

Metaphysical Economics: Agrarianism, the Garden of Eden and St. Ephraim the Syrian

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The agrarian life, the organic life over the mechanical, is a process that uses an array of cultural and biological practices to create a self-sustaining, independent and autonomous local economy. As such, it is also a rejection of the material cult of efficiency. The agrarian life is, at its most abstract, the natural and normal connection of human reason with the natural world.¹ The natural world, of course, also comprises human reason. Modernity sees reason as purely internal and utilitarian, while the reality is that all being is rational. Reason is the very soul of being and is not reduced to the drive for control.

Scientifically, organic, that is, traditional agriculture, builds soil health so as to avoid the use of synthetic chemicals that, while they increase yields in the short term, do irreversible damage in the long term. The organic system is designed to maximize the biological activity of the soil, minimize soil erosion and agricultural pollution. There, however, is far more to organic farming than specifically scientific or utilitarian ideas. It aims for little less than the total integration of all human activity.

Small, decentralized patterns of ownership, the revitalization of small towns and even a maximization of local autarky aims at not merely food “security,” but personal security as well. Agriculture in this basic approach is more than just “growing things,” but an overarching philosophical critique of modernity and its reliance on mechanism rather than organism.²

The organic, agrarian criticism of modernity is, philosophically speaking, the process of manifesting and clarifying the rational structure of Creation as a whole. This is Reason as such, and humanity participates in this universal Reason. Practically, this comes down to the fact that the natural needs of man are mediated by labor: practical reason joins with the Logos within creation. Spirit, reason and labor are all one rational whole. It is not so much a “transformation” of the material world into something that man “requires,” but is rather an adjustment to the rational order of Creation mediated by the will.

The agrarian life hearkens to Eden. This is the essential understanding of the early mystics, chief of which is St. Ephraim of Syria (306-373) who remains one of the highest expressions of Platonic Realism in Christian thought and comprise the ontological core of Christian metaphysics.

Logos is the presence of grace in nature. It is the “energy” of God serving as the eternal structure that connects land, logic, thought and work into a single whole. In Eden, Adam was saturated with this energy. Concepts were not needed, nor was language, since an intuitive channel existed between Adam and God, only partially remade in that same connection between mother and child. No language expresses it because it is older than

1 It must be stressed that “reason” is not a specific quality of human nature. Reason is found in all Creation as the expression of the Spirit, of logos. Modernity claims that human reason confronts a dead material world. This is the cardinal error of the modern world and is the ideological justification of industrialism.

2 Kuepper, G. (2010). A Brief Overview of the History and Philosophy of Organic Agriculture. Kerr. Center for Sustainable Agriculture, Poteau, Oklahoma. <http://www.kerrcenter.com/resources/organic-agriculture.htm>

language. Language and concepts distort nature, they seek to “pin it down” and define it.

The Garden of Eden is the church, restored to its fullness at Pentecost. It is only sin that blocks the soul's path to it. The church acts as a recapitulation of the garden. The fruit of the Tree of Life is the Eucharist. The church is not the men who control it, nor can it be reduced to “jurisdictional” associations. It is no less than the presence of divinity on earth. What Gregory Palamas considered the energies of God is precisely what Ephraim earlier saw as the church. Nature contains energy as Form in matter, while the church (sacraments, Scripture, patristics) contains the same Forms in a different manner. These are all a single, uncreated world of grace that, to use Platonic language, contains the fullness of the Form's content.³

The Form of the Good is the Form within which all others are synthesized. It is the mind of God, Logos, the Wisdom of the Old Testament. The tree of knowledge is the veil. It is the symbolic representation of the distinction between the dispersed life of the world, made into an ontological dogma by the nominalist school, and the revelation of Forms as providing knowability to worldly objects and forces. The one side is objects as seen by finite minds, the other is the Form, the immaterial expression of divine energy, that informs those objects. The veil exists only because of the fall. The purpose of human life, revelation, philosophy and Christ's presence on earth is to spiritualize matter. To infuse the Forms with the material, chaotic universe and to impregnate matter with the uncreated grace of Tabor.

The church's external life is the “prosopon” of grace, that is, the external life is the “mask” of Logos or Wisdom. Logos itself is the “content” of the rituals and sacraments of the church. Logos is nothing other than the energies of God which, at the same time, is the very internal content of the church. Therefore, the church is identical with the presence of Logos in nature, the same Wisdom spoken of in the Old Testament Wisdom Books. Hence, Logos, nature and Eden are all one in the same, though seen from different perspectives.

Man before the fall did not require concepts or logic to participate in the universal grace or Logos present in Creation. God and man communicated by intuition. Logos was plainly seen in the natural order. Once man fell, Logos was not so clear. Matter appeared more and more “dead” as man degenerated. The intuitive connection between logos and man was severed, and the degeneration developed from idolatry to ideology to nominalism.

The saints, due to severe ascetic labors and grace, are able to see the presence of Christ in all nature. Nature does not appear as a “dead” set of meaningless causes and meaningless effects, but an ordered whole that serves man both intellectually and physically. It is a living sacrament. The ascetic life removes the fetish of material causality and exposes the Substance underneath. It liberates reality.

This implies that the created universe is itself a sacrament. To the nominalist, the created world does not exist as a singular entity. It is just a convenient label we use to communicate the totality of material causes. The totality of causes has no ultimate purpose, but it exists as a chaos of random events. Human beings, according to this school, have invented a set of words and phrases which seek to conceptualize and “capture” this meaningless meandering of the world. These words are inventions that give order to a world that is a mere accident. It is the vocabulary of the degenerating human person.

Even the word “cause” itself makes little sense, since a “cause” is not a physical thing. Hume taught this to those overcome with the excitement of Enlightenment doctrine. Logos, however, is the final and formal cause of all that is. Efficient causality is an outgrowth of the presence of the Logos. Material causality is the “mask” of creation, it is the “person” or “prosopon,” while Logos is the “nature” that is underneath the mask. Christ was the prosopon

3 Maximos the Confessor, more than any other patristic writer, used Platonic language to grasp the presence of logos on earth. Plato, in this writer's opinion, foresaw the incarnation, but lacked the vocabulary to understand it. In other words, Christ completed the idea of the Forms in matter.

of Wisdom, taking into itself both the Form of man and the fullness of divinity. Since man could no longer see Wisdom⁴ in nature as its cause and purpose, Christ needed to come into existence as a human being that can communicate explicitly what nature used to communicate intuitively.

If nominalism were true, then either a) Christ would have only been able to save one human person or b) the person can only approach God through prayer, and this prayer is answered with salvation. This is the Protestant view and assumes the nominalist negation of reality. Of course, none of this is true. Christ took all humanity, past, present and future into account. Hence, he took human nature, not human beings.

The created universe is a sacrament because it contains the very definition of the sacramental life: making Logos appear more clearly in created things; in matter. The transfigured man can see Logos easily. Nature is less the material and efficient cause and more the formal and final cause. Nominalism reduces the mind so that it can only see the efficient “causes” in nature and apply random and meaningless labels to them. The presence of Logos however, is the full Cause of nature, as well as its end. The sacraments of the church are examples of how Logos can be seen under the material mask. The sacraments are the expressions of Logos relative to the universal needs of the church.

The term “sacrament” is “mystery” in Greek. The Greek “mysterion” is the same as “symbol” and refers to a material entity that acts as a gateway to the world of Form or Spirit. To the nominalist, none of these make any real sense. A “symbol” is not something that points to a deeper reality. Nominalists cannot make sense out of symbols because they assume that there is an infinite gap between the symbol and that vague, unknowable object that acts as its referent. In Orthodox ontology, however, the symbol is the prosopon of the nature. Christ's physical presence on earth, his hypostasis, is the symbol of his two natures.

The symbol is that which appears, while the nature is that which generates the appearance. They are not identical, but they are tightly linked. On the other side of the Tree of Knowledge, the symbol and the Real are one in the same. More accurately, the mysterion, the symbol, was extraneous to Adam and Eve since they saw Logos directly. Fallen man, however, requires symbols as guides.

The symbol in St. Ephraim is understood as the “word” or the “name” of something. Words, of themselves, mean little. When they are connected with the deeper relations among created things do names take on the function of symbol. Names are accidents, and thus, they can only show the most superficial elements of an object. A symbol, on the other hand, points the way to a deeper understanding of the object in its relations with all else.

When Scripture speaks of God, the names used, of themselves, say nothing. The fact that nominalism centers around the ultimate reality of words in creating and/or reflecting reality proves that it has no grasp of any object, since the word alone exists. Here, God is cut off from his creation because there is nothing “behind” the names that act as a referent. There is no reality at all except language. In his *Fifth Discourse against the Heretics*, St. Ephraim writes:

But if, as we say, the Soul is able by means of the senses of the Body to hear the Truth, and to speak what is right, for to us, who are Sons of the Church, the function of teaching properly belongs, inasmuch as we confess, according to the Preaching of the Prophets and Apostles, that the Body is akin to all the beauties of the Soul, and is a partner with it in all good things, since it is able to learn by means of it, and teach by means of it,— the Body is, as it were, a

4 Wisdom, grace, light and logos here all mean the same thing. It is the presence of divinity in nature, but a presence that is not identical with nature. It is, in other words, Platonic forms seen in their ultimate synthesis from their originator, the Trinity.

trumpet for it; for by the Body's mouth, the soul preaches Truth in the World, and it is a pure harp for it, by means of which it sounds forth Truth in creation.⁵

This comment is essential to understand the philosophical nature of the organic. Matter, the land, culture, and all other aspects of what is truly human, are conduits for the spiritual life. Truth, given our state, is communicated only by symbols, words or material culture in social relations. All of these are “matter” in the broad sense of being “not spiritual.”

The spirit lies underneath cultural forms, but the forms themselves are not spiritual. They are gateways to it. St. Ephraim states “For along with the body, the Soul is adorned just as along with it the Soul is defiled. For they are alike in the matter of gain and loss, in every respect like friends they suit one another.” If the body is treated to a diet of chemically processed foods, empty calories and the repetitive, unnatural lifestyle of industrialism, then the soul will be equally effected. Matter and form cannot be separated. One aspect of Platonism rejected by the fathers was the notion that matter was unredeemable.⁶

The centralization of agricultural capital derives from greed, the disordered soul, and the cult of efficiency that destroys the affective, cultural, spiritual and moral elements of true community. For St. Ephraim, Paradise is the full expression of Logos in nature. The Spirit makes it possible for the senses and reason to experience Christ's energies on earth.

For the unredeemed, bereft of grace, nature becomes a projection of their inner chaos. It is the cause of the nominalist idea (which is truly just an expression of despair) that will then, once the British empire is capable of taking enough resources from its colonies, develop into the industrial revolution. Industry is prefaced on the concept that nature is nothing but matter and the void. To them, appearance is the only reality. Nominalism is true only at the lowest stage of man's degeneration.

On the other hand, man in St. Ephraim is body, soul and spirit. This structure differs substantially from Plato's. The body is inert, but, in order to stay alive, it craves sustenance. The soul is the unregenerate reasoning apparatus – it can experience, in a highly limited and symbolic way, the immaterial world, at least at the level of the forms. This is the experience of Plato.⁷

Nominalist arguments miscarry because they presume what they are trying to prove. If nominalism is true, then sacramental life is superstition. If it is false, then the sacrament is a means of communicating universal truths to bounded minds. Since nominalism cannot believe anything as “true” or “real” other than their own words, man is automatically the creator of all things. Once this idea takes hold of the elite, the life of the farm is doomed as peasants are herded into the factories in the name of “progress” and “democracy.”

Once nominalism is rejected, practical sciences such as economics take on something more than formalized analysis. Instead, it is seen as organic and whole: based on the local community and the capacities of the bio-region. Demand, economically speaking, is the function of the local culture and the regional tradition reflecting actual needs rather than artificially implanted wants. The markets in the organic alternative are basically local and reflect local tradition rather than a false, cosmopolitan demand that is created through television advertising.

An excellent example comes from the Danish Research Center for Organic Farming. It is a foundational document on agrarianism that, while not explicitly Christian, seems to

5 _St. Ephraim, Hymns on Paradise. Sebastian P. Brock, ed. (St. Vladimir's, 1990)

6 Also Plato's doctrine of the eternity of matter and reincarnation are rejected. However, Plato was not aware of what the incarnation would do, and hence, his use of natural reason, while inspired, was fallen and error prone. He remains the greatest of the ancients and serves as a prophet – of a sort – to the gentiles.

7 Possekkel, Ute. Evidence of Greek Philosophical Concepts in the Writings of Ephrem the Syrian. (Peeters Publishers, 1999); this is Plato's limit given his time period.

reflect a disgust with the vapid nominalism of the Carthaginian elite. They explain:

Sustainability in the sense of functional integrity sees agriculture as a complex system of values and relationships, and emphasizes the frailty of the system that results from our lack of understanding of the interactions between production methods and ecological and social survival. The basic consideration is that the system is vulnerable, and that some of its fundamental elements recur over a period of time in a way or at a rate that depends on the condition of the system at an earlier date. The genetic characteristics of specific farm animals and crops, for example, are crucial to the next generation of these animals or crops, and treatments that change the fertility of the soil can be critical to production over the longer term. In general, nature is seen as an inseparable aspect of society's sustainability or functional integrity, and this understanding underpins strategies to oppose and avoid irreversible changes.⁸

This brief paragraph contains more revolutionary thought than the mechanical, Enlightenment mystifications of Marx. Economics is Platonic in that the Form of something (such as the virtuous) is identical in each manifestation. Health is both the result of eating non-processed foods AND the intellectual focus on the spiritual world. They are different manifestations of the same thing. Modernity takes any and all moral ideas out of economics and politics, those two areas of the elite's greatest interest.

In more specific terms, this means that the negative externalities of conventional farming—such things as pollution or poor diet—are not reflected in the price of what is produced. These negative externalities are “hidden” only in that they are understood only indirectly. Agrarianism is more efficient than corporate processing because these externalities do not exist. Integralism and agrarianism see science as not merely formal designs, but also human relationships.⁹

One example of these externalities is in the conglomerate's use of synthetic fertilizers and herbicides that are washed from the land and seep into water supplies. Over a long period of time, pests become resistant to these chemicals, which only leads to increases in concentration, as if to underscore its irrationality. This leads to an impoverished landscape dependent on chemicals to create what nature would have created of her own volition. Social reconstruction then faces yet another cost the conglomerates force on society: the amount of rich soil and clean water are disappearing.¹⁰

Modernity is based on the colossal: the pagan preoccupation with right angles and increasingly monumental structures to extract more from nature than she herself allows. Food is accordingly the province of massive, international conglomerates such as ConAgra and Archer-Daniels-Midland. These firms use global fuel inputs in its plants (more like factories than farms) that produce food very cheaply, but with the cost of high pollution and health risks from leaking chemicals. Furthermore, as mentioned above, their costs are forced on the

8 Principles of Organic Farming (November, 2000) Discussion document prepared for the DARCOF Users Committee, 12

9 Kuepper, G. (2010). A Brief Overview of the History and Philosophy of Organic Agriculture. Kerr. Center for Sustainable Agriculture, Poteau, Oklahoma. <http://www.kerrcenter.com/resources/organic-agriculture.htm>

10 Many of these chemicals remain in the soil for long periods of time. They soon decrease the availability of needed minerals, since the focus is on monoculture. Agribusiness is “economic efficiency” that is anything but efficient or rational. As the soil is exhausted in the unnatural demands placed on it, disease and malnutrition will result. The use of artificial fertilizers does introduce heavy metal leaching into ground water. They also find their way into cows milk and all the crops growing in the specific area, especially those with a high water content such as tomatoes.

public while profits are quite private. Their well-known political connections insulates them from all but symbolic criticism.

Urbanization is inherently parasitic on the countryside. Using terms like “white trash” or “redneck” are means to legitimize this exploitation. Today, a few have discovered that modernity has destroyed the organic world it had once considered “dead.” Resource depletion and the ignorance of basic health and husbandry are only now being explored as clear consequences of the Enlightenment and its bizarre construction of nature as mere matter just waiting to be manipulated. That the apologists for modernity call the peasant yeoman of old “backward” is laughable: their knowledge of the body and the soil is far superior to the modern agronomist.

Cooperative associations, in the realm of cost control, are critical in challenging the modernist idea of agriculture.¹¹ Cooperation is the key, since the conglomerates have easy access to credit which takes financing away from the smaller association. To challenge this, agrarianism has little choice but to develop its collaborative infrastructure and an integrated market across a specific region.¹²

In 2004, the Australian Department of Agriculture published a summary of their own organic movement. First, they report that those who converted to organic and small scale methods saved money and increased efficiency per acre. Additionally, they discovered that the use of resources (or input costs) for organic farms were far less per acre than for conventional farms.¹³

In the book *Organic Agriculture: A Global Perspective*, this is explained in greater detail:

The yields in organic agriculture may be equivalent to or better than conventional agriculture, although often they are not, simply because of inadequate plant available nutrients, weed infestation, non-cash phases in the crop rotations or inexperienced management. Yield performance is very location and management specific and many underlying drivers (e.g. soil carbon, weed seed banks) of yield have long responses times. Some researchers have also highlighted the value of alternative agro-ecological criteria such as resilience and stability. Although organic agriculture causes less pesticide contamination in food, people and the environment, it is premature to claim that organic agriculture is completely environmentally sustainable.¹⁴

In a (2006) study, agronomist David Pimentel of Cornell devastated agribusiness and the absurdity of modern capitalism. Among small, organic farms and operatives, soil nutrients were almost 50 percent higher than among corporate farms. Water erosion stopped, while efficiency was increased. The same product within the organic environment was grown with about 50% of the energy used by the conglomerate. This proves the falsity of economies of scale and the purely abstract assumptions of modern economics.¹⁵

Soil is “historical” in that its chemical makeup is based on how it has been previously used. This content is then consumed by the customer of its produce. Thus, the land is

11 cf. Rodale, M. (2009) *The Organic Manifesto*. Macmillan

12 Ibid, 44

13 Department of Agriculture (2004). *The Australian Organic Industry—A Summary*. Commonwealth of Australia, 11-12

14 Kristiansen, Paul, Acram M. Taji, John P. Reganold (2006) *Organic Agriculture: A Global Perspective*. Comstock, 426

15 Pimentel, D. (2006). *Impacts of Organic Farming on the Efficiency of Energy Use in Agriculture*. An Organic Center. State of Science Review

ingested. When this has been chemically stripped of its natural constituents by corporate arrogance, it becomes the opposite of the Eucharist; it is poison. In other words, man is forced to ingest the consequences of society's disordered desires and perverse view of the natural order.

This is quite significant to St. Ephraim. While not using modern economic terms, many of the ancient Platonists were quite aware that sin is not an act: but an ontological condition of the person that also infects the natural world. Agrarianism must face this fact as well. The opposite of this is the Eucharist, which is the result of farming, and more specifically, is the offering of the first fruits of bread and wine to logos made visible for the faithful. St. Ephraim writes in an undated sermon:

In your sacrament we daily embrace you and receive you into our bodies; make us worthy to experience the resurrection for which we hope. We have had your treasure hidden within us ever since we received baptismal grace; it grows ever richer at your sacramental table. Teach us to find our joy in your favor! Lord, we have within us your memorial, received at your spiritual table; let us possess it in its full reality when all things shall be made new.¹⁶

The Eucharist is then the final gnosis of the agrarian life. It is the summary of the truth in the face of capitalist and industrial nominalism that is killing millions. Modern nominalism has destroyed the most meaningful and significant aspects of nature and human life. Mass society loves to use words like “spiritual” or “mysterious” to describe their newly found faith. Yet, if the culturally enforced bourgeois idea continues to justify mass ignorance, then these terms are meaningless.

In a very real sense, St. Ephraim posits that the soul becomes, over time, what it wills and what it values. St. Augustine says the same. Heaven and Hell are two worlds created by man. Heaven is eternal life living within the divine energies. All the potentialities of man are full activated. Hell is the imprisonment of the soul in the material world and its “values.” It is the experience of the energies as foreign, not as natural or normal.

The Spirit, however, since the fall, is not natural to man in the strict sense. In Eden, the Holy Spirit filled everything, making Logos as clear as the day. The Fall expels the Spirit. In Eden, the ontological difference between it and our fallen world is the manifestation of logos. Plato and the Stoics could make out the vaguest outline of the reason present in the natural order. The Apostles made this presence far more explicit, and the saints can have direct experience of it.

Concerning the world in 2014, this means that when nature is seen as dead, as atoms in the void, the result is the mass concentration of wealth, elite control over culture, total standardization, relativism (except in economics), and the deification of wealth. Agrarianism is not just a means to rebuild society, but is a standing refutation to economies of scale and the assumption that larger units are more efficient means of using resources. In truth, it is just a much easier way to extract profits. The conglomerate's costs are much higher both directly and indirectly, but this is hidden by the fact that taxpayers must pay for the infrastructural regime required for their purely private profits.¹⁷

16 All texts can be found: Ephraim the Syrian. Hymns. Kathleen MvVay, ed. (Paulist Press, 1989); Hymns on Paradise. Sebastian P. Brock, ed. (St. Vladimir's, 1990); and, as an excellent secondary source, cf. Possek, Ute. Evidence of Greek Philosophical Concepts in the Writings of Ephraim the Syrian. (Peeters Publishers, 1999)

17 Department of Agriculture (2004). The Australian Organic Industry—A Summary. Commonwealth of Australia

Organic farming is more productive than the other options which make it the best alternative in the production of food crops for human and animal consumption.¹⁸ Using local inputs is far more efficient than the absurd, enforced and coercive regime of “free trade.” This is because the ecosystem of any locality should comprise all that is required for basic goods. Of course, this is not always practical in all places, but the simple idea of using all local inputs except what is just unavailable locally has escaped the bureaucrats at the WTO.

While often ignored, the ancient Fathers were far more attuned to the natural economy than the anomic, urbanized academic. After all, the fathers were not normally paid and were not financed by elite forces in the banking industry. St. Ephraim shows a tremendous parallel between the view of nature and logos and the resulting conception of the virtues. The debased oligarchy in the western world projects its own alienation onto nature and calls it “empiricism.” This insight is quite old, and the Fathers remain as radical and relevant as ever.

18 Sandhu, H.S., Wratten, S.D., Cullen, R. and Case, B. (2008). The future of farming: The value of ecosystem services in conventional and organic arable land. An experimental approach. *Ecological Economics*. 64(4): 835-848.

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