

Reason and Man's Devolution into Insanity: The Social Ontology of Gregory the Great

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Gregory the Great, pope of Old Rome (540-604), is not generally known for his philosophy, yet his contributions here are immense. The human soul exists and is known with certainty since it can resist bodily desires. It is thus defined as that entity that can ruse above the passions. Gregory stresses simplicity, regardless of social rank or position in the church. His views of social life are closely connected with his view of the cosmos.

The great pope contributed to Realist metaphysics not just in the sense that he helped intellectually rebuild the destroyed west in the 6th century, on the verge of utter dissolution and depopulation, but in his own writings, which is of immense profundity. The fact that Gregory spent much time as ambassador in the Greek court of Constantinople assisted in his development greatly.

Gregory bases his approach to metaphysics and Realism around the Eucharist. Like all sacraments, the Eucharist especially cannot be understood, or is radically distorted, by nominalists. Nominalism can make no sense out of the Eucharist, since it is the presence of divinity under the matter of bread and wine. For Gregory, the renewal of creation and the renewal of human nature is manifest most profoundly in the Eucharist. Here is, in miniature, the revelation of the Logos that lies at the heart of all matter and nature. In his Exposition on the Book of Job, St. Gregory writes on the Eucharist:

Notice what follows: Do not let my cry find a hiding place in you. The blood that is drunk, the blood of redemption, is itself the cry of our Redeemer. Paul speaks of the sprinkled blood that calls out more eloquently than Abel's. Of Abel's blood Scripture had written: The voice of your brother's blood cries out to me from the earth. The blood of Jesus calls out more eloquently than Abel's, for the blood of Abel asked for the death of Cain, the fratricide, while the blood of the Lord has asked for, and obtained, life for his persecutors.

The blood of Christ is not just the presence of divinity, nor the manifestation of Logos in bread and wine. Even more, it is the synthesis of the Old Testament archetypes of blood. The Sacraments are not just symbols in the vulgar sense, they are Symbols in the true sense, that is, gateways into the Realist universe, the world of Forms. Their content exists on many levels. In this citation, Gregory stresses the true nature of Symbol, that is the synthesis of all previous, incomplete elements of the Eucharist elsewhere. The importance here is that, as society was crumbling all around him, the people remaining needed to be reminded that God's providence is not hindered by this. God rules the physical through the spiritual.

The priest and bishop, those who help bring this revelation about, are ambassadors between the two worlds of earthly and heavenly life. Gregory himself was an ambassador to the very different Greek world of Constantinople. Clearly, the regeneration of all thing was on the mind of any sensitive person who, at the time, was living through the total dissolution of

civilization.

There are two kinds of Christians. Both are of value, but they differ based on their closeness to the Spirit. The first is he who is directly guided by the spirit. For him, the law is not necessary – the Spirit takes control of his soul. On the other hand, those people who come to the church to discipline their will are also important and make up the majority of the church. These have a lesser dependence on the Spirit, and are under the canon law and pastoral discipline of the church. The first is the saint, the other is the common believer. He writes on his Paschal Sermon:

The Church of the elect will be fully day only when the darkness of sin is no longer mixed in with it. It will be fully day only when it shines with the perfect warmth of a light that comes from within. God shows that we are still going through this dawn when he says to Job, Have you ever sent the dawn to its post? Something that is being sent somewhere is being sent from one place or state to another. What is the destined place of the dawn if not the perfect brightness of the eternal vision? And when it has reached its place, will it still have any of the darkness of the night that has passed? The dawn was intent on reaching its destined place when the psalmist said My soul thirsts for the living God; when shall I appear before the face of God? The dawn was hurrying to the place it knew to be its destiny when Paul said that he wanted to die and to be with Christ, and when he said For me to live is Christ and to die is gain.

The church is the Form of the Good manifest on earth. Due to human sin and passion, it is not seen as such, but only as a collection of believers, of many different kinds. It can only “shine,” as Light, when it is purged of its accretions brought about by the passions. Passion itself exists only in respect to individual, physical objects of desire. Forms in the Platonic sense do not elicit such responses.

The “eternal vision” is the presence of God's grace; the manifestation of perfection, the perfect Form of Goodness on earth. Darkness is sin and passion, always associated with that which is material, and hence, individual. “Dawn” is the slow development, or unveiling, of the Truth as such, rather than under physical appearances. The sacraments condescend to our human senses by providing nominal, material sensibles. But these are Symbols in the true sense, entryways into the Light, the Truth and Church as such, not under the veil of appearance. This is St. Gregory's philosophical contribution.

The Eucharist approaches both kinds of men equally. The point is that matter is never actually matter in the New Dispensation. It exists as it always has existed, as the home of the Spirit. Since Adam, spirit has been disassociated from matter. Since Pentecost, the two natural counterparts have been rejoined. When God is rejected, the natural order is overturned. From the social point of view, this refers to the Satanic concept of “inversion.” The cardinal principle of nominalism and modernity, inversion can refer to anything, but it is the backwards nature of social life. The woman is superior to the man, the child against the father, matter is placed on a higher level than the spirit. This is the result of social breakdown, caused by the refusal to see Logos in objects. Gregory was a proud Roman, as was St. Jerome, and one of the virtues of that empire was its recognition—incompletely to be sure—of Logos in nature.

There is a close relation between the sacraments, the church and the created order in general. Logos was soon as the “sun,” or that which cannot be seen directly, but whose affects are clear. Another example is the soul: this cannot be seen directly, but man, in experiencing his

freedom, thereby experiences something within his power that is not carnal. Logos is perceived in creation as the lawfulness whereby all material things move. Logos is invisible in the same sense that natural law in general is.

The church is Logos as found in the “new” nature of the Christian life. The church buildings, icons and other sacramentals is the re-creation of the natural order in Symbolic form. In this case, the Symbol is of Logos or Wisdom made explicit and clear in this order. Under the curse, human beings can only dimly see the outline of Wisdom in the natural order, while some cannot see it at all. Wisdom negates all attempts of humanity to appropriate and control nature, meaning that nominalism is required before nature can be made the “property” of an economic elite. To remove Wisdom and order from nature is to leave it vulnerable to human appropriation and exploitation. The more Wisdom can be seen—and the church as such makes this explicit—the more nature is seen as iconic. The difference between nature as dead matter and nature as iconic is the difference between fallen and redeemed humanity. Sacraments are then a foretaste of this nature “corrected” through grace and regeneration. In truth, it is not creation itself that is corrected, but man's perception of it.

Logos shows that the spiritual and the carnal exist side by side in the cosmos. Creation is the forming of formless matter. These forms, or the six days of creation, are potentialities where history is bringing them to their final end. There is no sharp distinctions between the two in basic ontology. At the same time, heaven, Hell and judgment are too mixed in our earthly lives, as a sort of foretaste of the final judgment – there are no toll houses or purgatory. All men are judged immediately at death as to their deeds.

For most, holiness is manifest not in flights of mysticism, but rather in the simple social virtues so essential to rebuilding the devastated west. Like St. Benedict, whose cult Gregory was instrumental in development, stability was of immense importance – for the bulk of Christians, this was the continuation in the basic social virtues. Humility lies at the root. In other words, social harmony, and harmony within the church revolves around humility, each knowing his place, and the place itself continuing both important responsibilities and significant rewards. He writes in his Moral Reflections on Job:

When Paul says to Timothy Command these things and teach them with all authority, he is not calling for a domination born of power but an authority that comes from a way of life. “Teaching with authority” here means living something first before preaching it; for when speech is impeded by conscience, the hearer will find it harder to trust what is being taught. So Paul is not commanding the power of proud and exalted words, but the trustworthiness that comes from good behavior. This, indeed, is why it is said of the Lord, Unlike the scribes and pharisees, he taught them with authority. He alone spoke with unique authority because he had never, through weakness, done evil. What he had from the power of his divinity, he taught to us through the innocence of his humanity.

Sin, death and suffering are profoundly unnatural at root. These all result from pride, which is the vice behind nominalism – the part seeking independence from the whole. The nominalist mind is so soaked in sin and materialism that the parts, the bare objects are all that exist. Autonomy, in this vulgar sense, is the origin of sin and death. Pride lies at the basis of nominalism and this false “freedom.” Again from his work on Job:

For the human soul by the sin of the first man was expelled from the joys of paradise, lost the light of the invisible and poured itself out entirely in the love of the visible; and so was made blind to the interior sight, deformed to the degree it was dissipated without. Whence it comes to pass that it knows nothing except that which it knows by bodily eyes, that is to say in the manner of touching. For man, if he had been willing to keep the commandment, would even in his flesh have been spiritual, yet sinning was made even in soul carnal, so that it only knows in the soul which it obtains through bodily images. The body is a quality of heaven, earth, water, animals and all visible things, which he unceasingly considers; and while the delighted mind throws itself entirely into these things, it wanders from the fineness of its interior intelligence; and whereas it is now no longer able to erect itself to things on high, in weakness it willingly lies prostrate in things below.

Christ's power is manifest in the church through the holy spirit. This spirit both awakens the soul to its wretched state and, after a suitable time of the ascetic life, brings it to salvation. God illuminates the soul directly, though even secular reason can see the absurdity of sin's consequences (as Plato did).

Repentance is not a single act, but a lifetime of struggle. The love for God is not something available to the secular man. Therefore, this is the result of the holy spirit's actions. "Stability" is a monastic term with many meanings, but the ascetic life seeks to fasten it to the church, hence its stability is to remain close to God's grace (that is, is energy and presence) so as to avoid sin. Another way to put it is that the ascetic life opens new vistas of experience in that new parts of the world – the spiritual realm – usually closed off from others, are opened. This then is to take the place of the pleasures of the flesh.

God's works are often seen as "mysterious." A common saying reflects that. What is really means is clear in St. Gregory: that our prison of the fragmented, empirical world keeps us from seeing much of God's long term plan. Sin, even by the elect, closes the mind in the best of circumstances.

This goes for "evil." The work of demons is the work of God in that God permits their behavior. This is because evil is not really evil in the conversational sense o the term. Pain, while it is occurring, is awful. However, once over, usually the Christian will see its salutary affect on behavior. Sin is forgiven, new perspectives are opened and bad habits are corrected. It is not evil after all.

One of the critical passages on social life in Gregory's work can be found in his work on Job:

Earthly goods are denied to the elect in this life because the physician never allows sick people for whom there is hope of recovery all the things they desire. To the reprobate, however, are granted all the good things which they seek in this life, because nothing which they desire is denied to the sick whose recovery is despaired. Let the just consider well the evils that await the wicked and let them never envy a happiness that comes to an end. Why should their joys be desired, for while the just are journeying to the fatherland of salvation along a rough path, the wicked are, as it were, traveling to the pit through pleasant meadows?

God, though not directly, permits the evil to have what they desire. Their desire is warped and earthly goods do not bring happiness, so it is sin and an immersion in a perverted that permits one to see their good as “good.” If one looks at a person who seems to “have it all” and is jealous thereby, the good of the world are erroneously taken as good in itself. Usually, the goods involved are only goods if the worldly power structure is seen to be correct. It is not. Therefore, the goods that these people enjoy (or think they enjoy) are to be pitied.

“Contemplation” refers to the non-empirical connection between God and man without any intermediaries such as particular objects. The “interior light” is the result of human nature not motivated by the internal lusts and appetite. This is lost with sin. Yet, God expects little from us, as we read again from the work on Job:

We, being mortal and unrighteous, stood a great distance from righteousness and immortality. But between us, the mortal and unjust, and the immortal and righteous appeared the mortal and righteous Mediator of God and man, who shared mortality with humans, and righteousness with God; so that even though through our lowliness we stood far away from the heights, he joined in himself together the lowliness and the height, and so he became for us a way of return, for he united our depths with his heights.

These sort of statements are common and ambiguous. It reads as if to say that God has deified our weak efforts. This is likely what it means, meaning salvation is far easier than many of the canonists such as John the Faster suggest. Gregory suggests elsewhere that Christ acted as a lightning rod for us, taking all the rage of the demons upon ourselves. Yet, Satan's rage is visits upon the church daily, so this cannot be taken literally. An important passage from his commentary on Ezekiel reads:

Dearest brothers, we must recognize the evils that we have committed, and we must wear away ourselves with continual sorrow. Let us seize through penitence the inheritance of the righteous, which we do not hold by our way of life. Almighty God wants to undergo this kind of violence from us. For he desires us to seize the kingdom of heaven through our tears, which we are not owed by our merits.

By sorrow he can only mean the ascetic life – not “depression” in the modern usage. It is through an ordered life where physical goods of the world receive a decidedly secondary place. These are scorned in all cases except where utterly necessary. Yet even this never works, since our “merit” is not to blame for our salvation. The struggle is sufficient. If it were not, then our merits would be sufficient themselves.

Ego, “freedom” and pride seek to separate from the whole and dominate it. Politics and the state exist only through pride. Ego seeks power over all. Sin is the cause of politics, and sin is at the root of the political mind. Politics is the opposite of the social – the latter is the natural state of the human soul; reason can develop only in community. Politics is profoundly unnatural, and it refers to the domination of the community. Politics is anti-social. At the same time, power and authority are also opposites. The latter is based on merits such as holiness or superior knowledge. Power is totally fungible because anyone can wield it so long as they have the deviousness to take it. Anyone with the money or social influence can have power. Authority is

for the few. Gregory writes in Book I of his *Pastoral Rule*:

For who could so blamelessly have had principality over men as He who would in fact have reigned over those whom He had Himself created? But, because He had come in the flesh to this end, that He might not only redeem us by His passion but also teach us by His conversation, offering Himself as an example to His followers, He would not be made a king; but He went of His own accord to the gibbet of the cross. He fled from the offered glory of pre-eminence, but desired the pain of an ignominious death; that so His members might learn to fly from the favours of the world, to be afraid of no terrors, to love adversity for the truth's sake, and to shrink I fear from prosperity; because this often defiles the heart through vainglory, while that purges it through sorrow; in this the mind exalts itself, but in that, even though it had once exalted itself, it brings itself low; in this man forgets himself, but in that, even perforce and against his will, he is recalled to memory of what he is; in this even good things done aforetime often come to nothing, but in that faults even of long standing are wiped away.

Social ranks are lies – they are illusions based on the ability to grasp the levers of power without any purpose or authority. Social rank is based on power. Social influence is based on authority. Social order and stability is based on the latter, never the former. Gregory writes in a letter to his bishops under the Merovingian monarch Childbert:

To this end has the provision of the divine dispensation appointed that there should be diverse degrees and distinct orders, that, while the inferiors shew reverence to the more powerful and the more powerful bestow love on the inferiors, one contexture of concord may ensue of diversity, and the administration of all several offices may be properly borne. Nor indeed could the whole otherwise subsist; unless, that is, a great order of differences of this kind kept it together. . . For hence peace and charity embrace each other mutually, and the sincerity of concord remains firm in the reciprocal love which is well pleasing to God.

The modern man will read this and immediately think of income and power. At the time of course, those things were considered vulgar. What Gregory is referring to here is importance, experience, social roles and relative contributions to the common good. He supports class rule, but not a class that is based on income. Diversity in social life implies in equality, since not all men will fulfill their roles with equal vigor. Furthermore, a high rank, granted through experience and virtue, requires great mercy to those below. If this is not shown, then, as the above implies, obedience is not necessary.

The Antichrist will be a Jew, a man of great power. He will not be recognized as an enemy because the church will have been reduced to nothing. The Jews will dominate when perception has been reduced to only the carnal. The miracles of the Antichrist will be non-existent. They will be seen by the mass-man because that's what he's been conditioned to expect from this elite.

In his commentary on the rarely read *Song of Songs*, he writes,

Because reflection upon the nature of things does not reach its ideal state unless the life concerned with behavior precedes it, Ecclesiastes is rightly placed after Proverbs. And since we do not gaze upon the object of our heavenly contemplation unless we first disdainfully look away from those things slipping away below, the Song of Songs is rightly placed after Ecclesiastes. To be sure, one first reforms his behavior; after a while he reflects upon all things present as if they were not present; third, he gazes upon pure things with heavenly and interior keenness of heart. And so it is as though a kind of ladder leading to the contemplation of God is constructed with these books as its rungs. Thus, after someone has suitably discharged honorable things in the world and then disdainfully looked away from them, he may behold the profound depths of God to the utmost.

The fall derives from a lust for power and control. Antichrist will seek to be like God through power, not grace. Man is not being punished, but is just being left to the consequences of his sin: God does not “punish” but simply permits the parasitic nature of evil to feed off the good and the consequences naturally follow. The reprobate are under the rule of cause and effect only. They have no freedom. Gregory writes in his work on Job:

For the human soul by the sin of the first man was expelled from the joys of paradise, lost the light of the invisible and poured itself out entirely in the love of the visible; and so was made blind to the interior sight, deformed to the degree it was dissipated without. Whence it comes to pass that it knows nothing except that which it knows by bodily eyes, that is to say in the manner of touching. For man, if he had been willing to keep the commandment, would even in his flesh have been spiritual, yet sinning was made even in soul carnal, so that it only knows in the soul which it obtains through bodily images. The body is a quality of heaven, earth, water, animals and all visible things, which he unceasingly considers; and while the delighted mind throws itself entirely into these things, it wanders from the fineness of its interior intelligence; and whereas it is now no longer able to erect itself to things on high, in weakness it willingly lies prostrate in things below.

This is man's history. While the Orthodox reject the dogma of evolution that rules secular societies, the church certainly does preach the gospel of devolution. Evolutionary dogma suggests that the organisms that populate the world are improving. As the more fit and intelligent manifest their power through offspring, this implies that the world as a whole gets more stable and stronger. The reality, easily verifiable by a walk down the street, says otherwise. Gregory above states that the descent from the intellectual to the carnal state is gradual, and that it effects one's understanding of the world. After a time, the sinner (whether the person or the society) comes to completely ignore the life of the spirit. Some time after, the spiritual world is denied altogether. The material world is then just a projection of their debased desires and the ego, in this case, has no connection with reality at all. The result is that man presently lives in a fantasy state.

Justice is a mix of rules and mercy: the spirit and the letter. Yet, since charity is the highest virtue, rule following is the lowest form of good behavior. Adam in paradise was able to

actually contemplate God without the assistance of carnal things. Carnality and dense matter are results of the fall. The result, as man decayed over time, was empiricism, or the bare piecing together some kind of universal knowledge through increasingly alienated and arbitrary individual things. The fall in history led to a slow decline in man's intellectual powers. Christ's sacrifice on the cross only affected a handful of people able to live the ascetic life. The church alone contains the results of Christ's negation of this fall.

This handful – the saints – have been able to restore the connection between God and man through the church. The saints are the church tout court and there is no church without them. As Satan rules the souls of the reprobate, God rules the souls of the saints, acting through them. This is the nature of salvation. Free will is lost once truth has been found. One this occurs, free will makes no sense.

Politically speaking, this is reflected in his letter to the Byzantine emperor Phocas: "Let every single person's liberty be now at length restored to him under the yoke of empire. For there is this difference between the kings of the nations and the emperors of the republic, that the kings of the nations are lords of slaves, but the emperors of the republic lords of freemen." This underscores the point above: the gentiles are not free. They are the results of the devolution of history and have degraded to the point of being part of the material, natural order and have lost their reasoning ability except for the most pragmatic concerns.

Ultimately, history is the arena where God's plan for creation is worked out. The whole of creation is based on unequal ranks and functions that carry out different roles. For human beings, there is functional inequality, but the only real meaning of that is greater service. Even as pope Gregory saw as, while an exalted office, crushing in its responsibility. Power is not to be sought.

Creation is manifest and ruled by the spiritual realm both directly and indirectly. Natural law is not visible to the eye and cannot be proven to exist except in that it is presumed in all scientific endeavor. However, even this dissipates as mass delusion projects a flux or a chaos onto the world around them. There is no real distinction between epistemology, theology and ontology, but each focuses on a different aspect of the social realm. This state of fantasy that devolution creates is the punishment. The modern world is not the cause of God's severity, it is his severity.

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