paul II in *Centesimus annus* is more subtle, and more satisfying.

In CA, Pope John Paul begins the fifth chapter on State and Culture with praise of the “rule of law,” where the law is sovereign “and not the arbitrary will of individuals” (44). He contrasts an organization of society with a balance of powers—legislative, executive and judicial—with different forms of totalitarianism (here he specifically mentions Marxist-Leninism) where some arrogate to themselves the exercise of absolute power over the rest. Up to here his analysis is fairly standard and would garner a broad consensus. It is the statement that follows that departs from conventional wisdom.

John Paul affirms that the real difference between totalitarianism and democracy based on a rule of law is not so much the concentration of power into a single individual or party versus a system of checks and balances that broadens the base of power, but rather the more fundamental understanding of truth and the common good. Totalitarianism is based on voluntarism, or the supremacy of will over reason, whereas a rule of law places will at the service of reason. According to John Paul,

⁴ Karol Wojtyła, “Thomistic Personalism,” a paper presented at the Fourth Annual Philosophy Week, Catholic University of Lublin, February 17, 1961, translated from the Polish “Personalizm tomistyczny” (*Znak* 13 [1961]): 664–75) by Theresa Sandok, in *Person and Community: Selected Essays*, vol. 4 of *Catholic Thought from Lublin*, edited by Andrew N. Woznicki, (New York: Peter Lang, 1993), p. 174.

“totalitarianism arises out of a denial of truth in the objective sense. If there is no transcendent truth, in obedience to which man achieves his full identity, then there is no sure principle for guaranteeing just relations between people” (44).

The rule of political expediency is characteristic of a totalitarian state. The breakdown of moral absolutes is necessary, in fact, to permit such a state the free exercise of statecraft with no accountability to transcendent principles. The will of the ruler becomes the sole criterion of moral good and evil. Thus John Paul wrote that the state “which sets itself above all values, cannot tolerate the affirmation of an *objective criterion of good and evil* beyond the will of those in power, since such a criterion, in given circumstances, could be used to judge their actions” (45).

The consequent evil of such a political system is that it denies the existence of a transcendent point of reference outside of the will of individuals by which to guarantee and indeed understand just relations between people. The denial of objective truth importantly entails “the denial of the transcendent dignity of the human person who, as the visible image of the invisible God, is therefore by his very nature the subject of rights which no one may violate—no individual, group, class, nation or State” (44).

Therefore the true benefit of a political order based on a rule of law does not stem merely from a balance of powers and the consequent coordination of opposing personal interests. The real superiority of such a system is its implicit or explicit recognition that objective principles of justice exist outside the system itself, and which the system serves to advance. The division of political powers exists not merely to impose a system of checks and balances on personal will and self-interest, but in order to achieve justice and the common good. Here will is subject to reason, and not vice-versa.

It is in this light that we can understand John Paul’s oft-cited remark in its deepest sense: “a democracy without values easily turns into open or thinly disguised totalitarianism” (46). This is not an exercise in rhetoric for dramatic effect. Though democracy may seem to be the antithesis of totalitarianism, since it distributes political power among the citizenry, if it fails to recognize objective truth and goodness beyond political expediency, it literally falls into the same error found at the heart of totalitarianism. It denies the role of reason in the organization of society, and allows the will to reign.

“If one does not acknowledge transcendent truth,” John Paul continues, “then the force of power takes over, and each person tends to ma-

ke full use of the means at his disposal in order to impose his own interests or his own opinion, with no regard for the rights of others. People are then respected only to the extent that they can be exploited for selfish ends” (44). In other words, when the Arthurian “might for right” falls back into the barbaric “might makes right,” the result is totalitarianism.

In his 1995 encyclical letter *Evangelium vitae*, John Paul drew out the practical consequences of such a transition, especially as regards the right to life.

This is what is happening also at the level of politics and government: the original and inalienable right to life is questioned or denied on the basis of a parliamentary vote or the will of one part of the people—even if it is the majority. This is the sinister result of a relativism which reigns unopposed: the “right” ceases to be such, because it is no longer firmly founded on the inviolable dignity of the person, but is made subject to the will of the stronger part. In this way democracy, contradicting its own principles, effectively moves towards a form of totalitarianism. The State is no longer the “common home” where all can live together on the basis of principles of fundamental equality, but is transformed into a *tyrant State*. (EV 20)

The common good

And here we come to the central principle of the common good. It is an established idea of Catholic social thought that the state or political authority exists to promote the common good of society.⁵ This is its sole *raison d’être*. Yet here differing notions of the common good will yield radically different conclusions regarding the nature and role of the state.

A view of the common good as the good of the collectivity, as we have seen in twentieth-century totalitarianism, is unacceptable on seven-

⁵ “Furthermore, the civil power must not be subservient to the advantage of any one individual or of some few persons, inasmuch as it was established for the common good of all” (Pope Leo XIII, encyclical letter *Immortale Dei* [November 1, 1885], no. 5). “The political community exists, consequently, for the sake of the common good, in which it finds its full justification and significance, and the source of its inherent legitimacy” (Second Vatican Council, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et spes*, 74). “The attainment of the common good is the sole reason for the existence of civil authorities” (Pope John XXIII, encyclical letter *Pacem in terris* [April 11, 1963]), no. 54. “It is the role of the state to defend and promote the common good of civil society, its citizens, and intermediate bodies” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1910).

ral grounds. The individual is subsumed into the whole and has value only in relation to the state. Even if Marxist Communism had “worked,” for example, on a practical level, it would have been a pyrrhic victory. A state that functions as perfectly as a Swiss watch, but whose members are reduced to the role of pieces of that watch, does not yield a truly human society at all. Society has no value apart from its members, and the good of a society must always be evaluated by the good not only of the whole but of the parts as well. Furthermore, a polity that does not protect and promote the freedom and creativity of its members has failed in what is most essential to human society.

If, on the other hand, the common good is viewed through a utilitarian optic as the greatest pleasure (or happiness) for the greatest number, then it is likewise difficult to see how the totalitarianism spoken of by Pope John Paul can be avoided. This is the real danger of modern democracies with an underlying individualistic ethic. A calculus of maximizing happiness where each member of society is assigned a value of exactly one permits and even encourages the sacrifice of the minority for the majority. The maximization of happiness often demands this. Where one must be shot in order to save a hundred, a utilitarian ethic doesn’t think twice about shooting the one. There are no moral absolutes in utilitarianism, since the “moral” choice will always reflect a cost-benefit analysis and any cost can be justified by proportionate benefits. The flaws of utilitarianism are compounded when the “good” of the greatest number is reduced to personal autonomy, rather than a more substantive idea of human flourishing.

This is why the definition of the common good offered by the Second Vatican Council, and subsequently appropriated by the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, while manifesting a prima facie poverty, in reality proves exceptionally useful. The Council describes the common good as “the sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfillment more fully and more easily.”⁶

Importantly, the common good tutored by the public authority does not describe a final *outcome* of human flourishing, since this can never be achieved by the state, but rather a culture or social *environment* that propitiates human flourishing. Certain social conditions are necessary so that men and women can freely and responsibly achieve their fulfillment in cooperation with others. Human flourishing can never be

⁶ GS 26 # 1; cf. GS 74 # 1.

imposed from without since by its very nature it must be the result of free action.

At the same time this set of social conditions reflects a substantive idea of human nature and the human good, and is not a mere expression of consensus or convention. It is human reason that recognizes the requirements of the common good, rather than the human will arbitrarily imposing them. The protection of human freedoms, the satisfaction of human needs and rights and the stability and security of a just social order give the common good a solid foundation of non-negotiable human goods. This vital environment is—or should be—the aim of political structures and policies.

The explicit recognition of the elements of this environment is necessary for the right ordering of a free society. It was in his 1995 encyclical, *Evangelium Vitae*, where John Paul articulated this important statement:

It is therefore urgently necessary, for the future of society and the development of a sound democracy, to rediscover those essential and innate human and moral values which flow from the very truth of the human being and express and safeguard the dignity of the person: values which no individual, no majority and no State can ever create, modify or destroy, but must only acknowledge, respect and promote.⁷

There is a valid and necessary diversity *within* the common good, but also a diversity that *threatens* the foundations of the common good. Diversity is not to be celebrated for its own sake, but inasmuch as it contributes to the common good.⁸ Recognition of a basic core of moral truths is essential for the establishment and permanence of a free society. Justice, equality and human dignity must be recognized as moral truths, rather than mere expedient conventions, in order for the free society to truly be so.

The contribution of personalism

It is in this context that John Paul's personalism proves especially illuminating for the problem of the one and the many. It attempts to re-

⁷ John Paul II, encyclical letter *Evangelium Vitae*, no. 71

⁸ See, for example, Peter H. Schuck, *Diversity in America: Keeping Government at a Safe Distance* (Harvard University Press, 2003). In it Schuck makes the case that diversity, which is generally a good thing, is not a good in and of itself; it becomes valuable only when it contributes to other objectives.

concile the errors of collectivism and individualism through a more robust understanding of the common good. In the first place, it posits a hierarchy or ordering of what is particular to what is common. We Americans appreciate that our national motto is *e pluribus unum*, rather than *ex uno plures*. At the same time, personalism does not allow the individual to be completely subordinated to the whole. On the contrary, through a correct understanding of the dignity and rights of the person, moral absolutes become possible once again when the inviolability of the individual is at stake.

Thomistic personalism maintains that the individual good of persons should be by nature subordinate to the common good at which the collectivity, or society, aims—but this subordination may under no circumstances devalue the persons themselves. There are certain rights that every society must guarantee to persons, for without these rights the life and development of persons is impossible. One of these basic rights is the right to freedom of conscience. This right is always violated by so-called objective totalitarianism, which holds that the human person should be completely subordinate to society in all things. In contrast, Thomistic personalism maintains that the person should be subordinate to society in all that is indispensable for the realization of the common good, but that the true common good never threatens the good of the person, even though it may demand considerable sacrifice of a person.⁹

Personalism's understanding of the common good derives from its understanding of the person himself. The inherent dignity of the person demands that persons always be treated as ends rather than means, loved rather than used. This principle has profound consequences for political ethics and the organization of society, since it prohibits the absolute subordination of the individual to the collectivity and demands respect for the inviolability and hence the radical equality of all persons.

The common good does not stand in opposition to the particular good of persons, but rather comprises it, as well as the good of families and other mediating social institutions and associations. Since it is not identified with the good of the abstract collectivity, the common good is truly the good of one and all. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states: "The common good is always oriented towards the progress of persons: The order of things must be subordinate to the order of persons, and not the other way around."¹⁰ The Catechism, in fact, places

⁹ Karol Wojtyła, "Thomistic Personalism," p. 174.

¹⁰ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1912.

respect for each and every person at the heart of the content of the common good. It states:

First, the common good presupposes respect for the person as such. In the name of the common good, public authorities are bound to respect the fundamental and inalienable rights of the human person. Society should permit each of its members to fulfill his vocation. In particular, the common good resides in the conditions for the exercise of the natural freedoms indispensable for the development of the human vocation, such as "the right to act according to a sound norm of conscience and to safeguard . . . privacy, and rightful freedom also in matters of religion." (1907)

In this way we see how the social principle of subsidiarity is a requirement of the common good, and not a counterbalance to it. Although subsidiarity is fundamentally a limiting principle on the interference of a society of a higher order in the life of a society of a lower order, it is not meant to advance individualism over the common good. On the contrary, it is meant to *further* the common good, since the common good itself entails the good of persons and societies of all levels. In order to achieve the vital humus necessary for human flourishing, societies of a higher order *must* respect societies of a lower order, and allow them the necessary autonomy for the responsible exercise of their proper competencies. Again, this is a component of the common good, rather than a concession.

At the same time personalism remedies the excesses of individualism as well. It offers a deeper explanation of the relationship between the particular good of individuals and the common good. Though the ordering of what is particular to what is common may seem to place the person on an inferior status vis-à-vis the community, this is not true. Attention to the common good, far from destroying the particular good of persons, is essential to it. Just as the common good comprises the particular good of persons, so the particular good necessarily is achieved through attention to the common good. Herein lies the logic of the Second Vatican Council in saying that man is in fact "the only creature on earth which God willed for itself" and at the same time he cannot "fully find himself except through a sincere gift of himself."¹¹

In the words of Pope John Paul, these two aspects—self-affirmation and the sincere gift of self—"not only do not exclude each other, they mutually confirm and complete each other. *Man affirms*

¹¹ *GS*, 24.

himself most completely by giving of himself."¹² In other words, the true good of the human person is found not in self-interest but in self-giving.

In serving the common good, the human person grows in his personal good as well. This is why the Christian virtue of solidarity, described by Pope John Paul as "a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good" is necessary for human flourishing.¹³ In the end the human person realizes his full potential only by going beyond himself, and by giving himself to others. By asking human beings to look to the common good above personal self-interest, society elevates its members and indicates to them the path to authentic fulfillment.

In the end, the proposal offered by Christian personalism is a Trinitarian solution. It understands the mutual self-giving manifested in the inner life of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit as a paradigm for human society. Made in the image and likeness of the Trinitarian Godhead, man is called to communion and self-giving.

At the same time, the more lofty theological truths underlying a Christian notion of the common good do not obviate the need for a realism based on another theological truth—that of original sin. Man's tendency to selfishness must be curbed by social and political structures that both educate in virtue and restrain vice. Here, too, the reason for the Church's insistence on human rights.

The role of human rights

We have seen that in his reflections on the common good, John Paul placed special emphasis on the role of human rights. As an ethical category, human rights prove uniquely useful in addressing the problem of the one and the many, in that they lay claim to a universality that unites the human race, while simultaneously according a moral absoluteness and inviolability to the individual.

Despite a fair amount of opposition, the Church has consistently supported the United Nations in its articulation of universal human rights. As we have seen above, rights make a statement about objective human goods, and thus counter the voluntarism present in totalitarianism. When the United Nations endeavors to spread the idea that every human person possesses an inherent dignity, that women possess the same fundamental rights as men, that certain ways of treating children are always and everywhere wrong, it is proclaiming the existence of

¹² John Paul II, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, 202–3; emphasis in original.

¹³ John Paul II, apostolic exhortation *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, no. 38.

universal moral truths. Where these human rights are violated, contemporary society rightly denounces them as contrary to morality. The moral realism implicit in human rights stands in contrast to the moral or cultural relativism that threatens democracies today.

In 1947, on the occasion of the United Nations debate about universal human rights, the Executive Board of the American Anthropological Association issued a statement expressing opposition to the United Nations' attempt to formulate a universal declaration of human rights. Written by leading members of the AAA, the Statement argued that individual cultures and societies must be evaluated on their own terms, and not by universal standards. "How can the proposed Declaration be applicable to all human beings," the authors asked, "and not be a statement of rights conceived only in terms of the values prevalent in the countries of Western Europe and America?"¹⁴ The Statement added that "standards and values are relative to the culture from which they derive" and "what is held to be a human right in one society may be regarded as anti-social by another people." (ibid)

For those who see morality as a question of cultural convention, one moral code is no better than another, any more than driving on the right side of the road in America or Italy is better than driving on the left side of the road in Australia or the United Kingdom. We may prefer one way over another, but it is not morally superior to the other. When rights are deemed to be partisan, or simple cultural constructs, the possibility of a rule of moral reason becomes impossible, and the only remaining option is the balance of individual wills and the exercise of an ultimately unreasonable power. In its more radical forms, multiculturalism undermines the conditions necessary for the common good, since it—like totalitarianism—denies the existence of universal moral truths.

Thus contemporary public debates around such topics as abortion suppose that no binding moral norms may be applied. You may choose not to engage in behavior you deem morally unacceptable, but you may not limit another's license to do so. Moral principles are seen to flow from personal opinion or religious convictions, but not from reason. When one wishes to extend opposition to abortion to others, such attempts are immediately construed as an imposition of personal values on others.

¹⁴ Executive Board of the American Anthropological Association, "Statement on Human Rights," *American Anthropologist* 49/4 [October-December 1947]: 539.

Yet the fact that a given moral principle is simultaneously accessible to human reason and also taught by a given religious body or held as a personal moral conviction does not reduce the principle to a matter of religion or individual values. Larceny is prohibited both by the fifth commandment of the Decalogue and state penal codes everywhere. Homicide is likewise forbidden both by moral and civil law. The positivism proclaimed by the Enlightenment that reduces authority to power and divorces civil law from moral law, can only end in a “thinly veiled totalitarianism.”

Catholic social doctrine, and *Centesimus annus* in particular, offers a refreshing and satisfying alternative to Enlightenment theories regarding public authority and the common good. For a free society to remain so, a voluntaristic understanding of the common good must give way to a rediscovery and acknowledgement of the objective moral truth that lies at its base.

Summary: The author analyzes the tensions that exist between unity and plurality in the modern free society and shows how these tensions can be understood in the light of principles of Catholic social thought. A movement toward plurality celebrates the diversity present in society and exerts a centrifugal force on culture, splitting it into as many parts as possible. Meanwhile, a concurrent movement toward political correctness exerts a contrary, centripetal force that works to insure uniformity of speech and customs. These contrary tendencies are irresolvable as long as the will is granted supremacy over reason and the “good” is understood only in terms of autonomy. The Catholic principle of the common good provides the key with which to read and resolve these diverse tendencies by showing that the particular good of the individual and the common welfare of society complement and implicate one another. The rule of law truly serves the common good when it recognizes that objective principles of justice exist outside the system itself, and that the system exists in order to advance them and is ultimately accountable to them. The division of political powers has value not merely because it imposes a system of checks and balances on personal will and self-interest, but because it promotes justice and the common good.

Key words: Catholic social thought, common good, unity, uniformity, homogeneity, diversity, multiplicity, culture, political correctness, plurality, pluralism, subsidiarity, solidarity, balance of powers, totalitarianism, John Paul II, *Centesimus annus*, *Evangelium vitae*, free society, voluntarism, multiculturalism, tolerance, personalism, individualism, collectivism, utilitarianism, rule of law, objective morality, human flourishing, *e pluribus unum*, human rights, relativism, United Nations, American Anthropological Association, justice, just order.

Parole chiave: Dottrina sociale della Chiesa, bene comune, unità, diversità, uniformità, omogeneità, molteplicità, cultura, “political correctness”, pluralità, pluralismo, subsidiarietà, solidarietà, bilancio dei poteri, totalitarismo, Giovanni Paolo II, *Centesimus annus*, *Evangelium vitae*, società libera, volontarismo, multiculturalismo, tolleranza, personalismo, individualismo, collettivismo, utilitarismo, ordine giusto, giustizia, moralità oggettiva, realizzazione umana, dignità, *e pluribus unum*, diritti umani, relativismo, Nazioni Unite, American Anthropological Association.