

Subsidiarity and Society: The Moral Person in a Moral Community

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You cannot live a good life by yourself. You can only be good in good relationships with other persons. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, the philosopher Aristotle teaches that the most necessary good for human life is—not contemplation, not the vision of truth, not even perfection in virtue, although that’s implicated, but—friendship. “Without friends,” said Aristotle, “no one would choose to live, though he had all other goods.”² The essence of friendship, furthermore, is not love, as we might want to say (due to our Christian influence), but rather justice. Friendship occurs, says Aristotle, when we treat the other person with justice, and the purest form of friendship is the one in which there is the most justice. It follows that the state, whose proper role is to assure justice, is thus comprised, not of the persons who are its subjects, but of the friendships that make it up. The state, we might say, is the sum of the friendships that occur within it. This concept of friendship and the state underlies most of the subsequent philosophical development of the idea of human society in Western culture.

And it’s the place where we need to begin this lecture. I have been asked to talk about the idea of subsidiarity, not as it occurs in Catholic thought or religious teaching, but in the

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² Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Various Editions, n.d., bk. VIII, Ch. 1.

philosophical tradition and on philosophical grounds. In the Western philosophy of the natural moral law, following from the insight described above, subsidiarity occurs as one of four root principles of human society. These principles are inter-related; they all are present at least minimally in any society, and for a society to be good they all must be working together in the proper balance. So we can't understand subsidiarity very well without knowing something about the whole framework of these principles and how they interrelate. Indeed, the lack of such context can lead to misunderstanding and confusion about the idea of subsidiarity, which we sometimes see in today's political discourse.

What I want to do, then, is to give you a framework or image of all the root principles of human society, as expounded in Western philosophy. Then with that background we can focus in on the idea of subsidiarity more clearly, based on the natural moral law and particularly in the modern political context. Then I will conclude by suggesting some particular implications of these ideas for our own moral lives in community in America.

In the natural law tradition society is not something that needs to be explained, but is put forth as an axiom of human life. Aristotle said, "Man is by nature a political animal."³ Many commentators have observed that the word translated "political" might just as well have been translated as "social" or "communal," that is, dedicated to the life of the polis; and some translations use the word "social". In Aristotle's day, the "polis" did not just designate the framework for defense, legislation and public policy, like the word "political" connotes in our day. The polis was also the central community of life. It was the place where people interacted with one another, and were drawn out of themselves into something higher and nobler in their interchange with each other.

³ Aristotle, *Politics* (Various editions, 2006), bk. 1, sec. 2.

In our day it is important to emphasize the communal nature of life, because we dwell in the midst of the myth of the isolated individual, the independent, self-reliant person; but this abstraction can be found nowhere in actual human life. Aristotle says, “Anyone who either cannot lead the common life or is so self-sufficient as not to need to, and therefore does not partake of society, is either a beast or a god.”⁴ Actual humans are always embedded in a wealth of relationships, in which their lives are initiated, completed, and find their meaning.

Man is not only social, natural law philosophy observes, but social by nature. Aristotle posited human community as a first principle, that we are social beings. He actually makes three primary statements about human nature, that begin “Man is by nature ...”. We are probably all familiar with the one we learned in school, that man is by nature a rational animal; which, as I said last year, refers to our ability to make moral choices. Later in the *Politics* Aristotle also says man is by nature a conjugal animal. Humans—we may observe, following Aristotle—are the product of human community in both body and mind. Every human being enters the world as the product of a special relationship between two human beings; so no one enters the world without already being related to someone. And we enter the world utterly helpless; for many years we are dependent on other human beings for sustenance.

Four Principles of Human Society

Just as the ideal goal of friendship is to help the other person find their highest good, so the purpose of human society is the ennoblement of human character or the promotion of virtue, or put another way, to help each person find his or her meaning and purpose in the world. Our ideals for the ennoblement of character form the basis of what we call culture. The very image of the world “culture” is of cultivating a plant, that is, creating the conditions that enable its higher and better growth. So human society is the realm of cultivating human life, or drawing it to its

⁴ Ibid.

higher purposes. Therefore a society that promotes human character and virtue more fully is better than a society that does not. Fostering the good and the development of persons, like one friend does for another, is the good of the community, or as it is often called today, the common good. We may define the common good, then, as the set of social conditions that allows and encourages each person in society to find his fulfillment more fully and more easily.

The common good, then, exists in a reciprocal relationship with the personal or individual good. Just like in a true friendship both friends must be devoted to the good of the other, so in a true community the common good and the personal good must serve each other. You cannot live a good life except in a good community; and you cannot have a good community except when the people in it live a good life. So people in their relations with one another must seek to serve and build up the good of the community; and the community in its relations with its members, or the state in its relations with its subjects, must always seek to serve their personal goods; and these are respectively the principles of solidarity and subsidiarity. So we have four principles that together describe the dynamic interaction of persons that make up human society: personal virtue or fulfillment; the common good; solidarity; and subsidiarity. Figure One (shown below at the end of the text) displays these four principles graphically. Aristotle and the ancients identified only the first two of these; although the basic idea of the other two are certainly implicit in the ancients, the understanding of solidarity and subsidiarity as distinct principles was a result of the developing understanding of natural law social theory beginning in the 18th century (as the Lamazon reading⁵ makes clear for subsidiarity). The large, coercive, secular nation-state of modernity required more formalization of the relation of state power to individual freedom than did the small city-state of Aristotle's experience.

⁵ Benjamin Llamazon, "Subsidiarity: The Term, Its Metaphysics and Use," *Aquinas: Rivista Internazionale Di Filosofia* 47 (1978): 44–62.

Solidarity is the virtue of persons by which in their relations they uphold the common good, that is, the good of the community, and so, as the name implies, help make the community “solid”. The point of solidarity is not just to enter into compassion or fellow-feeling with people who are hurting, but with people whom *we* have hurt, so as to restore the broken community. We might think of it as the glue that holds society together. For Durkheim, Parsons, and most modern non-religious social theorists, solidarity involves relations that address the different and contrasting interests of persons so as to bring them together in a common project or to serve shared interests. The usual context in mind is the workplace; Durkheim saw the division of labor as the most effective means of solidarity in modern society. The corresponding institutional expression is the labor union, like the Solidarity labor union in Europe which opposed and eventually overcame communism in the 1990s.

Subsidiarity

Subsidiarity is the property of a community by which, in its relations with its members, it serves to build up their own personal good and fulfillment. It is the principle, in other words, by which the common good is transmitted or applied to the individuals and smaller parts that make up the community. As such, it is the reciprocal principle to solidarity: solidarity conforms persons to serve the common good; subsidiarity conforms the common good to serve persons.

In the hierarchical community of the state, subsidiarity constrains governance, and particularly the application of coercive government authority, to only those actions which will best serve the fulfillment of each person governed. This is expressed in two ways: by subsidiary reserve and subsidiary intervention. A state that operates in subsidiarity does not exert its authority in any matter that can be decided on a smaller or more local level (subsidiary reserve).

At the same time, subsidiarity requires that the state stand ready to intervene coercively whenever the smaller or more local community itself undermines human freedom or fulfillment. The word subsidiarity comes from the Latin *subsidium*, which, in the Roman army, were the reserve troops, held behind the line of battle ready to go in, but not used unless they were needed. The state, for example, does not (or should not) dictate to parents, under normal circumstances, how to raise their children; but when parents become abusive of their children or otherwise threaten the children's own development and growth and persons, as occasionally happens, then the state has an obligation to intervene to preserve the good, and sometimes the health or even life, of the child.

Generally speaking, with all the exceptions that come with generally speaking, conservative modern political theorists focus on subsidiary reserve to the exclusion of subsidiary intervention, as if subsidiarity means nothing more than that decisions should be made by those most affected by them. In this narrower sense, subsidiarity is closely analogous to the political principle that legitimate government rules by the consent of the governed. When Miner points out that subsidiarity is expressed in American and European political constitutions—in the Tenth Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, which states that powers not enumerated therein are reserved to the individual states or to the people, i.e., the principle of federalism; and in the Maastricht Treaty of 1992 which established the European Union, which explicitly uses the word “subsidiarity” to restrict the activity of the European Community with regard to its member states—he is using the word in this limited sense.

Liberal political theorists and state bureaucracies, on the other hand, tend to emphasize the obligation of subsidiary intervention and focus on the benevolent use of state power to overrule the deficiencies and limitations of local decision-makers. The necessity of a minimum wage or

public health care are the two most common examples of the advantage of this approach.

Likewise, conservative theorists tend to see in the idea of subsidiarity a brake on the power of big government, while liberal theorists see it as limiting the power of large business corporations.

Against the modern tendency toward a totalitarian state limited only by the rights of citizens, subsidiarity envisions the formation of a vibrant ecology of smaller institutions-- assemblies, clubs, leagues, churches, committees, political parties—that mediate between the autonomous individual and the omniscient state to create a space for human freedom to flourish. Tocqueville makes this case in the reading,⁶ in his chilling description of the stupefaction of the citizens which passively acquiesce to the pervasive control of the modern state and his admiring description of Americans' energetic exercise of the right of association. This is the realm of civil society, composed primarily of voluntary associations, formed not to pursue profit or power, but to enrich human life in countless other ways. In a subsidiary civil society, in which larger and more formal associations respect the autonomy and competence of smaller and more personal ones, human persons find maximum freedom, since there is no association smaller and more personal than that of a person with himself.

As important as subsidiary governance is for the maintenance of a vibrant civil society and the promotion of individual freedom, it is particularly essential for the formation and perpetuation of families. Subsidiarity conforms most fully to the character of the family, where there is a distinct sphere of privacy and autonomy which is necessary for the fulfillment of that association. A national society may or may not (some more and some less) reflect the character of a family writ large, but a family does recapitulate all of the features and functions of national society writ small. For Aristotle, the state is a natural outgrowth of the conjugal family, which is the

⁶ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, Various editions (Online at <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/815>, 1840), bk. 1 ch. 12, bk. 2 ch. 4.

irreducible necessary association of mankind; and is comprised of families, not individuals.⁷ The family predates and is more fundamental than the other major collective actors of modern life--the state and the mercantile corporation. Families existed before states; provide, in the absence or deficiency of a state, the support for their members that states typically do today; and will doubtless continue to order human life if and when states ever cease to function. Conjugal solidarity is, for Durkheim, who invented the idea, the model for the “organic” solidarity expressed in the division of labor of industrial society. Both subsidiary reserve and subsidiary intervention express, with particular force, the disposition of a community and state that is necessary for families to exist and thrive.

As a principle, subsidiarity privileges not merely the smallest or most local associations, but the most intimate and personal ones. A large family takes precedence over a small local firm or government agency in the same way that these take precedence, in turn, over larger and more distant agencies. The pertinent difference is not that one has more members than the other but that it has less personal or more general concerns. The “larger” association may not be comprised of more people, though it is generally concerned with a larger number of subjects, but it is larger in the sense that it takes a larger view of the situation. For this reason it takes a smaller view of the persons involved.

Subsidiarity recognizes that the larger and more diverse the persons in a social enterprise, the less each one of them can be treated with the full personal consideration to which each is entitled. Large associations constrict personhood; it takes small associations to make large persons. Rules must become more general and formal the more widely they apply. The bigger the scope of a rule in application, the smaller can be its responsiveness to the unique and various personal characters of those ruled by it. Big rules only admit of small exceptions, if any, while

⁷ Aristotle, *Politics*, bk. 1, sec. 2.

small rules admit of many exceptions, indeed may be almost nothing but exceptions, until they are literally exceptional. In this sense, the sense of authority and domination, big men, in wide and powerful relationships, can only make small decisions. Their decisions can at best touch only a small part of the meaning of human life. It takes a small man, in small relationships, to make the big decisions, the ones that will shape his life and love for eternity.

Conclusion

Perhaps the most important conclusion of all this for our thinking about subsidiarity is that we cannot properly understand it, or properly apply it to understand other things, in isolation from the other principles of human society observed in natural law reasoning. You may have discerned by this point that subsidiarity, as a principle, does not provide a test or rule for assessing particular political proposals or candidates, though an understanding of it can help us to think more clearly. Each political situation is complex, and all of the principles of society must be considered. We must always balance the subsidiary imperative of society with a concern for solidarity and for the common good; and we must persistently direct all three of these principles always to serve the worth, meaning or purpose in life of actual human persons.

Following from this, we should never forget that subsidiarity and solidarity always operate in a reciprocal and complementary way in human society. The one does not work well or properly without the other; and to think of them as separate in practice leads inevitably to distortion. This is so much the case that it may be better, when we are applying these ideas, to talk about the subsidiarity-solidarity complex than about either principle by itself.

I know that in kinlein you emphasize not just understanding something intellectually, but putting it into practice, moving in it. So I want to conclude by also suggesting some implications

or movements that an understanding of subsidiarity, or the subsidiarity-solidarity complex, may hold for our moral life in community.

First, subsidiarity and solidarity call us to participation in society. We can't just focus on our own interior life or growth in virtue or circle of like-minded people. We have to break down the barriers between our lives, our own little worlds. Let me give you an example of what I mean. This past summer I had the blessing, by the grace of God, to spend some time in Lagos, Nigeria, Africa. Lagos is a huge modern metropolis, among the five largest cities in the world. There is a great deal of wealth; there are more millionaires per capita than in the United States. But when it rains, the whole center city floods; most streets are riddled with potholes; electric power flickers on for only a few hours a day at best. When you walk down a street in the middle class part of Lagos, picking around the mud and the trash, you see huge concrete walls, one after another, with locked gates with metal grills, and often armed guards. Each home has its own compound. Inside the compound is lovely house, with all the comforts that we know. There is electric power supplied by their own private generator; clean running water from their own well or cistern; beautiful furnishings; an expensive luxury automobile. Each house is walled off to itself; it's beautiful on the inside of the wall, but stark and ugly and difficult to survive on the outside. They are like the persons Tocqueville describes in the reading: "Each of them, living apart, is as a stranger to the fate of all the rest; his children and his private friends constitute to him the whole of mankind. As for the rest of his fellow citizens, he is close to them, but he does not see them; he touches them, but he does not feel them; he exists only in himself and for himself alone"⁸ This is a society with a profound lack of solidarity and subsidiarity, where there is not even a basic public physical infrastructure, in many respects. Our society, thank God, is much more advanced in this area, and we enjoy far more public benefits and structure. But we too can

become isolated spiritually or psychically, living in our beautiful private compound, walling out the world and not seeing those who are beyond the wall. We have to make the effort to move out and participate in society.

Second, when we participate, subsidiarity calls us to build community; not just form a family, engage in a business or profession, and support a government. Civil society in America is disappearing. The Harvard sociologist Robert Putnam wrote a book about this about ten years ago, tracing the loss of civic participation and engagement of all types over the past generation in America. We're talking about civil society, which is non-remunerative activity of all kinds, but the most striking loss he found was in the decline of adult sports leagues. The title of his book was his best illustration: *Bowling Alone*. He found that there used to be all kinds of bowling leagues and sports associations for adults, but today there are almost none. More and more, people today are bowling by themselves; playing golf by themselves; go go to the movies by themselves or go out to eat as singles. The fabric of relationships of civil society in American life, that used to be rich and thick, is becoming thin and frayed. We need to rebuild it. We can't tell the government to hold back from imposing on our civil life if we are not going to step in and build a strong civil community. In a word, volunteer. It's not a bad thing to give funds for charity, but that doesn't advance community. Offer your time and your presence to your neighborhood or city to make it a better place. Form enduring associations not devoted to profit or power, but for the purpose of furthering particular ideals, points of view, or local interests, to counterbalance the power of big government and big business. I say this to you here not to exhort you but to commend you because this assembly and The National Center of Kinlein are great examples of such efforts.

⁸ Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, bk. 2, sec. 4, ch. 6.

Finally, to build up a subsidiary society, start your own business or practice. Not a multi-national conglomerate, but your own manageable local firm. Small agencies and small businesses are the modern-day equivalent of the small farms observed by Tocqueville. Too many people aspire to the security of a corporate position rather than the creativity of an entrepreneurial endeavor. A strong, vibrant, diverse society only happens when people take the risks to pursue their own dreams and participate in constructing their own destinies.

