

The Impossible Concurrence: The Continuing Legacy of Ockham's Razor¹

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Our contemporaries are insistent upon taking actions that are intended to end human suffering, whether this comes from social injustice, war, poverty, illness, environmental crises or a myriad of other sources. Though this seems like a natural reaction to situations that are troubling and worrisome, it must not cause us to lose sight of the fact that in the case of any perceived malady, a correct diagnosis must be the basis for any decision about remedial action. A disproportionate preoccupation with action risks forgetting that it has always been the unanimous conviction of all traditional societies that humankind's sufferings stem not from a lack of science and the application of appropriate resources, but from the inward disharmony of the soul. This is the soul cut off from its inward connection with the Absolute, the "fallen soul" or the soul shrouded by ignorance, the description depending upon the perspective of the given tradition. This is not to say that evil and suffering do not exist. It is simply to bring attention to the fact that if one tries to fight the calamities of this world without the correct identification of their fundamental causes and without regard for the total Truth that encompasses them, then incomparably worse calamities will ensue. If mankind could be exempted from all physical, material cares, would this bring about our ultimate, profound and lasting happiness? History

¹ The title of this article is paraphrased from: Frithjof Schuon, *The Transfiguration of Man*, the chapter "The Impossible Convergence", (Bloomington, Indiana: World Wisdom Books, Inc., 1995), p. 37.

is replete with examples to the contrary.² In short, it is useless to only suppress effects if the underlying causes are not addressed. But this entails, precisely, admitting that man's³ reason for being lies beyond the physical and psychological shells that constitute his individual ego.

Since what we propose is to contrast differing worldviews, we have to begin with agreeing that ideas have consequences. So, for example, if the prevailing contemporary ideas are correct, our world is like an ailing patient who needs a cure, or like a mechanism that needs repair. A certain logic would say that, given the correct diagnosis, one applies the medicine which restores health. Or—in the image of the mechanism—one uses the right tool or tools to put things in order. But what if the mechanism needs something more than “a bigger hammer”? Or to return to the image of the ailing patient, if the diagnosis is faulty to begin with, then taking the prescribed medicine will not bring about a cure. And what if the certain cure for the patient is something new to us, something that challenges what we currently accept as norms? In both cases, we would do well to consider a different way of looking at things, a different worldview. And the reason this is necessary is that there is actually an important question which is but rarely addressed: has there ever been a patient who lives forever, and has there ever been a mechanism that never comes to the end of its useful life? It is not that our contemporaries deny the need for correct diagnosis, but what is essential is to see that the roots of these maladies lie not in the “horizontal” dimension of measurable causes and effects, but in the loss of what we will call the “vertical” dimension. In the face of trials and suffering, is there a worldview that can situate them in a more ample perspective of the purpose of human life instead of seeking immediate relief, a relief that may actually be detrimental to that ultimate purpose?

We wish to set forth for consideration some basic principles of a

² “No one is more pitiable than he who places true happiness in fortune. No one is happier than he who does not judge fortuitous prosperity truly to be happiness”; excerpt from a letter of Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499) to Bernardo Bembo, the Venetian ambassador. *Meditations on the Soul: Selected Letters of Marsilio Ficino*, (Rochester, Vermont: Inner Traditions International, 1997), p. 116. Ficino is considered as one of the most important philosophers in the revival of the Platonic tradition that began in Europe in the fifteenth century.

³ Let it be understood that throughout this essay, wherever the word “man” is used, “woman” is also intended, in accordance with the usage customary, accepted and understood without difficulty for centuries, until very recent times.

worldview that may not be familiar to many readers but which deserve reflection. Once these have been presented, then we can return to their connection with the immediate concerns of the day. This juxtaposition of the prevalent scientific worldview with a pre-modern, theocentric worldview may remind the reader of the familiar dichotomy between science and faith. We would like to recall here that for centuries, in the traditional worldview, there was no such scission; the pursuit of knowledge was aligned with faith.⁴ One may recall the adage of Saint Anselm *credo ut intelligam*.⁵



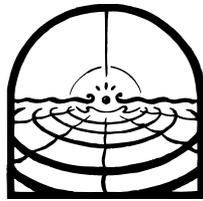
We have said above that transcending the earthly is man’s deepest nature—his immortality. In contrast, our individuality—our existential “shell”—is limited by temporal and spatial conditions, as is the phenomenal world that surrounds us. But there is within human beings an awareness of these limitations and a yearning for liberation from them; and this is an indication of the faculty in man that opens unto what is unlimited and absolute. It derives, precisely from man having been created in God’s image. Modern man’s need to satisfy this yearning has led him to seek to extend the limitations of his “existential envelope”. But the very nature of these limitations ultimately renders such efforts at their own level futile; liberation from these limits requires, precisely, connection to a higher principle and level of reality. This is the answer of the traditional worldview, which requires that man actively affirm his connection with the Absolute principle—absolute Truth—which is celestial and immutable. The Truth we are referring to here is what Meister Eckhart meant when he said, “Truth is something so noble that if God could turn aside from it, I could keep the truth and let God go.”⁶ But the question in fact does not arise, because God is absolute Truth, which transcends and at the same time comprehends its own reflection in the relative. Absolute Truth cannot be expressed in words; that which

⁴ According to a saying of Saint Mark the Ascetic, “He who does not know the truth cannot truly have faith; for by nature, knowledge precedes faith.” Saint Mark the Ascetic; *On the Spiritual Laws: Two Hundred Texts*; text 110; <http://www.stasinos.org/Arthra/Philokalia-St%20Mark%20The%20Ascetic.aspx>; retrieved 11/19/18.

⁵ “I believe in order to understand.”

⁶ Raymond Bernard Blakney, ed., *Meister Eckhart: A Modern Translation*, (New York; Harper & Row, 1941), p. 240.

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