



A depersonalized society? educational proposals

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Over history, human beings have organized themselves into different kinds of societies, beginning with tribal systems, up to empires. The first great societies, such as the Sumerian or Egyptian, were dominated by a system something like caesaro-papism where the head of state was also the religious leader. The population was completely subordinate to the ruler. The ruler had political, religious, legal, moral, economic, and military privileges. There was no room for equality among the members of society not only as members of society, but above all as human beings.

The idea of the *bios politikós* arose in ancient Greece and was a breakthrough. This was the idea of a society in which the members were subjects in themselves and shared responsibility for the common good of their society. The idea arose in the sixth century during the reign of Solon, and as the result of his thought. This idea of the *bios politikós* today is expressed by the term “democracy”. However, if we want to be precise, what we call “democracy” today would be called a *politeia* by the ancient Greeks, or a *republica* by the ancient Romans. What the Greeks called democracy was not concerned with the common good, but with the good of the majority. The majority was not necessarily the people of the noblest character, rather of the worst, and that’s why Plato and Aristotle criticized democracy as leading to ochlocracy, namely the rule the worst.

Aristotle’s observation that man has a social nature is the key to understanding the idea of the *bios politikós*. Today especially we must be careful to be precise in how we think about man’s social nature, because in many circles, especially among socialists and communists, they speak of man’s social nature, but have something completely different in mind.

Aristotle said that someone who thought he could live without society was either someone miserable or a superhuman being.² A normal human being must live in society. Two questions arise here. In what sense does a human being need society? In what degree does a human being belong to society?

Aristotle’s realism in how he looked at the world, and so, in how he looked at man and society, had its theoretical basis in his conception of being (*to on*) and nature (*physis*). Man is a substance (*ousía*), and so he belongs to the most important category of being. Man is also a composite substance; the subontic elements in man (matter and form) and his properties, organs, and faculties have within them act (*entelécheia*) and potency (*dúnamis*).

¹ Comunicación en el Congreso Internacional “¿Una Sociedad Despersonalizada? Propuestas Educativas”, de la Universitat Abat Oliba CEU (Barcelona, 13-15 de abril de 2010). Translated by Hugh McDonald.

² “Hence it is evident that the state is a creation of nature, and that man is by nature a political animal. And he who by nature and not by mere accident is without a state, is either a bad man or above humanity; he is like the “Tribeless, lawless, hearthless one” whom Homer denounces; the natural outcast is forwith a lover of war; he may be compared to an isolated piece at draughts.”, Aristotle, *Politics* 1.1.9.



Man is a substance and contains potential elements, beginning with the vegetative level, and all the way to the spiritual level. When we come into the world we have feet for walking, but we do not know how to walk; we have eyes for seeing, but we do not know what is worth looking at; we have the reason for understanding, but understand little. Our organs and faculties do not develop spontaneously by nature.

In order to develop, they need a human environment, first of all the family, and then social circles of various sizes, including schools. The human being needs society in order to survive as a substance and to develop his potentialities. Society tries to meet man's needs here, and so society is natural for man because it tries to meet the needs of human nature.

Despite the close connection between the human individual and society, the individual remains distinct in being. This is described in Greek by the term *choristós*, and in Latin by the term *transcendentia*. Man needs society, but remains a substance. His need for society appears at the level of the actualization of various potentialities, not at the level of substance.

Society is not an abstraction, a new being, or a new substance. Society consists in relations between human beings. These relations are the different ways in which human beings have reference to each other. This system of relations takes on an institutionalized form based on the codification of positive law.

Interhuman relations are determined by justice in society. In a mature society, justice takes three forms: commutative, distributive, and legal justice. Commutative justice applies to the individual relations between the members of society. Distributive justice applies to what the state owes to the individual, and legal justice applies to what the individual owes to the state. These three forms of justice together build up a mature society in which all relations and obligations are arranged in harmony.

What is the significance of the conception of the person here? What does it mean for a society to be personalistic? These questions are key in defining the relation between the individual and society.

It is a question of determining why an individual is transcendent to society. Why does the individual, who is subordinate by virtue of many relations to society, exceed society? The person transcends society because the person is a substance, a subject who is immaterial and spiritual. As a substance, the person cannot be completely subordinated to mere accidents, and relations are accidents. Society is a relation or a set of relations.

As an immaterial subject, the person is open by nature to persisting in existence regardless of biological death. As one who possesses a separate and distinct existence, the person retains his own identity and distinctness in relation to all other beings.

This conception of the person first appeared in the work of Thomas Aquinas. Aristotle rightly showed that the human being is a substance (*ousia*), but Aristotle had problems with establishing how the soul or form was related to the mind or intellect, and so there was some uncertainty concerning the unity of the human being. Moreover, if the mind transcended the body, the result of individuation would seem to disappear. Such a mind might be universal and divine, but not human. As we know, Arab philosophy interpreted Aristotle's philosophy in this way. For this reason, St. Thomas Aquinas' analyses of the soul as the form of the body as a subject that exists by separate and unique existence allowed him to develop a conception of man as a person conceived of in integral terms. Despite his



many and various obligations, man transcends the entire world of nature and society.³ Therefore if society is going to be human it must be organized to respect the individual distinctness of each human being, and society must be organized so that the personal development of the human being will be the supreme purpose.

This first purpose is called the common good. Since personal development consists in spiritual development, the common good as a spiritual good must be the personal good of each individual in a way that precludes conflict. A million persons cannot go where they want in one car, but a million persons can listen to one lecture on philosophy, or enjoy one concert of Chopin's music, or think about the same philosophical truth. For this reason, culture must be a common personal good. Culture is an end, while material goods are merely means and not ends. A society organized as described is a personalistic society.

When does a society undergo depersonalization or move off the path of personalism? This occurs when the substantial distinctness of each human being is denied or ignored, and when the transcendental dimension of our being is denied. This occurs when society is organized without consideration of man's specific character as a personal being. How can we learn, then, who man is?

For the first civilizations such as the Egyptians, mythology and religion supplied the fundamental ideas for society. In mythology they could find a reason why the pharaoh was the sole subject in society, because the pharaoh was above society. The pharaoh was above society because he was closer to the gods, or even a god in his own right. The entire society lived and worked for the sake of a god, namely the pharaoh. The entire society gained immortality by the immortality of the pharaoh, and the entire society build a pyramid as his tomb. This tradition was justified by mythology. It would be hard to call the society of ancient Egypt personalistic.

The principles upon which the western societies have been build look to philosophy and theology. Mythology was discredited by philosophy and by theology. What sorts of philosophy and what sorts of theology favor or hinder the construction of a personalistic society? Philosophy played a key role, because theology in the interpretation of the data of revelation looks to philosophy. The type of theology we have depends on our philosophy.

In modern times the two most influential philosophical conceptions of society, liberalism and socialism, have come into conflict. Liberalism speaks of the individuality of the human being, while socialism speaks of society. How do these two theories relate to personalism?

Liberalism would seem to be much closer than socialism to the ideal of personalism. Socialism makes the individual into a part of society, and regards society as a more fundamental being. Hegel, whose philosophy underlies socialist ideology, states directly that society is a substance, while man is merely a function of society.⁴ Man as a "function of society" is a relational being, and that is the feeblest category of being. Such a conception of man cannot be the foundation for a personalistic society, but indeed it serves as the basis for the construction of a completely totalitarian society. In totalitarianism (from *toto*, as in the Italian system with Mussolini), the state is the whole, and the human being must exist entirely as a function for the state. Apart from the state, outside the state, or after death, the human being has nothing for himself, is simply nothing. Socialism must lead to nihilism.

³ Mieczyslaw A. Krapiec (1983). *I – Man. An Outline of Philosophical Anthropology*. New Haven, Connecticut: Mariel Publications, p. 326-333.

⁴ Hegel (1817). *Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences*, § 539.



What is the status of the individual in liberalism? There are many varieties of liberalism, but they share fundamental assumptions about man's nature. We should remember that liberalism arose in a Protestant milieu that was heir to a certain conception of philosophy and a certain conception of theology. The philosophy they inherited was voluntarism and nominalism. Voluntarism puts the will before the reason, and treats the will as the most important faculty in the human being. Nominalism takes from the reason its ability to learn about the natures (or essences) of things. At this point one must wonder whether a being whose reason is so feeble could be called a person? When the will is put in first place, how can the will be advised in its choices if there is little help from the reason? Liberalism seems to work with a defective vision of man that cannot match the conception of man as a person. Man as a person must be a complete being to be a person.⁵ In liberalism man is an incomplete being.

Liberalism starts from a conception of man and society that is not based on facts or reality, but from a state of nature that cannot be real at all. The state of nature to which John Locke referred was an imaginary state formulated on the basis of religion. Locke says that it was a state "of complete freedom in action, and in the management of their own estates and persons, as they regard as proper within the limits of the law of nature, not asking anyone for permission, without dependence on the will of another man".⁶ However, such a state of nature would seem to belong to the distant past, or at present it would pertain only to the rulers of independent governments.⁷ As members of society not all human beings are equal; the many are subject to the one who is their ruler.

Freedom in the state of nature, limited only by the law of nature, belongs to one person in the state, to the ruler alone. The other members of society are subject to the law of nature and to the positive law.⁸

Although in the starting point he speaks of the state of nature as the state of all human beings, that was in the time of Adam, because society as it is now, as political society, does not possess such equality. In political society, it is necessary that "each of its members relinquish his natural power and place it in the hands of the community ..."⁹ In this way, society as it really is at present, as opposed to an imaginary or mythical society, is composed of individuals who do not have power of themselves. Although they may freely relinquish that power, in a way they must relinquish it voluntary to the king or government.

Locke introduces limitations to political authority in the form of the natural law, but his exposition of the natural law is in terms of liberalism. He does not speak of the natural law in a classical sense such as Cicero articulated, and Christian culture after him.

Cicero spoke of the natural law as following from fundamental inclinations, and he included under it the right to life, the right to a family, and the right to truth.¹⁰ Locke mentioned the right to life, but he mentioned the right to freedom in the second place, and the right to property in the third place. In Locke's conception of the natural law, the family and the truth

⁵ M. A. Krąpiec, *I – Man*, p. 326-333.

⁶ J. Locke, *Two Treatises on Government*, II, 2.4.

⁷ *Ibid.* II, 2, 14.

⁸ *Ibid.* II, 4. 22.

⁹ *Ibid.*, II, 7, 87.

¹⁰ Cicero, *De officiis*, 1, 4, 11-14.



were lost, and it is a different conception. In it there is the danger that the authority possessed by the government may become absolute, because the government possesses the real power.

In this way, a society that is really and presently organized in a liberalistic way can become a depersonalized society in which only the king or government is sovereign, but the citizens have no sovereignty.

It should not surprise us that although liberalism in its starting point differs from socialism, it can easily end in socialism, because the government that rules the state becomes the actual sovereign. In the various strains of liberalism and socialism, the sovereignty of the human person as a person is lost.

In order to determine man's status as a person, we must resort to metaphysics, but Locke had the lowest possible opinion of metaphysics. He said that metaphysical judgments concerning substance, man, animals, form, the soul, vegetative life, sensory life, and rational life, were dubious and did not allow us to assert what the soul was.¹¹ Locke's anti-metaphysical skepticism was rooted in his nominalism and sensualism; not only was the reason as a cognitive faculty downgraded, but the conception of man was downgraded.

What is man, if he is not a substance and does not possess a soul? Only in metaphysics do we study substance as substance and the soul as the form of the being that is man.

Locke could not formulate a personalistic conception of society if he did not possess a personalistic conception of man. If he used the word "person" it was in a legal sense, and not in a philosophical sense.

Nor do we find a personalistic conception of man in the other founding fathers of liberalism, such as Hume. It is substance as that most important category of being that allows the human individual to retain his distinctness and transcendence and so to be a person, despite his many relations to society, and his dependence on society. Otherwise, the use of the term "person" would be of secondary importance, and even wrong. We must remember that the founders of liberalism had a very feeble philosophical education, and a feeble grounding in metaphysics in particular. That education was limited to what was called scholastic philosophy, in particular scholasticism in the version of Duns Scotus.

To sum up. The depersonalization of western society has proceeded on two tracks. The first track is liberalism, and the second is socialism. Both are connected in their opposition to personalism, which has its foundations in classical realistic metaphysics. At present the next phase is postmodernism, which attacks in many ways the concept of rationality, the abilities of the reason, and the category of substance. As a result, the image of man is the total destruction of substance, of identity, of the soul, and of reason. In such a view there is no more place for human being as a person, with all its negative consequences leading to global post-totalitarianism.

¹¹ "By this method one may make demonstrations and undoubted propositions in words, and yet thereby advance not one jot in the knowledge of the truth of things: v. g. he that having learnt these following words, with their ordinary mutual relative acceptations annexed to them; v. g. SUBSTANCE, MAN, ANIMAL, FORM, SOUL, VEGETATIVE, SENSITIVE, RATIONAL, may make several undoubted propositions about the soul, without knowing at all what the soul really is: and of this sort, a man may find an infinite number of propositions, reasonings, and conclusions, in books of metaphysics, school-divinity, and some sort of natural philosophy; and, after all, know as little of God, spirits, or bodies, as he did before he set out". J. Locke (1690). *An Essay on Human Understanding*, 4.8, 9.



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If we consider all the above, how do the new educational proposals look? In education we must return to classical philosophy. The drama of our time is that the so-called intellectual elite, including those who work in universities, journalists, and politicians, graduate from university without having received the classical education that the classical gymnasium schools traditionally offered, and without knowing the philosophical foundations of science and culture.

Greek and Latin have been banished from the curriculum, and so graduates no longer have the key to understanding the sources of western culture. They no longer know the canon of master works that begins with Homer. Education has changed into purely professional preparation and a matter of forming social behavior. A man who is reduced to his profession and his "social behavior" is completely immersed in society and cannot be a subject or a person. The ancient Greeks discovered that a man needs more than professional preparation; he needs to be formed in culture. That formation was called *paideia* in Greek, and the Romans later called it *humanitas*. That kind of education proceeded through the liberal arts, or *artes liberales*, and culminated in philosophy. In Christian times theology was added at the summit. The reason for it all was so that a man could be fulfilled as a man, one involved in a series of relations to the world and society, but ultimately open to personal union with God.

The liberal arts and classical philosophy are the foundations for restoring a personalistic society. Culture is to be found in them, and culture helps man to develop the practical knowledge of how to be a man, but it also allows us to understand what it means to be a person. Without the liberal arts and classical philosophy, we are doomed to a depersonalized society, even if the word "person" is repeated often.

However, when people speak of a "person" they are not thinking of a way to be a man, but are thinking only of an element of various social relations.

Meanwhile, every man is a subject and substance, and is also a real sovereign. Education should provide man with the ability to develop his sovereignty, so that he can understand reality and contemplate it, so he can see real beauty and admire it. The sum of the transcendental is fulfilled in God, and therefore man's purpose must ultimately be sanctity. That will be a society and a culture to the measure of man as a personal being. A society which is personalization and not depersonalization of man.

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