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Individual and the State versus the
Subsidiary Hierarchy of Heaven

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The Question of Identity

The question of identity haunts us, we inhabitants of the 20th and 21st centuries, underlying all our political excesses and extremes, playing a central role in the culture war tearing us once again asunder. We are adrift in chaos and longing, in the absence of a firm identity, no foundation underfoot, nothing to strive toward, prone in our lacking conscious and unconscious to decomposition and strife.

Something must unite our attention and our action, so that we are integrated, psychologically. Something must unite our interests and endeavours, collectively, so that we can cooperate and compete peacefully, productively, reciprocally, and sustainably. How then should our identity be conceptualised and embodied, practically and ideally? What opportunities beckon, if that question is answered, in an optimal fashion? What pitfalls lurk if we err?

A Dichotomous Scheme – Individual vs the State

The modern and postmodern ages alike were and are characterised by an increasingly simplified and starkly dichotomous notion of human existence and development. The simplest overarching conceptualisation of human identity separates and divides the person into the opposing poles of sovereign individual and faceless automaton of the state.

In doing so, the complex internal hierarchy of the person—all the intrapsychic elements warring within, different motivations, emotions, drives, and impulses; different subordinate physiological, physical, biological, and chemical subsystems; the host of fractious psychological complexes and spirits—are collapsed to the singularity of autonomous liberal man, imbued mysteriously with intrinsic rights, and segregated in essence from any broader social context.

That broader social context is then, likewise, collapsed: couple, family, neighbourhood, workplace, city, province and nation are subsumed into society, or collective, or the state, separate from, antithetical to, or even superordinate above the individual. Those who worship power trumpet the former; those who worship whim elevate the latter. The individual, thus collapsed, is all-too-easily viewed in opposition to the collective, leading those who favour self to view all social bonds as contrary to the call of freedom or even indistinguishable from oppression, while those who favour society view individual existence itself as naught but impediment to the establishment of the utopian collective.

Variations on the Dichotomous Scheme

Narrative and philosophical variations on this dichotomous scheme abound, permeating our culture: we read about, view, and imitate the dramatised individual crushed by the state, the rebel fighting against a tyrannical order, the sacrifice of the personal world for the hypothetically-paradisaic collective.

The hapless protagonist of Franz Kafka's *The Trial*, caught and tortured by a cold bureaucracy, contrasts starkly with Ayn Rand's John Galt, triumphing over the fascist collective in *Atlas Shrugged*. Bertolt Brecht's famous play *The Mother* features a woman divorcing and isolating herself from private life, marriage, and maternal role for revolution in the service of a communist Eden. Modern though such themes may be, and seem, they are also simultaneously extensions of a similarly patterned literary past, stretching far back into the pre-history of self-conscious conceptualisation.

The guardians of the city in Book V of Plato's *Republic* are, for example, made subordinate to the city from the time of their birth, bred first from the best parents, but handed thereafter to the state. All intermediary allegiances, from private ownership to family ties, are abolished, in the service of the singular collective.

The main actors and authors of the European Enlightenment continue developing this story of the war of mutually reinforcing opposites. Thomas Hobbes portrays the individual as a war of competing and fundamentally antisocial and narrowly self-serving drives and desires, made necessarily subordinate to repressive state control. John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, fleshing out the opposite pole, portray the individual as rational, autonomous self-governing actor (Locke)—all good, except insofar as he is corrupted by the state (Rousseau).

Our current metaphysical battles are drawn along similar lines: we are either stalwart, sovereign liberal heroes, sufficient unto ourselves, or hapless victims, parented by the totalising state, aiming for utopia, justifying all means in pursuit of that ultimately glorious end.

The Struggle between Opposing Forces

Even if those terms "individual" and "state" are not well-defined—when the former applies to each person in all contexts at all stages of development and maturity; when the latter is applied without discrimination to any and all levels of organisation transcending the individual—a deep dialectic remains at work. It moves forward in time like a powerful motor, pistons cycling back and forth, driving the machine of modern identity toward ever-greater extremes.

In principle, in the war between the individual and the collective, the duality between state and individual must be bridged or overcome, so that one side or the other emerges triumphant—but this end is illusory. The consequence of the struggle between such opposing forces is not the final victory of either. There is simply no possibility of finally eradicating social being, in consequence of the triumph of an extreme individualism, Ayn Rand notwithstanding. Likewise, there is no reduction of the fact of the individual to a homogenous, idealised state. What transpires instead in consequence of their conflict is not the conquest of one, but the exacerbation of the worst tendencies of both.

How do the opposites feed, nourish, and magnify one another? Any higher identity can be caricatured as nothing but the tyranny of a higher power, from the point of view of the individual—a tyranny which must be overthrown in the service of true liberation. This is true of marriage, family, private enterprise, and religious endeavour; indeed, of any imaginable collective. This is "self-actualisation" in the absence of any true self, a concept sullied by two illusions: first, that anarchy is freedom; second, that the desire for anarchical freedom is something separate from the desperate and self-defeating wish to sacrifice all responsibility for an impulsive, hedonistic, and immature irresponsibility.

From the collectivist standpoint, alternatively, all higher identities can be represented as nothing more than partial and corrupt versions of the ultimate homogenous collective—and, therefore, as impediments to that end, to be suppressed, fragmented, demonised, and otherwise destroyed. The collectivist can tempt the anarchists with the eradication of marriage, offering free love; of family,

offering freedom from mature, adult responsibilities; of work, offering distributed wealth, without effort; of religion, offering freedom from restrictive superstition.

As all the meaning and purpose once contained in those intermediary identities is thus destroyed, allegiance to the state becomes both overwhelmingly tempting and increasingly all-consuming. Untrammelled, irresponsible, narcissistic pleasure-seeking as a precursor to state slavery; shades of *Pinocchio's* Pleasure Island. Force applied too brutally and rigidly on one side of the dialect produces a countervailing and compensatory response on the other. Paradoxically, therefore, a too-extreme insistence on the independence and self-contained autonomy of the individual, freeing himself from religion, family, nation, and other forms of social unity, means that the totalitarian state becomes more, rather than less, likely, as the state expands to occupy all the intermediary roles and responsibilities abandoned by the too-self-concerned individual. In the same way, from the point of view of the state, individuals isolated from each other as much as possible—all allegiance to intermediary identity eradicated—become the welcoming targets of attempts to universalise the collective.

Revelation and Trajectories of Civilisation

The Biblical book of *Revelation* contains several images, relevant in this regard—difficult to understand, as is inevitably the case with dream-like insight—but worth the analytic effort. Many have interpreted that book as a prophetic map of the future, giving rise with such analyses to extreme millennial movements, losing both themselves and their erstwhile followers hopelessly within its mysteries. It is better understood as the representation of a universal pattern, psychological and collective alike: a pattern characterising past and present as much as future.

The Beast and the Whore of Babylon

Two prominent images in the visionary work portray the two possible trajectories of civilisation. The first is a hybrid: a great, seven-headed scarlet beast, with the mother of all prostitutes seated on its back. The beast is civilisation and its leaders, the colour of earth and blood. The false princess or queen is the licentiousness offered by the would-be totalising state to its once-citizens. The beast is a representation of false hierarchy, a living Tower of Babel, the arrogant state/king and its vassals, hell-bent on total subordination, marking everyone witting or unwitting with the mark or the number of the beast.

The great prostitute—the Whore of Babylon—riding on the back of the beast, is the denizen and temptress of the dark alleys, byways, and brothels of the “big city”, the embodiment of the licentiousness of Rome. She is the dissolution of constraint that accompanies atomized individuality, the dissociation of sex from the constraints and guides of tradition. She is the freedom of anonymity in the “universal city”, a whore embodying all the desires, mixtures, deviations, and fetishes characterising those hypothetically freed from all higher-level identities and obligations. She is the total temptation offered by the totalitarian state. Ultimately—ironically and inevitably—the scarlet beast kills the prostitute: the totalising state promises freedom, but kills even desire, let alone its satiation.

The State of Absolute Control

This strange, surreal, and endlessly compelling tale is a vision of warning: the ultimate state, promising the freedom to pursue every conceivable whim, accrues to itself all the power that remains on the table as responsible conduct is abandoned, using that power not to free, but to enslave. The worship of

impulsive idiosyncrasy, and the accompanying destruction of subsidiary structure, invites, enables, and even necessitates the “State of Absolute Control”. Someone, after all, has to pick up the pieces.

This pattern reveals itself when the pendulum swings, and the hedonism of Weimar is transformed into the totalitarian Reich; when the Anarchism of the French Revolution transmutes into centralised Napoleonic empire. This same dynamism ruled during the Covid-19 pandemic, which was, most truly, a plague of authoritarianism. Our individualistic and hypothetically free societies re-organised themselves in a heartbeat into a rigid and comprehensive totalitarianism, with all those who objected demonised, punished, castigated, and excluded. The majority participated with enthusiasm, offered as they were the tantalising opportunity to inform oh-so-moralistically on a neighbour.

It is in such moments that we can see the relationship between the Whore of Babylon in *Revelation*, with all her idiosyncrasy, her easy desire, and the increasingly all-promising state, which can and does all-too-easily metamorphose into its jack-booted and uniformed opposite. The punk rocker or the furry with his loud and pathological impulsive idiosyncrasy and anti-authority individualism could not exist for a moment in the Amazonian jungle. He is the eternal child of the atomised techno-society, the beneficiary and infant of the state as Great Mother and Father—devouring parents, enabling, however temporarily, his narrowly self-serving desires.

The New Jerusalem

The second image of civilisation in the book of *Revelation* is also the final Biblical vision. The manner in which the problem of individual and society finds its resolution in this image is possibly the finest literary example of sophisticated, multi-level identity. The readers of *Revelation* find themselves presented with a great city, the new Jerusalem, a city of peace, descending from Heaven, aligned toward the greatest good, God Himself. The city is established on a mountain, tree and river in the centre, hierarchy of culture and natural world in proper balance. The sun is no longer necessary, for the light of the divine fills the city. There is no competition or conflict there, as all reality is subsumed harmoniously into its roads, alleys, and byways.

It is said of the city: “The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it.” The nations are in no way abolished when the heavenly Jerusalem emerges. They find their proper place, instead, in hierarchical relation to what is by necessity and ideal highest; they serve and make offering or sacrifice to the unquestionable transcendent good, the light by which they most truly see—the light of God above. This may seem obscurely mythological to some, but the image of the heavenly city is in fact the ultimate representation of structured harmony, a vision of the reality that might obtain if the entirety of existence properly found its place, served what is highest, and integrated itself into a transcendent whole.

As the irresponsible and narcissistic individual abandons his allegiance to his intermediary and superordinate identities, and those are undermined and destroyed, level by level, the state grows ever-more powerful. Eventually, even the comprehensive nation-state itself is no longer sufficient to satisfy the appetite of those who worship the collective. Just as Napoleon eliminated provincial dialects and customs so that the all-encompassing French Nation could be imposed, so too today the very notion of France—the very idea of the nation-state itself—is portrayed as something anachronistic, patriarchal, restrictive, and counterproductive; as something that must be overcome and transcended to render the globe stable and sustainable.

Rampant Individualism Drives Collectivist Totalitarianism

This dialectic of rampant individualism driving collectivist totalitarianism occurs most precisely and subtly even where the opposite appears to be both strived for and occurring. Individuals might, for example, attempt to defend their intermediary identities against the impositions of the state.

Thus, people fight to maintain their private clubs, enterprises, and religious institutions and beliefs against higher-order collective strictures by referring to individual rights, such as “freedom of association,” “freedom of conscience,” “freedom of religion,” or “freedom of speech,” not noticing that reference to their autonomous individuality as grounds for validating the existence of those other levels of identity removes any claim such institutions might have to valid existence in their own right, increasing the fragmentation of society, and adding more power to the state (particularly if the state simultaneously claims that those very rights are something merely granted to the individual, by the collective, and possessed of no intrinsic “metaphysical” reality).

Perhaps it was inevitable, in the wake of the Enlightenment vision and the centuries following Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau that we would watch the dialectic intensify and see the slow but persistent erosion of intermediary structures of identity, accompanied by the compensatory expansion of larger and more encompassing bureaucracies, promising to manage the great sea of falsely free individuals, drowning in anonymity, anxiety, and lonely hopelessness.

Technology Accelerates the Atomisation of Individuals

Technology is speeding up this development. More and more, online social media platforms are accessed not by families, or by voluntary associations of any kind, but by atomised individuals, increasingly at the mercy of the top-down dictates of giant corporations, promising originally to democratise the public space and provide everyone with a voice, but soon gathering all manners of highly personal data, encroaching upon the confines of the distributed digital self, and imposing arbitrary and often invisible restrictions on communication that far exceed in their danger anything dreamed up by optimistic pessimists such as Huxley and Orwell.

The government stepped in, with dreadful instantaneity, to regulate whatever the corporations wittingly or unwittingly left free. The consequent authoritarian collusion between private enterprise and state threatening freedom realised itself in a manner simultaneously novel, extensive, and ominous. We saw this possibility on full display during the Covid psychogenic epidemic, when the Global Village predicted by Marshall McLuhan made itself present much more truly in the guise of Global Leviathan.

Censorship, of course, is nothing new. There has always been pressure, marital, familial, and more broadly social, to attend to one thing and not another; pressure to align thoughts, spoken words, and actions alike within the strictures of conventional social acceptability—a pressure which is not self-evidently distinguishable from appropriate socialised conduct itself. Interventions mounting in severity from the odd look or false smile of a friend or family member, through to the withdrawal of the hand of friendship, to public shunning and excommunication, have always been at hand, played their role in guiding people into the middle from the extremes, and have also been misused to compel untruth and force false action.

With the erosion of intermediary social structures, that regulatory role passed to what are in the techno-world often shadowy, collectivist bureaucrats censoring equally anonymous fragmented and sometimes even entirely artificial individual participants. The online platforms and the government

believe it is their role to reign in people's excesses, in the absence of differentiated collective identities, often joining forces (again, invisibly) to do so. This propensity is worsened when such joining and censoring occurs in service of a particular political ideology, as has been the case in the last decades. That is particularly dangerous when that very ideology is also one explicitly aimed at furthering exactly the fragmentation, atomisation, and anonymisation enabled by the technology in question.¹

The Absolute State Subsumes Individual Identity

To say it again: As the Leviathan becomes more and more encompassing—when state-like structures are increasingly understood as the only counterpoint to the individual—the relationships between the two poles will radicalise. The individual will tend towards increasingly idiosyncratic fragmentation, while the state and its corollaries will formulate ways to explicitly envelop everything within it. This “everything” will encompass not only the individuals, and their idiosyncrasies, but the totality of the environment within which those individuals exist. This will of course be justified by the necessity to protect and secure, now and in the future—and to develop “sustainably.”

The ultimate extension of this expansion—the notion that the state could monitor, track, legislate, and control not only the social systems that regulate and govern individual attention and action but the natural systems within which those social systems operate—would have been unthinkable only a generation or two ago. Such ideas are now commonplace to the point of being mandatory.

In a way that seems almost paradoxical at first, it is only in this context of an all-encompassing state that we can understand the politician's declaration of absolute diversity and openness. Recently we have seen statesmen such as Justin Trudeau, the Prime Minister of Canada, insist that his very nation is “post-national.”²

Such a statement is the logical consequence of the proclivity of such leaders to proclaim that inclusivity, diversity, and equity is the replacement social identity. What portrays itself as a universalist compassion at the outset, is in fact the jaws of the Leviathan stretching wide enough to devour everything. To reduce the existence of a nation to diversity and openness is to in time destroy that nation, as diversity without unity can only be decomposition. But our interpretation of the tune changes when we realise we are moving towards a system, a kind of meta-state, where everything is included and where all competing identities, including nations, must be swallowed up.

The globalist struggle is ultimately presented as a fight against intermediary identities such as nation, gender, family, and religion because they present an obstacle to the free individual, but in the final analysis, the “sovereignty of the individual” will be subsumed into the body of the Leviathan by the very processes by which this sovereignty arose, and radical freedom will be transformed into totalitarian control.

Identity Can and Should Be Fractally Interpreted

There is another vision, broadly characteristic of Western thinking, independent of the dichotomous dialectic of individual versus the state, and echoed in many other traditional societies: that of the micro- and macrocosm. This perspective is offered by the early Hermetic and the Neo-Platonic writings. It permeates the Christian mysticism running from St. Paul to Meister Eckhart. Within this tradition, the individual is understood as the active embodiment of and participant in the patterns of the cosmos

itself—even of the God who created that cosmos—instead of a unity in contrast to or competition with the superordinate social order.

When a great mystic like St. Isaac the Syrian declares: “Be zealous to enter the treasury within you; then you will see that which is in heaven. For the former and the latter are one, and, entering, you will see both”,³ he offers more than vague, “spiritual” advice. St. Isaac envisions the individual not as a unity opposed to or in competition with or even regulated, socialised, or constrained by the larger order, but as a mirror, reflecting that higher order, and organised in the same manner.

“As above, so below,” as the hermetic Emerald Tablet has it: identity is fractal, self-similar, organised in many levels, each a reflection of the levels both sub- and super-ordinate. When St. Paul describes the Church as the Body of Christ, he is similarly stepping into this domain of fractal conceptualisation, journeying between macrocosm and microcosm in a manner that is no mere literary trope. When we speak of the head of a city or a company, or of a body of laws, a body politic, or a corporate body we are, like St. Paul, employing this vision of a fractal identity or reality, attempting in that way to describe the very nature of our participation in reality.

Fractal Vision of Identity

Although the ancients spoke dualistically, in a sense, of microcosm and macrocosm, their vision is extended, such that all objects and systems are conceptualised and understood in this manner. All identities are microcosms participating in larger macrocosms, which are, in themselves, microcosms of their own higher participations.

This fractal vision of identity is one not only true of people and their higher-order groups, but of all identities and levels of identity. Everything which can be recognised inevitably consists of subsidiary parts or, at least, multiple characteristics, united in function and goal. Even ordinary “objects” are defined as much by their context, which includes their function, as they are by the sum of their parts.

A drinking glass sitting on a table partakes of the meal of which it is a part, the family sitting down for the meal, the broader concept of hospitality, the more fundamental biological reality that is the human sharing of food (a truly singular rarity in the natural world), and the fact that such sharing is part of a much broader, necessary, and fundamental ethos of reciprocity. The glass is most truly therefore “perceived” in the same manner as the meaning of an essay, chapter, or book: the reader attends, simultaneously to the letters, the words, the phrases, the sentences, the paragraphs, and the entire text, as well as to the relationship between all of those levels and all other forms of knowledge previously integrated and thereby present.

Unity and Multiplicity

This is the case for all perception, which is never of the valueless object. Unity—purposeful essence—and multiplicity define each other. The parts of wholes are building blocks for what they participate in at a higher level, while simultaneously possessing a reality, specific to the level of the part, defined in the same way.

Such nested identity is a cardinal feature of corporate hierarchies, for example. The multiple vice presidents making up such an organisation are all heads of their various departments, reporting and representing them to the superordinate head of the entire enterprise, the CEO. Even the word “corporate,” derived from the Latin *corpus* or *corpor* (body), directly reflects that fractal

conceptualisation: the corporation is a collective body, and is even treated as such by the laws that governs the relationship between individuals, corporations, and the higher-order social structures such as governments within which even the corporations are in principle contained. The inner order of the individual is reflected and mirrored in the surrounding social structures.

Cascade of Fractal Relationships

Such a cascade of fractal relationships is a constant constituent element of our experience. We are all bound into friendships, families, clubs, churches, sports teams, projects, and companies while we participate, simultaneously, in cities, states, and countries. We encounter united multiplicities at every recognisable level of being, all constituting their own united multiplicities.

Unity or identity is not something that happens accidentally within this dynamism of relationship between parts and wholes. It is not a bureaucratic affair, mandated arbitrarily as power from the top down, by fiat, by simple declaration of rules and laws. Nor does it come about by establishing arbitrary borders, or by the mere fact of shared space. Two people in the same territory can be seeing to their private and independent affairs and ignoring each other—even fighting an all-out war against each other. The joint habitation of a given space is not sufficient to confer identity.

Unity comes from sharing a common point of attention, establishing common purpose or goals, sharing a common origin, or embodying a common story. These are vectors of identity. To participate in unity is to sacrifice some aspect of multiplicity to its purpose. It is an exchange of direct, deliberate will and attention between the individual and any collective.

Marking the Collective Identity

Any collective identity must be marked, as well, so that we become capable of attending to its directives and embodying its call to action. This marking is the point of the collective, the direction to which attention is devoted, the destination of the journey, the purpose of effort, the target to which sacrifice is offered, and the moral of the story.

That higher-order purpose—all the superordinate levels of a fractal hierarchy—also serves as judge of the lower levels, as the suitability of those levels is adjudicated in reference to that subsuming goal. Even in our personal experience, it is always necessary, for example, to discriminate a thought or action that allies with and serves the current purpose toward which attention and action is devoted from a temptation or distraction that misleads, diverts, or corrupts.

If I try to organise my stamp collection while I am painting my house, I will do neither properly. A child who wants to play tag is not playing chess. A person playing football will cause chaos if dropped into a basketball game. For similar reasons, a violent criminal must be incarcerated to exclude and marginalise him so that his narrow selfishness ceases to disrupt the broader social harmony of aim, purpose, and function.

Unity as a Common Good

We should understand this unifying point of attention—the identity uniting the multiplicity—as a common good toward which the multiplicity is directed, transforming it into a unity. This Good is not a matter of simply abiding by or conforming to bordering and restricting rules (morality as obedience). It

is instead something more akin to desirable and, optimally, voluntary purpose. This Good, this *telos*, is both a vector of commonality and the arbiter of each participant's inclusion in that commonality.

Thus, the identity of basketball, with its rules, its specific manner of marking a team's progress, performance, and victory, is the reason why a team is a basketball rather than a football team. Simultaneously—and this pertains to the inevitability alignment and accompaniment of judgement with purpose—the same identity will necessarily exclude or marginalise behaviours and people out of line with that game. This will mean that intrinsically less skilled or simply careless or uncommitted players, whose performance in relation to the uniting goal is sub-optimal, will not be allowed to occupy the centre. The same will be true of those whose attention and actions are simply and even necessarily directed elsewhere—toward another game, or entirely chaotically, as it may be. The uniting identity will also necessarily engage its participants in various forms of implicit or explicit ritual: it will share images, and stories, and history, and a name.

The ritual, from the point of the view of the participant, will be the volunteering, agreeing, committing, promising, the swearing of allegiance, the signing of a contract. It can also manifest itself as something initiated by the group: the ritual is then to choose, select, hire, mark, initiate, draft, or name. This is as true for the creation of a team as for a marriage or a business deal. It is also true for birth into a family, a country, or a religious tradition.

Hierarchies and Tracks of Identity

When the process of fractal identities plays itself out, individuals fit into families, and networks of friendships, extant within teams, communities, churches, cultural groups, cities, states, and nations. Some of these identities are state-like and form strict hierarchies (boroughs, for example, existing within cities). Some of them run on parallel tracks, such as sports teams, whether local or national, alongside companies, small and large. These different hierarchies and tracks of identity exist within even larger moral and religious hierarchies of joint attention and communion, which aim at the very highest of human goals.

It is of course possible for subordinate identities to compete with the superior, subsuming structures. If a would-be team member is too undisciplined to participate properly, his false priorities can make it difficult for the team to function. If a team captain is too tyrannical in his demands, likewise, then those who play for him might see that their membership interferes with their roles as friends, husbands, fathers or even moral agents.

Under optimal circumstances, however—with participation voluntary at each level, and the niceties of competition and cooperation properly managed—all the levels at which a given person might maintain and pursue his or her identity can find a desirable balance, minimising anxiety, and maximising hope and its attendant forward-striving motivation.

The Harmony of All Levels of Identity

We moderns tend to believe that such optimality of function is a consequence of freedom from constraint—some individualistic self-actualisation, some “mental health”—conceptualised in an intrinsic liberal manner. But it is much more truly and completely the harmony of all the levels of identity functioning jointly, in mutual support; something much more akin to the music that emerges when all the various levels of an orchestra play together, merging all of their disparate identities towards the uniting commonality of the musical score.

It should be noted, as well, that this way of describing identity is not “the fact of the matter,” either—it is not the same as the physicalist’s cold description of the world, in a flat objective reality, or the clambering over it, like an insect making its way through gravel. It is a set of scaled relationships, culminating in a superordinate covenant. Life is a deal, all the way to the uppermost heights of Jacob’s Ladder; a set of sacrifices, to put it another way, a sequence of if/then propositions, negotiated between the different aspects of the present self, as well as the future self, other people (at all the levels of society), common identities, and the spirit that both governs and permeates the whole.

The “Heavenly Hierarchy” of Goods

Identities and the goods they embody scale down toward oblivion, but upwards, as well, toward higher and higher and more comprehensively optimised modes of being—the pinnacles of attentional hierarchies and priorities of action. It is observation of this “great chain of being,” as it has been called, that has driven philosophers, theologians, and mystics to recognise the commonality and unity of the good itself, and to posit God as the very *Summum Bonum*, the pinnacle or unity of all goods, the Greatest Good and, simultaneously, the ground of being and source of becoming.

It is through such a “heavenly hierarchy” of goods and virtues that Dante ascended in *The Divine Comedy*, rising upward to discover the infinite source of all goods. The Christian Trinity can be formulated in fractal terms, as well: one God, both Eternally One and Eternally Three; the infinite source of the One and the Many. Fractal identity scales from bottom to top; the eternal tree of life, with its roots sunk into the deepest and most invisible microcosmic places and branches extending up into the cosmic heights above. The source of the great tree is by definition God—the source of all patterns, of all attentional prioritisation and of directed action, the standard against which all subsidiary forms of identity are (necessarily) to be judged.

Identities at Every Level Have a Centre and a Margin

All identities have strangers, occupying the margins. Ambiguous spaces exist on the borders of all groups, so that which does not quite fit can still exist and have its place and even its function. A stranger walks into town in a Spaghetti Western: Who is he? What is he doing here? How does he fit into our current story? What identity will he adopt, or be attributed? The stranger is the exception, the unknown, the unusual, even the monstrous.

A properly functioning category comprises an ideal and a surrounding penumbra of increasing deviation. Everything can then find its place, without destroying the category, the ideal—or the exception. It is said that the exception proves—meaning *tests*—the rule. The world is overflowing with multiplicity and variation; filled with incalculably numerous levels of cascading identities, weaving themselves into the tapestry of experience. Within that woven structure, invisibly maintaining its purpose, identity, and predictability, it is the exception that often announces proof of a heretofore undiscovered pattern.

When what does not fit jumps to our attention, we notice the predictability, previously taken for granted, against which that exception now stands. Noticing that which does not fit can reveal to us the manner in which we had been previously participating in a coherent pattern. It could also show us that this pattern is not absolute or perfect, but something appropriate and well-placed in its context, without but striving toward the perfection we expect of the uppermost, God or the Infinite.

In simpler terms, made popular by the logician, mathematician, and philosopher, Kurt Friedrich Gödel, things cannot be coherent and complete at the same time. Coherence and pattern must always build hierarchies of participations and leave remainders and exceptions. Completeness must contain some examples very uncharacteristic of the ideal, proving or testing the pattern, even undermining the identity itself, particularly when inappropriately centred.

The Ebb and Flow of Identities

In a world of fractal identities, identities have borders of gradual dilution, mixture, and hybridity, but the fact of this strangeness—the existence of that which does not fit—is no necessary impediment to either the existence or the desirability of the category itself or of categorisation as such. The world is very complex. No single category can hope to contain all, particularly in the absence of hierarchical conceptualisation. Thus, the border where categories meet is a place of uncertainty and vagueness, a fringe, a margin, a land of perverse forms.

This looseness is necessary, so that the category itself can survive, and it is no proof of its lack of applicability, utility, or necessity. The same applies to the ideal at the centre of the category. Even when that crucial perfection seems impossible to attain, it can and does still serve as a focal point for attention, singly and jointly, and as a goal for action, even while it remains tantalisingly out of reach.

We all inhabit a world of untruth, to a lesser or greater degree, but that does not mean that we should dispense with the idea of the truth, or with the requirement that truth be pursued. This is something realised by the inhabitants of most traditional worlds: recognition of the ideal and establishment of peace with the margins, accompanied by understanding that the pinnacle is never fully attained or embodied but is nonetheless inevitable and desirable.

Attempts to Eliminate Margins

Instead of such ebb and flow of identities towards its ambiguity, we saw many attempts to define the categories more precisely and exactly in the modern era. That happened, for example, with the appearance of the nation-state, with its fixed borders, as well as in the scientific realm, where the categories known as proper sets, with carefully delineated rules for inclusion and exclusion, became the ideal toward which perception and conceptualisation strive. The ancient world had fewer clean lines of that sort, and their introduction elicited a radicalisation of identity, making itself simultaneously manifest in many fields.

The notion of a rigid *ethne* became extremely prominent in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, in concordance with the encyclopaedic thrust of scientific taxonomy. The description and definition of different human identities, individual and group alike—in the same manner that the breeds of dogs or the variety of flowering plants might be categorised—brought in its wake a great problem of separation and purity.

A devastating solution emerged—first, in the form of great population transfers; later in annihilation of allegedly deviant individuals and peoples, with the same purity held as the aim. The Greeks were separated from the Turks; the Muslims in India from the Hindus. The Armenians and the Jews were led down the genocidal path, as nations without countries.

The same type of radical fixing occurred in relation to sexual deviance. Behaviours and identities such as homosexuality—which would, in the past, have been viewed as perverse and marginal, but also

inevitable, in the margins—now came to be seen as scientifically pathological (a contradiction in terms), medicalised, and treatable, not least through internment and chemical castration.

We are so accustomed now to living in the reverse swing of the pendulum, in the hypothetically-free-love world left to us in the 1960s, that we forget how in the first part of the 20th century, alcohol had been banned in the United States, chemical castration was practiced on men involved in homosexual behaviour, and racial segregation was enforced as physical separation of two distinct races. The margin became something to be eliminated, rather than tolerated. Mixture had to be avoided, at nearly all cost—a consequence of a failure to understand the inevitability of ambiguity in the aftermath of the imposition of structure.

Centring the Minority

We are now at the opposite end of the pole. We are constantly enjoined, in this postmodern world, to view exceptions as a form of heroic resistance to pattern; to view the anti-pattern itself as ideal, and the pattern as nothing more than oppression, in the service of a counter-productive hierarchy of arbitrary power.

This perverse reversal of conceptualisation itself is accompanied by an all-out assault, at every level of conceptualisation, on the vectors of identity, by which individuals and groups recognise their unity and purpose. This is happening through the so-called centring of the minority, the fringe, the strange—the showcasing of deviant appetites and actions or exceptional hypothetically “creative” personalities, even those traditionally regarded as criminal.

This inversion is creating (and purposefully so) a havoc whose breadth and depth is difficult to overestimate, and which makes itself present in the form of a pronounced demoralisation—the “meaning crisis” that accompanies “the mental health epidemic,” as well as the rise of a profound distrust in all institutions and a dangerous polarisation of political view. The identities destroyed by this tactic are always the intermediary patterns—sexual identity, family, nationality, and religious affiliation.

Furthermore, in the demand that the marginal and strange be deemed primary, a growing, implicit power is at work, capable of and willing to enforce that otherwise unsustainable demand, necessary both to enforce the dominance of the anti-pattern, and defend the idiosyncratic identities against one another, as their lack of unity produces its inevitably conflict-laden chaos.

Challenges with the Deconstructionist Approach

The problem with the essentially deconstructionist approach is threefold. First, the marginal, which is multiplicity, cannot be brought to the centre, as the centre is by definition unitary, as well as participating in all other levels, subordinate and superordinate. Thus, prioritising the marginal in opposition to the centre means the destruction of category itself—the very category that not only defines the centre but protects and allows space for the marginal as well. This destruction undermines not only cognitive function and emotional regulation, but the shared perceptions that harmony and peace depend upon most fundamentally.

Second, and consequentially: Marginal identities cannot be made central because the pathways they constitute are ill-specified, complex, and multi-valent. For example, the variety of sexual proclivities possible in the human spectrum cannot be made central in relation to, for example, the universal structure of marriage and family (not least because most of these various sexual proclivities do not

easily lead to reproduction). In the same way, a kind of flat multi-culturalism cannot be a centre because it is indefinitely variable—and that is the very opposite of a centre.

Thus, the elevation of the margin to the pinnacle inevitably produces confusion, anxiety, and hopelessness, as the intrinsic impossibility of an explosively multi-valent identity makes itself known across time and circumstance. This is evident, for example, in the continual and increasingly surreal proliferation of the alphabetic representation of the so-called Pride community. Every year, more letters have to be added, to specify the margin. This is not least because the margin is legion, and the fringe of the fringe will demand its recognition by the fringe in the same way and for the same reasons and with the same justification that the fringe itself demanded recognition from the centre.

Thirdly, and finally: because of this multiplicity and pragmatic impracticality, the very existence of the marginal, once inappropriately universalised, can paradoxically only be guaranteed by the intervention of an increasingly totalising state. The organic norms and the ideals of the traditionally unified identities must be held in suspicion, and the support, which should flow to them in their voluntary and self-sustainable unity, is channelled instead to those whose deviance makes independent existence in the absence of such state support impossible.

That Which Divides Cannot Unite

In 2023, to the surprise of many, the “Progress Pride” flag was adopted universally by almost all nations, especially within international organisations such as the United Nations. It was flown simultaneously all over the Western world during so-called “Pride Month.” This flag and its international use celebrate all that which is a challenge to the types of normative identity which were enforced and radicalised in the early modern period. The rainbow flag, a hypothetical symbol of diversity, has already transformed itself into the very image of a totalising globalism.

By celebrating only the exception, the normative micro-allegiances that bind people together, psychologically and socially, are being undermined—with only the Global Leviathan remaining as collective structure. Pride celebrates the absolutely autonomous and purely hedonistically motivated atomised individual, transformed simultaneously into a cog within the wheels of an increasingly globalised consumerist financial, industrial, and political system.

We have become obsessively consumed with fragmented self-referential identity, predicated most fundamentally on individual motivational whim. In 2023—to take a single example—the Prime Minister of Canada declared that *Pride Month* (up already in no time from day and week) was now *Pride Season*, May through September, almost half the year, followed by an October which is now deemed *LGBT History Month*.

Pride has become more than simply a place for homosexuals to celebrate their lifestyles, as it styled itself in previous decades. It has become the enforced celebration of diversity and multiplicity for its own sake, accompanied by the impossible demand that this very diversity become the new maypole around which all the happy children of present and future are now and forevermore to dance.

The more recent Pride flags, furthermore, have expanded to represent not only sexual proclivity and the relatively novel “gender identity,” but also skin colour. What possible relations might skin colour have to marginal sexual identities? Nothing but opposition to a perceived centre. It is a sign of the celebration and centring of difference and marginalisation itself. Such flags are the very image of the idea of “intersectionality,” a concept that brings together the margins in a unity of perceived persecution—a union which is and can be nothing more than “not the centre,” and a union which is

therefore by no means a unity. Such a move multiplies the vectors of diversity *ad infinitum*, and unsustainably. This is truly a celebration of the anti-pattern, and an attempt to undermine order and its requisite sacrificial responsibility, as such.

We Celebrate Our Commonalities

And so, as it is unity that unites, and diversity that divides—by definition—the insistence that multiplicity must rule will ultimately devour even the order that maintains the marginal.

Usually, we celebrate and elevate that which marks what we pursue jointly; what we value communally; and what we set our shoulders against together. In celebrating anything—in the pursuit of a family meal; while we are watching a sporting event; when we participate in a holiday or a religious ritual—we put our inevitable idiosyncrasies of temperament, habit, and desire aside, so to join together in common attention. We come together to celebrate the ways we connect with one another, not that which divides.

We simply cannot be united by what divides us. Whether this commonality be our union as a family, our accomplishments as an organisation, or our devotion to a cause or goal, it is the nature of attention and celebration to move towards unity.

Diversity as Unity Necessitates Absolute State Control

Instead of something emerging from the hierarchical structuring of family, communities, and nations, the celebration of idiosyncrasy and difference itself is a consequence of radically dichotomised identity, both embodied and conceptualised by a self-identified, omniscient, omnipresent, and omnipotent inner experience, which is then represented as oppressed by external forces of control. This is the ultimate and self-devouring endpoint of liberal individualism.

Such an endpoint is inevitably, even though somewhat surprisingly, allied with the endpoint of state control, for only state-like institutions can defend all our idiosyncrasies from each other. In the final analysis, of course, the state-imposed defence of all our idiosyncrasies and exceptions is impossible, no matter how comprehensive the state becomes, particularly as those identities multiply indefinitely, and the existence of one contradicts the flourishing of another.

We can see this multiplication in the infinite regress of the alphabet identity, as LG transforms first into LGB, and then adds T, and then explodes into the 2SLGBTQQIA+ absurdity that is currently insisted upon—a development precisely paralleled by the ever-expanding colours and sections of the Pride Flag. As we demand state recognition for this ever-expanding panoply of hypothetical identities, we fail to notice that we are simultaneously granting the exclusive right of the state to do so, cementing in place the totalising power of the most distant and abstracted possible social order.

The strange and otherwise incomprehensible alliance between the diversity, inclusivity, and equity enterprise and the so-called environmental movement can be best understood in this manner. At first glance, the consumerist hedonism of Pride—its aesthetic of overflowing variety, abundance, and inclusive generosity—appears to exist in direct conflict with the sobriety and top-down centralising restraint characteristic of environmentalism, with its demands that the earth itself be protected against its inhabitants, who do nothing but damage it in their requirement for ever-increasing freedom and standard of living. How can these two ways of thinking co-exist, much less regard each other as obvious political allies?

The same might be asked in relation to the recent planet-wide outbreak of medical totalitarianism that enveloped the earth during the Covid pandemic. How can the “anything goes” of Pride co-habit so comfortably with mandates isolating people from one another, and ending all possibility of contact, intimate and otherwise?

The development of total statist control over even the minutiae of our private lives (forbidding everything from non-elite flights, private automobiles, and natural gas stoves and furnaces on the macro side, and functional toilets and showers, wood-fired ovens, and plastic bags and drinking straws at the micro-level) is nothing but the reverse side of the coin of infinite diversity and difference, the exacerbation of the duality of individual versus the state, which is now reaching its surreal crescendo. The reason why we were allowed, encouraged, and mandated to identify with, give our attention and especially our sacrifices to the environment and a pandemic, is precisely because they are global and all encompassing, portrayed as transcending all intermediary identities, from individuals, to families and even nations. In that way, the global identity of such crises is the mirror image and dance partner of the 2SLGBTQIA+ explosion of idiosyncrasy and exception.

Subsidiarity: A Better Vision of Identity

In his famous encyclical *Rerum Novarum*, Pope Leo XIII re-established the vision long understood as subsidiarity. The principle of subsidiarity is twofold. Identity is first conceptualised as hierarchical, in the fractal manner previously described, with identity manifesting itself at multiple levels, simultaneously, somewhat like a mountain or an ancient ziggurat. Then, responsibility is deemed properly devolved and distributed when it is taken up or handed down to the most proximal and local level possible.

In a properly structured subsidiary system, the individual voluntarily adopts responsibility for his or her conduct and caretaking, but the couple has its domain and duty, as does the family, the neighbourhood, the corporate enterprise, the city, and the state. The more encompassing levels are restricted in their domain of purview to those actions and directions of attention that cannot be taken up by lower and more proximal levels of the hierarchical structure.

This means that decision-making is undertaken by those closest to the consequences of the decisions, as well as made by those who have access to the most detailed possible local information. Since a parent understands his or her child better, in the main, than might be possible in the case of even the most conscientious and caring state administrator, the parent should and must be charged with and adopt primary responsibility for that child. The same applies, say, to regulation of sexual behaviour, as it pertains to the couple. Taken to its logical conclusion, it follows that the nation should not legislate the activity of its citizens’ bedrooms.

Something similar can be said of economic activity: there are simply too many productive concerns for them to be well regulated by a centralised authority. There is no possible way for that centre to gather enough accurate information to manage the complex processes and systems of production and distribution characteristic of modern society on such a large variety of fronts simultaneously.

The principle of subsidiarity is the backbone of Catholic social doctrine. Pope Leo XIII was reacting to the modern political excesses and revolutionary class-conflicts characteristic of his day, but his emphasis on subsidiary organisation is not, in the main, political. It is a theory of proper identity and appropriate participation.

The Fabric of Identity is a Hierarchy of Levels

Identity is not simply a question of the individual, or his or her rights, or even his or her responsibilities, in relationship to a bureaucratic state. Identity scales, indefinitely—as thoughts, experiences, and sub-personalities unify into individuals; then as individuals embed themselves in families; as families are subsumed, in turn, into communities, cities, states, and moral ideals, rituals, and practices of religious participation.

The fabric of identity is a hierarchy of levels, each with its own existence, none of which are fully self-contained, each united in a commonality of goal, aim, direction, attention, and care; all playing together, optimally, in a great symphony.

This is also a theory of “mental health,” although such health, conceived in the subsidiary model, is not merely mental—a word that has hidden within it the same Enlightenment problem of individual versus the state. “Mental health” is the state of harmony that obtains when all the various levels of a subsidiary hierarchy are operating optimally, in relation to one another, and not merely the proper organisation of the subordinate cognitive, emotional, and motivational elements within the “psyche” of a given individual.

The same could be said, with equal accuracy, of the peace that obtains when the social world is properly and fractally structured. In the absence of this joint vision of voluntary participation, purpose, and structured cooperation and competition (as in a game), hierarchy can only be conceptualised as top-down authority and arbitrary, involuntarily imposed compulsion and force: as *power*, in a word. That is of course the accusation levelled at authority by the atomised, fragmented, demoralised modern and postmodern “individual,” possessed unconsciously by the competing spirits of Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau.

Identity's Uppermost Aim

The direction of our attention and our participation in loftier identities has been classically and traditionally construed as something culminating in, say, “one nation under God,” reaching its pinnacle in the transcendent and ultimate good, conceived as an active relationship, a covenant, an active state of celebration or worship. Each level of identity takes its direction from the level above, with the final guiding hand attributed to the divine itself, that which points to Eden, or the Promised Land, or the Heavenly Jerusalem, or to the Eternal Heaven. That Divinity is “the love that moves the sun and the stars”—that creates, for the purpose of love, with truth.

Such a “hypothesis” (and it is not in truth a proposition akin to a hypothesis, but a definition of the uppermost level in a hierarchy of value) is a bridge too far for most, but the alternative is an identity with no final unity, the cascade of fragmentation across time (that is the death of God), emergent anxiety as a result of the beckoning of multiple forces, weakening of character, both individual and social, and the hopelessness attendant upon lack of clear direction.

Misdirected Aims and False Idols

And that is not all: when what is uppermost is abandoned, what is properly subsidiary becomes paramount: so the political, for example, or the economic, or the whim itself, becomes the Highest Goal, and God devolves, at best, into Caesar—or worse.

Without the final non-rational, ecstatic and transcendent move into that which cannot be contained, some lesser aspect of identity will inevitably transform itself into a false idol. Hence the replacement of theology with its shallow pretender, ideology, and rise of all the hell attendant on such degeneracy.

Differentiated, hierarchical identity, with its distributed responsibilities and rights, provides precisely the meaning that renders ideology and its falsehoods unattractive, and the adventure sufficiently compelling to justify the tragedy of life.

The Role of Individuals

The embodied man or woman is of course a level of particular and unique value, within this fractal structure and conception of identity. They are the locus of focused consciousness, and the experience of the pain and pleasures—the values—of being. In consequence, there is still a clear role in a subsidiary vision for the idea of individual rights and, equally, responsibilities, anchored deeply as they are in our understanding of the superordinate levels of existence, including the religious. The individual is the active centre-point of the subsidiary world, the locus of moral choice, the primary source of active participation in all the other levels of being.

Nonetheless: that centre, for all its import, cannot exist in isolation—nor even desire such an existence, confused though it may be with a desire for complete freedom. Even the worst of antisocial men experience forced isolation as a punishment. We are social to the core, even as the most selfish and power-focused individuals. We all exist through and for others, even though we differ greatly in the sophistication, breadth, and depth of that social interaction. We find security and joy—meaning itself—as a consequence of our participation in our higher identities, that Jacob’s Ladder that reaches upward from our current incarnations to the stars above.

We can and should act as the moral guides, arbiters, judges, and promoters of the groups within which we find our places, but we take direction downward, as well, falling into alignment with the needs and wishes of our husbands and wives, our children, our friends, and our fellow citizens. Individuals, families, and communities are building blocks of the more comprehensive state, but also bulwarks against its too-insistent presence.

As individuals, we can shield those for whom we are responsible from the too-bright and hot light shining from above, protecting our team members from the ire of their superiors, socialising our children into respectable compliance with the body of laws so they do not fall afoul of its not-so-tender mercies, standing by our wives, husbands, and friends against the incursion of the arbitrary corporation or state. The best defence against power is the distribution of power—and when power is distributed in the proper subsidiary manner, it is ordered freedom and just authority, and not “power” at all. There is no difference, in the final analysis, between that distribution, responsibility, and sustaining meaning itself.

Responsible Citizenship Serves the Higher Good

It is by playing our part as the best person, parent, player, or parish member—the best citizen of our particular nation—that we serve the higher goods, even the Good itself. To the degree that our identity descends from the top down, the group offers order, meaning, and purpose. Equally, however, it is in serving, submitting, and sacrificing to and for that higher good that our acts of local participation become, themselves, most meaningful and effective, both psychologically and socially.

All the players on a given team strive to be the star, in the various ways stars might shine, but they are still a team, and their striving for stardom is both constrained and made possible by that team membership. All the teams in a league strive for the topmost place, as well, but they are themselves competing within an overarching framework of higher-order cooperation. Even the league itself, when optimally functional, operates according to the dictates of sportsmanship itself, the principle of voluntary association, direction of attention, and action.

That is in turn an ethos nested in something at least near-religious—the spirit of reciprocity itself, the ethos of treating the other as another self. It is the union of local affiliations in a higher unity that makes them able to co-exist with others in the absence of factional conflict, and that makes us in all our diversity able to work together, practically and toward existence “on a higher plane”. This is also a state of being that can only be brought about in the subsidiary manner: any utopian vision imposed by force immediately transforms into a dystopian nightmare.

If, by contrast, the requisite responsibility is adopted at each level of subsidiary identity, the Good makes itself reliably manifest—and it is within the power of each individual to be an incrementally better person, in a better relationship, in a stronger family, in a more robust community. It is in the mutual accomplishment of such attainable and properly humble goals that true social order and freedom is established, maintained, and even improved, and that the sustaining adventure of life is to be found.

Compassion Enables Subsidiary Identity

Within the confines of a properly subsidiary identity—a voluntary, hierarchical psyche and society—the excesses of too much top-down order or too much bottom-up variability must be carefully considered and avoided. To participate properly, given our own shortcomings, much as those of others, the fact that we all fall short of the glory of God—so to speak—must be kept firmly in mind.

This remains true even as we understand that upward direction of attention and action and the judgement that is part and parcel of such activity is both requisite and necessary. Each of us is, after all, permeated by what is marginal: our psyches are troubled, confused, and tempted; our marriages fractious and imperfect; our friendships often strained; our businesses outdated and blind. We do not fit the ideal pattern. This imperfection is inevitable, given our finite nature and the extreme demand posed by a subsidiary identity stretching upward into the infinite.

This means that compassion is the necessary handmaiden of justice. We must leave room, forgive, tolerate, and reach out to those which are marginal, broken, and forgotten by our identities. But this does not mean that justice can or should be completely sacrificed on the altar of compassion. We must judge not, lest we be judged; however, we all desire and need some judgement, to keep us on the strait and narrow path, to orient us skyward, to give reliable and admirable purpose to our lives. We cannot shirk the responsibility of judgement for ourselves or others (particularly by pretending that such avoidance is merely the consequence of an admirable pity), but need to remember that we will be assessed using the same measures we apply and that all of us fall short of the mark in one way or another.

Immediacy Strengthens Allegiance

It is important, as well, to consider immediacy, in relation to allegiance. The closer the subsidiary level, the more its demands should be felt as meaningful, morally requisite, and real. My wife, my children, my family, my friends, my town, and so on, are most properly my concern, in contrast to those of others,

not because of a difference in intrinsic value or “right,” but because my attention and resources are limited and must be focused to be applied both appropriately and usefully. I pay for the privilege of that unique immediacy with responsibility, and that applied responsibility, distributed across all players, keeps the whole complex game going; makes for optimal play, in the system, as well as efficiency and resilience.

A subsidiary hierarchical system is able to respond quickly and effectively to disruption, not least as a consequence of the plethora of local decision-makers, each with their own domain of true authority and ability. This is a much more realistic and compelling vision of attention than some false global awareness. The proper way to worship God, at least initially, is to treat yourself, and your wife, husband, friend, or child properly. This is not a reduction of the higher to the lower, but the manner in which the higher most truly manifests itself in the lower.

Our Conscience Calls Us Higher

The fractal or subsidiary understanding of identity is predicated on the realisation that a person, although the locus of consciousness, is nonetheless a multiplicity of thoughts and desires, which themselves have to be gathered into unitary will and coherent narrative memory. I can say of one thought in my own mind, “this is *me*, a valid partial image of my will and purpose,” but of another, in some mysterious fashion, “this is, instead, a temptation, a desire I must reign in, a goal that is not worthy of me—a deviation from a proper (and subsidiary) higher purpose.” The temptation is then the straying or diversity of the local from the higher and more general.

Our conscience then, is the voice of the higher calling out the lower, separating wheat from chaff, calling for the proper sacrifice. This conflict of internal push and pull is not merely the inappropriate subordination of the would-be autonomous individual to the arbitrary dictates of the powers that be, but the indication of a problem of play between levels that must still be worked out—and, therefore a challenge, with the promise of a higher unity or harmony the reward.

The protagonist of James Joyce’s modernist novel, for example—*Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*—regards all higher-order fractal levels of identities as prisons to escape, or traps to avoid, or deviations from his self-actualisation. He therefore attempts to free himself from family, nation, and religion.

Although it is true that there is little good in arbitrary or slavish subjugation to such higher-order structures, those structures and participations, if accepted voluntarily, become the very arenas in which the individual finds genuine meaning—the meaning that is both stabilising and sustaining, psychologically and communally. Without those higher participations, the “freedom” sought by the “artist” is nothing but a desert wasteland. It is within the relationship of care we establish with others that our individual identity is instead most truly discovered, strengthened, and refined.

Love Actualises Our True Potential

It is in how I love and exist in truth with others that I can become myself in the truest manner and see myself in the truest mirror. It is in how I enter into a dance with those around me that I become something valuable and shine, even in my own eyes. This responsible higher-order work is one that no authoritarian structure should or even can truly relieve us of—more accurately, steal from us.

The popular image of the free individual—he or she who “has the right” to do whatever strikes at the moment, as long as that does not interfere with others’ right to do the same—is an insufficient vision of what is most truly human, denying as it does the intrinsic desire and need to do right by others,

implying as it does that social order is nothing but limitation. No society can hold together as a mere consequence of abiding by that essentially liberal vision.

We need places where our individual identities can join with those of others in a unity of purpose, and celebration of commonality. In the absence of such community, we will continue fracturing into atomised selves, divorced from higher-order purpose—and the lack thereby produced will tempt us toward a compensatory totalitarian identity.

Intermediary Identity and the Family

We have our individuality, more or less at hand, and we can start the understanding and development of our identity there: “Know Thyself”, as the Apollonian maxim had it. Most of us are also born into families, at least of mother and child—and still, most commonly, more than that. That intermediary level is closest and intrinsically most valuable to us. It is within the confines of and opportunities provided by the family that we learn to respect valid authority, step incrementally toward personal responsibility, and learn to play well with others.

The world contains various types of intermediary identity, but the traditions in line with the Abrahamic faith have explicitly recognised the model of father, mother, and child as the most proximal microcosm of identity, and this is, as well, true of the other major civilisations of the world, Asian, European, and African alike. We use that immediate level, closest to our heart, as a model for even the highest of identities, considering ourselves in popular and extensively distributed metaphor as the children of God, the Eternal Father.

Because we are born, necessarily, of fathers and mothers—because we require them to come together in love to properly care for what their union produces—this image of nuclear family plays a central role in our imagination and our longings, peopling our fantasies, our dreams, our novels, movies, fairy tales, and myths.

Variations abound, and necessarily so, as people fall short of the ideal, or experiment with alternative arrangements, but the central standard by which all those variations are judged and the target at which they aim remain, at minimum, the nuclear family. Perhaps that arrangement can and even should be elaborated into the extended family, but such an extension is impossible without the nuclear core around which such extensions are grounded.

Exceptions to the Centre

What then of the exceptions—the reconstituted or partial relationships, the single parents, the divorcees, the widowed; the families of the margin? These exceptions make themselves known inevitably, as a consequence of our constant and universal deviation from the still-necessary ideal. Even within the secure and abundant confines of well-constituted families, conflict abounds; we all fail as ideal children and perhaps even more profoundly as perfect fathers, mothers, brothers, and sisters.

Sacrifice of the ideal itself is no solution to the problem of deviation: all that produces is a universality of failure. We must steel ourselves to maintain the tension that existence of the ideal produces, in all its judgemental perfection, while extending a necessary compassion to the margins which we often occupy as much as those we might like to exclude. This is the very balance of the judgement and mercy that classically comprise the right and left hands of God Himself.

We must also remain wary, in the extreme, of any and all attempts by the state to circumvent or replace the family, promising an irresponsible and false freedom as compensation. In giving up the responsibilities of the family to the state, we appeal to the worst of the whim-ridden, immature, and impulsive liberal sojourner, depriving him or her of the true adventure of life, by removing the existential burden that most truly constitutes meaning.

Responsible individuals, nested inside responsible couples and families: that arrangement constitutes the minimum requirement for a truly functional higher-order polity or state, as well as the most effective defence against the over-reach of those who would be king.

Attention and Memory Create Unity of Being

The first step in community, or even the unity of our own being, is attention. Our attention can be attracted by the whims within, by the subpersonalities, drives, emotions, and fragmented thoughts and motivations that vie for supremacy in the psychological world.

Our own personal attention becomes organised in a more comprehensive and universally viable, rewarding, and stabilising sense when it is related to others; when it is given or offered up to our connection with our family, friends, and fellow citizens; when it is sacrificed to the social hierarchies we participate in.

In time, memory represents that organisation of attention, both personal and historical, structured most fundamentally in the form of narrative—in the stories we weave about our own lives, bringing to them simplicity and coherence, structuring our understanding of the past, so that it can serve as an accurate and comprehensive guide to the future.

This is as true for the individual, as it is for the stories we share collectively, detailing the adventures and misadventures befalling the heroes and monsters that strode the earth in the time of our ancestors. It is the story, and its behavioural precursor and accompaniment, the ritual, that unites us in self-understanding, personal and mutual, as well as provides aim, emotion, and motivation.

Celebrating our Common Stories

In the most profound sense, the remembering of our common stories, the participation in our common rituals will be a form of celebration, whether it is commemorations, birthdays, and anniversaries, or whether it is the holidays which qualify our time, or the honour we bestow on our heroes, leaders, and celebrities. If you want to know the shape of a world, examine what those who inhabit it are allowed or encouraged to celebrate. Such celebration is the shared attention and proclivity for action that unites, up a fractal hierarchy which leads up all the things we rejoice in, up to transcendent worship of God Himself.

We join together in massive arenas to participate in the structured fractal harmony of a musical performance. We rise to our feet in the same venues when watching a spectacularly skilled athlete, the star of “our” team, reach beyond even his or her own abilities when aiming at the eternal goal and hitting it in a way that makes us remember, at least for a moment, what it is for a disciplined and focused human being to strive upward, and to do so with success.

Our religious holidays commend the founding of our states, the births of our redeemers, the death and resurrection of the spirits that most properly move us. Our holidays mark, commemorate, celebrate,

and constitute our collective, voluntary games, and the joint actions we all undertake during those reminders of the sacred world signify and reinforce our psychological integrity and mutual belonging.

False holidays, arbitrarily established—forced celebrations, imposed by propagandists and ideologues—are the intrusion of the Tower of Babel into private and public space alike, part of the attempt of the fractionated, hedonistic, atomised individual to declare his or her counterproductive freedom and independence; part of the forceful imposition of the universalising, totalitarian statist vision on the peasants, the serfs, and the slaves.

Although it has been difficult in our recent history to guiltlessly remember and celebrate our ancient heroes because of their failures and sins, real and imagined, the traditional scriptural law (a veritable commandment) provides us with the obligation and the opportunity to honour our mothers and fathers. We are asked to do so, despite their sins; to practice gratitude for what the past has bequeathed to us, despite its inadequacies; to reject the temptation to consider ourselves morally improved, merely because we have gained by our forebears' sacrifices.

Gratitude for Our Heritage

And, if we refuse that requirement? It is Noah's son Ham who sees his father, sprawled out before him, nakedness fully exposed, in the aftermath of too much wine—who then laughs, in derision, before calling his brothers, to join in the fun. On their arrival, the more virtuous brothers carefully cover their father, instead, averting their eyes in respect. It is by tradition Ham and his descendants who are in consequence destined to be servants of those humbly respectful brothers; doomed to be slaves forevermore.

Those who reject gratitude for the past in favour of a resentful judgement; those who arrogantly deem themselves morally superior to their parents, merely in consequence of the fortunate time and place of their birth—it is those who will develop the slave-like habits of the people lost in the desert, and who will render themselves defenceless in the face of the blandishments of the tyrants. The destruction and replacement of the past—that ever-present revolutionary ideal—destroys the memory of the commonality of error and sin we share with our fathers and delivers those foolish enough to risk it into the jaws of the authoritarian dragon. For such reasons it is necessary to recover, preserve, embody, and understand our collective past.

Standing on the Shoulders of the Giants of the Past

If we in the present have managed at least the appearance of moral advance—a dubious proposition, at best—it is in no small part because the peace and the luxuries we enjoy, and which exist because of the social structures and technologies the past produced, shield us in our infantile comfort from the worst of the impulses within us. What then should we make of the indisputable sins of the past, the patriarchal oppression, the war, even the genocide?

Perhaps we should strive to practice gratitude for our heritage, in the same manner we strive to be grateful to the natural world and the gift of life itself, despite its tragedies. Perhaps we should as well look to ourselves, first and foremost, to ensure that we conduct ourselves so that the recurrence of such things is less possible. Perhaps we should note, finally, that the same wise traditions insisting upon respect for the past also detail the shortcomings of its inhabitants in the most forthright and brutal manner possible. This is particularly true of the Biblical scriptures, which portray even the Israelites who

hypothetically author the text as falling far short of fulfilling the most basic moral obligations, let alone embodying the glory of YHWH.

We cannot have respect for ourselves, security, or hope for the future while denigrating the past, because those who dwelled in the past are no different in essence from those who live now and who will live later. That does not mean we have no responsibility to redress the sins of those who came before us: deviations once made and then followed require course correction, but that atonement and repair should be in a spirit of humility, rather than pride.

A Higher, Better, Upward Aim Makes Progress Possible

Our identity is fractal, hierarchical, subsidiary. Proper responsible participation in all its levels provides life with purpose, meaning, security, hope, and adventure. It is the very act of proper direction of attention and action that makes progress itself possible—progress, as further harmonious integration, further upward aim, and movement. That identity is accountability, at every level. It is sacrificial, in its essence. Everything less is properly and rightly offered to what is higher.

That mature offering establishes the very definition of higher, better, upward, motivating the delays of gratification and the integrations of otherwise impulsive desire that make a more comprehensive, mature, and integrated personal and collective life possible.

It is a *relationship*, too, rather than a set of facts, or even compliance or guidance by a set of facts: the relationship of man with woman, couple with children, family with community, town or city with country; the entire ziggurat under God, the *Summum Bonum*, the essence of good, the spirit that inhabits the entire pyramid, when that spirit is welcomed with open arms, humbly and gratefully.

It is the harmony of the spheres, the meaning of music, the joy in collective celebration, the standing ovation of the crowd, and the eternal liana connecting the denizens of earth with the angels of Heaven.

It is the father who can be rescued from the belly of the beast, the treasure guarded by the eternal dragon, the king who resides within, the voice of conscience itself, the subordination of the apprentice, the point of the masterpiece, the ordered freedom of proper worship in the desert that would then no longer be a desert, but a blooming place of abundance. Its instantiation requires wisdom, the willingness to shoulder the burdens of life, abide by the truth, and aim, upward, at the best, standing on the shoulders of the giants of the past.

Subsidiary Identity and the Adventure of Life

Subsidiary identity is true identity. Adoption of the responsibility that constitutes the price of membership is the adventure of life. It is the medication for existential angst, the source of the hope that abides. It is the shining star, beckoning in the distance, the true sustainability, the well-tended garden, the eternal banquet, and the heavenly city. It is the only true alternative to lonely wandering in the desert and slave-like subjection to the king and tyrant. It is the ultimate sacrificial gesture, the offering of what is personally unworthy to the harmony of the whole. It is the embodiment of the eternal *Logos*, who speaks the truth, in the service of love; who takes the weight of the world onto his shoulders and finds in that awful weight the redeeming meaning of life.

¹ Here again, Covid acted as an accelerator where those objecting, even in speech, to Covid measures were sanctioned by governments. The freezing of bank accounts and arrest of political activists in Canada were a glimmer of the growing state authoritarianism.

² Guy Lawson, "Trudeau's Canada, Again," *The New York Times Magazine*, December 8, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/13/magazine/trudeaus-canada-again.html>.

³ Isaac the Syrian (c. 630-c. 700), *Mystic Treatises by Isaac of Nineveh: Translated from Bedjan's Syriac Text with an Introduction and Registers*, trans. A. J. Wensinck (Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2011), p.8.



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