

# ENRICHING THE GOOD: TOWARD THE DEVELOPMENT OF A RELATIONAL ANTHROPOLOGY

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“The common good . . . is not merely an object of desire, but a way of being—specifically, a paradoxical unity of giving and receiving.”



According to Pope Benedict XVI, one of the root issues of which many of the problems *Caritas in veritate* explores are symptoms is an essentially individualistic interpretation of the person. In section 53, at the beginning of chapter 5 on “The Cooperation of the Human Family,” he states that “[o]ne of the deepest forms of poverty a person can experience is isolation” (CV, 53). But in addition to being a kind of poverty in itself, Benedict points to isolation as one of the causes of poverty in its most obvious sense, i.e., material poverty: “If we look closely at other kinds of poverty, including material forms, we see that they are born from isolation, from not being loved, or from difficulties in being able to love.” In this context, he does not present an explicit argument for this causal relation, although one can gather a sense of their connection from the convergence of themes in the encyclical more generally. For a particular argument in this regard, which captures the spirit of the Holy Father’s point, we could turn to one of the most insightful

critics of modernity, namely, Hegel, who argued that poverty is an essentially modern problem because it has arisen from the separation of the individual from the roots that provide a life-giving order—specifically, the family and the concentric circles of the communities to which he belongs.<sup>1</sup>

After identifying this core problem, Benedict makes the case that Christian revelation provides a unique response insofar as it has made known the particular reality of the person, and specifically the person as a unique individual who at the same time is intrinsically related to others (cf. *CV*, 54). The revelation of the Trinity is the paradigm here: the Persons, he says, are irreducibly distinct, but because they are “pure relationality” their distinctiveness does not compromise God’s absolute unity; instead, it ensures that unity. The Trinity reveals the simultaneity of unity and distinctness which Benedict takes to be the (infinitely transcendent) model of proper human community.<sup>2</sup> Benedict also believes, however, that the relational character of personhood has been insufficiently developed even in Christian thought up to this point, and so calls for a “metaphysical interpretation of the ‘humanum’ in which relationality is an essential element” (*CV*, 55).

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<sup>1</sup>Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, trans. Allen Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), §§240–45. Hegel explains the remark that poverty is essentially a modern problem in his 1819–20 lectures, cited on pp. 453–54. See the excellent discussion of the problem of poverty in Hegel in Shlomo Avineri, *Hegel’s Theory of the Modern State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 141–54.

<sup>2</sup>*CV*, 54: “The Trinity is absolute unity insofar as the three divine Persons are pure relationality. The reciprocal transparency among the divine Persons is total and the bond between each of them complete, since they constitute a unique and absolute unity. God desires to incorporate us into this reality of communion as well: ‘that they may be one even as we are one’ (Jn 17:22). The Church is a sign and instrument of this unity. Relationships between human beings throughout history cannot but be enriched by reference to this divine model. In particular, *in the light of the revealed mystery of the Trinity*, we understand that true openness does not mean loss of individual identity but profound interpenetration. This also emerges from the common human experiences of love and truth. Just as the sacramental love of spouses unites them spiritually in ‘one flesh’ (Gn 2:24; Mt 19:5; Eph 5:31) and makes out of the two a real and relational unity, so in an analogous way truth unites spirits and causes them to think in unison, attracting them as a unity to itself.”

In this brief paper, I wish to suggest that an essential part of this interpretation will involve a reflection specifically on the nature of the “goodness” of the common good that lies at the foundation of all human community. My thesis is that we tend to assume an impoverished notion of what goodness is, metaphysically speaking, and that this reduction is connected with our tendency to think of persons in individualistic terms. I wish to propose, accordingly, that our notion of the good needs to be “enriched” if we are to overcome individualism. In what follows I will first suggest why a metaphysical interpretation of personal relationality requires a reflection on the meaning of goodness (section I). Second, I will present the two steps that I am claiming are required in enriching our understanding of this meaning. Step one will be to argue *for* a specifically “metaphysical” notion of the good and *against* a common tendency to reduce the common good to a collection of individual goods, which is connected with a kind of materialism, or better, a rejection of the transcendent character of goodness (section II). Step two will be to suggest that even a transcendent notion of goodness will tend toward individualism unless we interpret it as more than just a final cause, but at the same time in terms of efficient and formal causality (section III).

### I. Goodness and human being-with

According to the classical tradition, both pagan and Christian, all human beings desire happiness, which means all human beings desire those particular things that bring human being to its proper completion, those things to which human being is naturally ordered. We call these things “goods.” This fundamental desire lies at the basis of every single human action without exception.<sup>3</sup> It is this innate order that leads Aquinas to say that man knows God implicitly in every cognitive act and wills God implicitly in every volitional act.<sup>4</sup> Because we pursue ultimate goodness in every particular good that defines our particular acts, it is evident that *what* we take the ultimate good *to be*—i.e., how we determine the nature

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<sup>3</sup>See, for example, Plato, *Republic*, 505e, and *Symposium*, 205e-206a.

<sup>4</sup>Aquinas, *De veritate*, 22.1.

of its goodness—will lend a particular quality to all of those acts in which it is analogously pursued. In this regard, what best defines a person’s general character, his general way of being in the world, is what he takes to be most ultimately good. Plato famously distinguished essential types of human beings in just this way, characterizing people according to what he took to be the most basic kinds of goods: one is either essentially a lover of money, a lover of honor, or a lover of wisdom.

If all human action is defined according to a particular conception of the good, then *joint* human action is defined according to a particular conception of the *common good*, that is, the type of good that is pursued essentially by human co-operation. Thus, all human being-*with*, that is, all human community, rests on a particular conception of the common good, and the quality of that community will follow from the quality of the good that is taken to be common. If this is true, then insofar as human “relationality” means community or common life, it follows that a metaphysical interpretation of the humanum in which relationality is an essential element requires a reflection on the nature of goodness. To be sure, such a reflection is not, by itself, sufficient to accomplish the desideratum that Benedict proposes; one would also need to explore, for example, the status of relationality in terms of the distinction between substance and accidents, act and potency, and *esse* and essence. Nevertheless, to the extent that goodness is a transcendental “property,” which names the relation between being and its most basic “other,” i.e., the soul, according to the order of the will,<sup>5</sup> and so names human relation in its most basic possible sense, an inquiry into goodness will cast an indispensable light on this more directly metaphysical exploration. The following aims simply to open up space for this light; future studies will be necessary to work out the essential details.

## *II. Common goodness and community*

To say it once again, if we wish to overcome individualism, we need to affirm a notion of the good that is wholly common, that is, a notion that implies relationality by its very essence. I suggest that this requires that we enrich our typical notion of the good in

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<sup>5</sup>See Aquinas, *De veritate*, 1.1.

two steps, which we will take in this and the following section. First, we must give priority to a specifically *transcendent* notion of goodness. Genuine community can be founded only on the sort of good that can be shared, which means that it can be “possessed” by more than one individual at the same time. What this means becomes clear when we consider contrary examples. There are kinds of goods that cannot belong to more than one by nature and therefore cannot *unite*. To start simply, material goods are almost all essentially of this sort. We can share a pie only by dividing it; the slice you consume will henceforward never nourish me. A very large pie could fill a very large group of people, but it still represents a so-called “zero-sum game,” a good that implies competition by its very nature. Money, though not strictly material, exhibits the same qualities as material goods: we might think of it as an effective symbol of materiality, insofar as it represents “purchasing power,” a certain quantity of goods.<sup>6</sup> In any event, it too cannot be shared except by being divided, so that for me to have more money—and indeed, for money to have any value at all—requires that others have less.

But it is not only material goods that have this quality. Plato thought that honor was ambiguous in this regard. Interpreted in relation to a higher type of good (which we will discuss in a moment), it can serve to unite; but insofar as honor is interpreted in the manner of material goods, as a sort of extension of them, it pits people against one another: the “honor” of my success is cheapened if there aren’t any who have failed. Plato associated this sort of honor with “pleonexia,” which is greed, not in the sense of wanting to have, but precisely in the sense of wanting to have *more than others*.<sup>7</sup> Thomas Hobbes famously characterized the state of nature as a “war of all against all,” and the civil state as an artificial check to this innate hostility. But it is important to see that Hobbes’ judgment regarding anthropology and political order reflects a more fundamental metaphysical judgment. According to him, there are only two basic types of goods, corresponding to man’s two-fold condition

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<sup>6</sup>For an elaboration of this point, see my “Why Socrates Didn’t Charge: Plato and the Metaphysics of Money,” *Communio: International Catholic Review* 36 (Fall 2009): 394–426.

<sup>7</sup>πλεονεξία, from πλεονάζω, is based on πολύς, meaning “many,” or “more.”

of being a composite of body and soul: gain and glory.<sup>8</sup> Insofar as these are the only possible types of goods, it is in fact *strictly impossible* to have human community, because there is no reality on which it could be based, no “foothold” there to offer one a way out beyond individualistic self-interest.

The same situation holds, though more subtly, in what appears to be the reciprocal benefits of a contractual relation (and so of community conceived along the lines of a “social contract”). This would seem to be the opposite of the “war of all against all” conception of essentially divisive goods, which necessarily implies “*anti-operation*,” because here we have a *co-operation* that results from the interdependence of goods. I require you to achieve my good, and you do the same. There are three problems with this conception, however, which we simply note here, for lack of space to work them out sufficiently. What we have in the case of a social contract is not a common good, but a coincidence of individual goods. In the first place, this means that the *co-operation* is not *essential* to the two who are merely contractually bound, but only accidental, which means in turn that the relationship can succeed only to the extent that it is externally enforced: if I happen to need you to achieve my interest, which is not essentially united with yours, the consistent pursuit of my interest will incline me merely to “appear” to fulfill my side of the bargain precisely to the extent that I can do so without detection. (To object that no normal human being acts this way is just to concede that people as a rule acknowledge goods that transcend the form of a contract—at the very least, the good of justice, for the sake of which one adheres to the contract.) Second, it means that the other can be only an instrument of my individual fulfillment: I don’t see the good of the other as intrinsic to my own good, but merely as extrinsic to it, even if I accept that in the contractually established relation I cannot separate these goods. And, third, this implies that the individuals remain simply separate individuals, no matter how necessary they

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<sup>8</sup>“Now whatsoever seemes good, is pleasant, and relates either to the senses or the mind, but all the mindes pleasure is either Glory, (or to have a good opinion of ones selfe) or referres to Glory in the end; the rest are Sensuall, or conducing to sensuality, which may all be comprehended under the word Conveniencies. All Society therefore is either for Gain, or for Glory; (i.e.) Not so much for love of our Fellowes, as for love of our Selves” (Hobbes, *Philosophicall Elements of a True Citizen*, chapter 1, section II).

may be to one another; no genuine community is achieved. We might consider, here, the contrasting example of marriage as Hegel describes it: marriage cannot be a mere “contract,” because, although the people are separate individuals prior to taking vows, the result of their taking them is that they become members of a whole, which implies what we might describe as a metaphysical transformation.<sup>9</sup> Benedict himself points to marriage as a paradigm of community, and moreover notes that it is precisely the good of *truth* (beyond gain and glory) that enables a profound unity.<sup>10</sup>

Indeed, the possibility of genuine community depends on the existence of goods that have a reality that transcends their relativity to individuals, or in other words are able to be possessed by many at once. A common good is more than a sum of individual goods; even though it is a good *for* individuals, it is good for them precisely as universal.<sup>11</sup> Thomas Aquinas draws a distinction between the will, which is a rational appetite, and the sensible appetite, on the basis of the nature of the object desired: while in general the appetites are “passive powers” moved by individual things existing outside the soul, the sensible appetite tends to them specifically in their individuality, while the will “tends to them as standing under the universal; as when it desires something because it is good.”<sup>12</sup> It is of course still a *good* that moves the sensible appetite, but it is not “goodness” per se; instead, it is goodness only in a particular respect, only relative to some further end (i.e., consumption or use). The proper object of the rational appetite, by contrast, is the good pursued as grasped by *reason*, which is the good *qua* good, the good in itself and independently of its consequences. In other words, it is goodness *in its truth*. If I pursue a good, not (merely) because I like it or want it or need it or find it useful, but simply because it is good, in that act I transcend myself in my individuality and so open to others in an *intrinsic* way: we can *actually be with* each other only

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<sup>9</sup>Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, §163, Anmerkung.

<sup>10</sup>“Just as the sacramental love of spouses unites them spiritually in ‘one flesh’ (Gn 2:24; Mt 19:5; Eph 5:31) and makes out of the two a real and relational unity, so in an analogous way truth unites spirits and causes them to think in unison, attracting them as a unity to itself” (CV, 54).

<sup>11</sup>On this point, see Charles de Koninck, *On the Primacy of the Common Good, Against the Personalists*, in *The Aquinas Review* 4, no. 1 (1997): 11–131, here: 16–17.

<sup>12</sup>Aquinas, *ST* 1.81.2ad2.

on the basis of a good that transcends us both; indeed, if I positively exclude others in my possession of that good, I no longer possess it *qua* good but in a merely relative way. According to Augustine,

A man's possession of goodness is in no way diminished by the arrival, or the continuance, of a sharer in it; indeed, goodness is a possession enjoyed more widely by the united affection of partners in that possession in proportion to the harmony that exists among them. In fact, anyone who refuses to enjoy this possession in partnership will not enjoy it at all; and he will find that he possesses it in ampler measure in proportion to his ability to love his partner in it.<sup>13</sup>

The common good is not necessarily a different thing from an individual good, but rather what we might describe as a more profound way of representing any good, whatever it might be. The key question is whether we take something as good in itself, as true, or we functionalize it or otherwise relativize it to something particular. To illustrate this point, let us consider some concrete examples. Education could be understood in different ways, and whether it counts as a common good—i.e., whether it serves genuinely to found community—depends on the precise way in which it is understood. If we promote it as a *common good* in the strict sense, it means that there is something intrinsically good about an educated human being; that education means the flourishing of humanity, which means that it allows the *truth* of humanity to be actualized; and that this truth has no need for anything beyond itself to justify itself as worthy of pursuit. If, by contrast, we think of education as training for some profession, as a means of acquiring the knowledge and skills necessary to live a successful life, and so forth, then even if we seek to make education available to as many human beings as possible, we are not in fact promoting it as a common good. To deny it this character, of course, does not imply that education so conceived is therefore an evil, but it does mean that we need to think of it differently if we are to have a *community*, such as Benedict has in mind in *Caritas in veritate*.

A public park would be an example one might offer of a common good, since it represents something that is not possessed by

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<sup>13</sup>Augustine, *City of God*, trans. Henry Bettenson (New York: Penguin Books, 1984), bk. XV, ch. 5, p. 601. Cf. Aquinas, *De caritate*, 2c.



any individual, but rather by the community as a whole. This is true, and the existence of such things generally contributes in profound ways to the unity of a neighborhood, i.e., the flourishing of relationality. But the way a park is used has some bearing on whether it in fact realizes common goodness in the manner we are describing. To be common, it must be first of all simply *enjoyed*, in which case it becomes a place wherein other gratuitous goods are also enjoyed, such as friendship—and it is the nature of a park to encourage just such enjoyment. But it is in principle possible to conceive of individuals turning the park into a merely instrumental good and therefore a mere accidental coincidence of private goods: a place to do one’s morning jog without having to dodge traffic. In this case, there could be many morning joggers in the park at the same time, but this does not thereby make the park a common good.

Given our cultural climate, we almost cannot help but reduce the common good to some collectivist form. To take a final, provocative example, we might consider the arguments typically offered against the legal recognition of same-sex marriage. The state’s “compelling interest” is explained in terms of the material harm to individuals, in this case, above all the children. This is a consequentialist argument. It may be true, and its truth may be crucially important, but it is not, strictly speaking, an argument about the common good, at least as it is generally framed. To become such, the argument would have to reject same-sex marriage in the first place because it betrays the truth of human sexuality, regardless of the implications of that truth. If one were to object that an argument of this sort does not carry weight, one is conceding that truth is less significant to human beings than material well-being. If one were to add that such an argument simply cannot be made in our society, one is actually saying that we do not *have* a society: a society, understood as a human community, can be founded only on the common good, and if a “society” restricts appeal at best to a collection of individual goods, it is denying the one thing that makes it possible.

There are two paradoxes that emerge from this conception of the common good, which are worth pointing out before concluding this section. First, while it may initially seem that the distinction between individual goods and common goods corresponds roughly to the distinction between material and spiritual (or intellectual) goods, the reality turns out to be more complex: one

can affirm material goods primarily as *true* in a manner that gives them a genuinely universal significance, and one can affirm spiritual goods primarily for the sake of their consequences, which eclipses their inherent universality. So, for example, G. K. Chesterton affirms a material good—in this case, long hair—as an absolute truth, so absolute it is worth laying down one’s life for, or at the very least worth restructuring social order. The passage is worth quoting in full because it is simply wonderful. Against the proposal that the hair of poor children be routinely cut short in order to prevent the spreading of lice, he writes:

Now the whole parable and purpose of these last pages, and indeed of all these pages, is this: to assert that we must instantly begin all over again, and begin at the other end. I begin with a little girl’s hair. That I know is a good thing at any rate. Whatever else is evil, the pride of a good mother in the beauty of her daughter is good. It is one of those adamantine tendernesses which are the touchstones of every age and race. If other things are against it, other things must go down. If landlords and laws and sciences are against it, landlords and laws and sciences must go down. With the red hair of one she-urchin in the gutter I will set fire to all modern civilization. Because a girl should have long hair, she should have clean hair; because she should have clean hair, she should not have an unclean home: because she should not have an unclean home, she should have a free and leisured mother; because she should have a free mother, she should not have an usurious landlord; because there should not be an usurious landlord, there should be a redistribution of property; because there should be a redistribution of property, there shall be a revolution. That little urchin with the gold-red hair, whom I have just watched toddling past my house, she shall not be lopped and lamed and altered; her hair shall not be cut short like a convict’s; no, all the kingdoms of the earth shall be hacked about and mutilated to suit her. She is the human and sacred image; all around her the social fabric shall sway and split and fall; the pillars of society shall be shaken, and the roofs of ages come rushing down, and not one hair of her head shall be harmed.<sup>14</sup>

By contrast, one can treat truth itself as primarily *useful*, whether it be reduced to its technological implications (“knowledge is power”),

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<sup>14</sup>G. K. Chesterton, *What’s Wrong With the World* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1994), part 5, section V: “Conclusion.”

a means of holding society together,<sup>15</sup> or a weapon to combat the ignorant. In this case, it becomes something we possess rather than what possesses us precisely because it transcends us and *only thereby* unites us. (On this score, the phrase “intellectual property,” taken literally, represents the triumph of the bourgeois and so the end of civilization.) The second paradox is that a truly common good may be something possessed by only one, while something else may be possessed by everyone and still remain an individual good. As an example of the former, we may look again at the little girl’s red hair in the service of which Chesterton pledges his life. As an example of the latter, we may look at our public highways: these are “for” everyone, and do not diminish in any obvious way by any individual’s use (though admittedly in the long run they most certainly do), and yet they are essentially *functional*, which means they exist to allow individuals to accomplish their individual ends.

In a word, one cannot promote community without promoting goodness in its highest sense, and this means not only promoting what are called “values” but a deepening of understanding, or rather, the ordering of the soul to the truth of the good.

### III. Enriching the causality of the good

In this last section, I would like to suggest that sustaining a genuinely transcendent notion of the good requires recovering a dimension of the Platonic tradition that has been neglected, and to offer a brief explanation of why I make this suggestion. We have argued that a radically relational concept of the person, which Benedict calls for as a response to modern poverty, depends in part on a rich notion of the good that lies at the basis of all human relations. In the passage we quoted from the *City of God*, Augustine asserted that the possession of true goodness *includes* a communion in possession. It seems to me that this can be affirmed only if we think of goodness not exclusively in terms of final causality, which is a tendency in the Aristotelian tradition, but rather also in terms of efficient and formal causality. A full reflection on why this is so would require a great deal more space than the present context

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<sup>15</sup>On this, see Robert Spaemann, *Der Ursprung der Soziologie aus dem Geist der Restauration. Studien über L.G.A. de Bonald* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1998).

permits, so we will offer here just a sketch in anticipation of a longer argument.

In a nutshell, if I think of goodness *exclusively* as a final cause, and therefore simply as something toward which I strive—i.e., as the object of my desire—it would be possible for me to affirm the good as transcendent and universal and still define it in relative terms as the perfection of my individual being. For example, one could affirm union with God, the supreme good, as truly universal, and yet conceive of it, in relation to me, as my individual vision. Here we would have something like watching a movie on an international flight, projected onto individual screens on the back of chairs. I know that others are watching the movie with me, and that may even be a fact of crucial importance to me, and yet I am still enjoying this good privately.<sup>16</sup> In other words, one can take the universality of the good to be true, and rejoice in some sense in that truth, and yet consider the commonness of the good accidental to the goodness for me.<sup>17</sup> While Aristotle distinguishes between goodness in itself and goodness in its appearance (for me) in his *Metaphysics*,<sup>18</sup> he admits that this distinction is not necessary as far as action is concerned.<sup>19</sup> While a longer argument would be necessary to explain this relation, we may at least propose that this point is connected with his reluctance to admit a genuinely *transcendent* notion of goodness, i.e., a reality of goodness distinct from various

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<sup>16</sup>I am grateful to Adrian Walker for this illustration.

<sup>17</sup>In his illuminating study on the common good cited above, de Koninck nevertheless restricts the import of the universality in precisely the manner being criticized here. After affirming a common goodness shared by others, he explains: “That does not mean that the others are the reason for the love which the common good itself merits; on the contrary, in this formal relationship it is the others which are loveable insofar as they are able to participate in this common good” (de Koninck, *On the Primacy of the Common Good*, 16–17). Surely, my joy dilates, as Augustine said, in actual community; it is not merely the *principle* of communicability that makes the common good supreme. Instead, we must affirm that the others *do* have some “causal” significance in the meaning of goodness. But to see this, I suggest, requires just the expansion of causality that this paper means to propose.

<sup>18</sup>Aristotle distinguishes the apparent good from the real good at *Metaphysics* 12.7.1072a25–30.

<sup>19</sup>See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 8.2.

good things.<sup>20</sup> The Aristotelian tradition tends to define the finality of goodness in terms of the perfective end of secondary actuality (operation): if a being's first actuality is given by the form that determines what it is, the second actuality represents the flourishing of its being.<sup>21</sup> But this conception, which is certainly true even if it is not the whole truth, defines goodness always as relative to individual beings. The good, here, does not enter into the "what" of things, i.e., it does not have any "formal" significance, which is to say that it does not concern the nature of the being of things—and it does not precede their being in any sense, which means it does not have an "efficient" dimension. The result is that goodness has its meaning *posterior* to the meaning of things in themselves. If we, by contrast, admit the efficient and formal dimension of goodness in the manner indicated, then not only is goodness relative to things, but at a more profound level they are relative to *it*. Perhaps it is the lack of this dimension in Aristotle that explains why, having bound himself to a relative and non-transcendent notion of goodness, he thinks of political community in a way that threatens to make it the victim of its own success: the very good that the polis enables one to achieve tends ultimately to set one outside of the polis.<sup>22</sup>

Famously, Plato sent the philosophers, who had transcended the relationality of community in the perfect happiness of contemplation, back into the cave to "share the life" of the prisoners, and he did so precisely on the basis of what made the philosophers

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<sup>20</sup>*Nich. Ethics*, 1.6. This does not at all mean that he denies that the goodness has an *objective* character.

<sup>21</sup>Aristotle explains the distinction between first and second actuality in *De anima*, 2.1.

<sup>22</sup>We see this tension in two places in the *Nichomachean Ethics*: for one, Aristotle admits that one will not wish the best good for one's friend, because the godlikeness that this good implies would undermine the friendship, insofar as friendship requires equality (see *Nich. Ethics*, 8.7). Secondly, at the end of the *Ethics*, Aristotle posits contemplation as the highest end of man, but then admits that, to the extent that man achieves this, he departs from the relationality of political life (*Nich. Ethics*, 10.7–8). In both of these cases, the tension arises from what we might call a "one-way" directionality of goodness, which is another way of describing the exclusivity of final causality. We do not mean to evaluate Aristotle's attempt to resolve the tension here, but only to point out its existence in his thinking on community and the common good.

happy. While not in an immediate way representing the fulfillment of the desire of the individual philosophers, this descent into the cave nevertheless follows from the transcendent nature of the object of that desire and indeed from precisely that which makes it supremely desirable. Thus conceived, the good brings to a perfect unity their finding fulfillment and their generous existence for others. In reply to the objections of his interlocutors that sending the philosophers down would intrude on their happiness, Socrates first says that the point is not the happiness of individuals but the happiness of the whole—i.e., the *common* good—and then adds as an aside that it wouldn't surprise him if they nevertheless turned out to be the happiest of all.<sup>23</sup> To put it in more technical language, for Plato the good is not only the ultimate final cause, it is also efficient and formal, and all of these are due to its transcendent character. As the Platonic tradition affirms, the good is by nature self-diffusive; as Plato originally put it, an absence of “envy” (*φθόνος*) is what is most proper to God understood as good. The absolute good cannot but want to share itself.<sup>24</sup> And because this is the ultimate principle of the *being* of things, *what* they are will be an expression of goodness: generous efficient causality is a communication of *form* (*omne agens agit sibi simile*). Such a conception of the good—as *perfectly causal*, one might say—complexifies one's relationship to it in beautiful ways: goodness makes a claim on me prior to my turning toward *it*; it exceeds my individual possession, so that my desire for it is at the very same time a desire to share it, to give it away, and indeed, insofar as the good concerns my very being (rather than simply representing the goal of my action), it is a desire to give *myself* away . . . and thus discover a profound, if unexpected, fulfillment. In a word, it is a desire to become an image of the good, in its simultaneous attractiveness and generosity.

This description begins to sound rather mystical, or at least metaphysical, and to that extent—or so one might object—no longer political. But this objection, of course, begs the very question we are challenging: it assumes that the type of goods with which politics is concerned are not transcendent. The point of the argument, however, has been that, if they do *not* have this character, then there ultimately *is* no politics, because there is no polis, no

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<sup>23</sup>Plato, *Republic*, 420b.

<sup>24</sup>Plato, *Timaeus*, 29e.

human community. What we have instead is nothing more than the negotiation of power. It is a disturbing comment on our age that the charge that we reduce politics to power negotiations sounds like complaining that water makes one wet. Admittedly, more would have to be said than can be said here about the precise relation between goodness in its metaphysical (and of course ultimately in its theological) sense and its properly political sense, but we may anticipate that, however the details of this elaboration may look, there will necessarily be a genuine analogy between them. The implications of this analogy will require us to re-imagine the nature of political order, the role of the state, and the character of human relations from the ground up, along the lines Benedict XVI sketches out in *CV* in relation to the economic order. What might this entail?

We most often think of the common good simply as that which fulfills the needs of the members of a political order, if not solely in terms of material necessities then nevertheless in terms of individual ones. The point of this paper is to suggest that we need not only to aim at better kinds of goods (i.e., “spiritual” goods rather than mere “consumer” goods), but to think of the goodness of the common good more comprehensively: it is not simply something to pursue together, but something we must *become*; the common good in other words is not merely an object of desire, but a way of being—specifically, a paradoxical unity of giving and receiving, which, in another context, Michael Hanby defined as the essence of *joy*.<sup>25</sup> Let us briefly consider in conclusion three possible ways this shift in perspective might change our thinking. First, we would for example have to recover the classical view of the polis, not merely as a provider of goods and services, along with the protection of those who enjoy them, but as responsible for the “form-ation” of the souls of its citizens. This perspective would of course entail a recovery of the specifically pedagogical meaning of the law, and indeed the primacy of this meaning, and a deepening of our sense of education (affirming the common good entails educating people, and forming people through education is necessary for there to be a

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<sup>25</sup>See Michael Hanby, “The Culture of Death, the Ontology of Boredom, and the Resistance of Joy,” *Communio: International Catholic Review* 31 (Summer 2004): 181–99.

common good).<sup>26</sup> A second possible line of reflection: more concretely, to think of work as a common good in the sense being proposed here would mean not only that we need to provide people with the means of supporting themselves and their families, but that work needs to be something genuinely good and that good work must be available to people because it is good to work: work is a basic human form of “self-diffusion.” Finally, we would be led to think of “wealth” in more comprehensive terms, beyond a mere calculation of the monetary value of material goods, and inclusive of the order of life that allows them in fact to be conceived as “goods” in the first place: wealth is not simply a collection of possessions (or indeed an abstract measurement of their monetary value) but more fundamentally a *way of being*, and specifically, *being good*. A response to the problem of poverty requires, before some sort of redistribution of wealth, more radically a reconception of wealth, and so an “enrichment” of the notion of the good, or it risks reinforcing the individualistic atomism at the root of poverty.

Ultimately, in order to overcome the poverty of individualism, which is a spiritual poverty at the root of material poverty, we must think of the common good in its most transcendent sense, and this entails a recovery of the Platonic understanding of goodness. Because he saw the good as “the beginning, the cohesive power, and the end”—i.e., the first, formal, and final cause—Dionysius the Areopagite understood the profound interconnectedness of all things. The good simultaneously attracts beings to each other, solidifies them in themselves, and moves them to generosity; one and the same good accounts for “the providences of the Superiors, the interdependence of the Co-ordinates, the responses of the Inferiors, the states of permanence wherein all keep their own identity, . . . and . . . the intercommunion of all things according to

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<sup>26</sup>This suggestion is troubling, because we spontaneously object that the state is the very last entity one would want forming souls. There are two responses to this objection: first of all, this proposal troubles us only because we have difficulty thinking of the state in any but the purely functionalist terms of liberalism (a “state” rather than a “polis”). Second, it is arguably inevitable that the state play this role, because in fact it cannot avoid presenting itself in some respect as a comprehensive common good to the extent that it organizes community at all. In this case, because it does not understand itself as responsible for the good of souls, it necessarily forms them irresponsibly.



the power of each.”<sup>27</sup> This is the overcoming of individualism and isolation at the most profound level of being that Benedict had in mind when he framed his encyclical on political economy with a recollection of this deep strand of the Christian tradition, which has nevertheless tended to be forgotten in both metaphysical reflection and political theory: “everything has its origin in God’s love, everything is shaped by it, and everything is directed towards it” (*CV*, 2). This love is the root of all goodness, which is what makes it truly common, a gift for all. □

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<sup>27</sup>Dionysius the Areopagite, *Divine Names*, IV.7 (C.E. Rolt translation).