

Chapter 3

Attacks on the Family East and West: Evidence for the Erosion of a Common Good

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3.1 Introduction

In this essay I am concerned to allow families and “thick” communities to be better appreciated as foundational to our human lives and not be perceived as merely derivative. To set about accomplishing this, what I offer is less an argument to this effect than a highlighting of historical and philosophical impediments to seeing matters in this way. I construe these impediments to be deep, influential and not often well-comprehended biases. They grow primarily out of a commitment to individualism that is poorly thought through. I enumerate and comment on a number of these individualist undercurrents, from Newton’s atomism to recent secular existentialism. Later, I suggest that Enlightenment notions of universality and autonomy not only contribute to these “anti-family” biases, but also paradoxically engender a vacuous sort of “commonality” that plays into equally empty notions of the common good. In the interim, however, I draw from both Sellars and Hegel to forward a richer notion of the “individual” that enables us better to appreciate the spiritual life and the central role that families and thick communities play in its constitution and in the constitution of all human life. I conclude with some brief reflections on the importance of empathy and of spiritual families in our contemporary world.

My underlying concern, thus, is to place the family in a better and more highlighted focus as an indispensable and foundational reality in the nurturing and development of our spiritual lives. To accomplish this, I will be examining and thereby removing some obstacles that sometimes prevent philosophical recognition of the family’s centrality. Most of these obstacles I believe to be of Western historical and philosophical origin, though in an economically oriented, rapidly globalizing era they cannot but have come to influence the Eastern world as well.

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I must also make mention of the “common,” for any discussion of individuals and the importance of families, any discussion of human spiritual life, must acknowledge philosophical influences and entanglements stemming from diverse sources. While some have hopes for a thickly pervasive “Common Good” in and for human life, others have aspirations for a very individualistically-oriented, libertarian autonomy. Still others are quite concerned to advocate and thereby preserve the family as the central and continuing normative human reality. These various stances are very much in conflict with each other, bear significantly on our understanding of persons, and require a careful sorting out. Consider once more. Is the common to be understood as the thickly shared and thereby as that by which we bond and comprehend our humanity? Or, might the common better be understood as a somewhat vacuous, lowest “common” denominator, that which covers everyone, but speaks to the diverging personalities and excellences of no particular person, family, or community? Could it function in some or even all of these ways? Answers to these questions will strongly influence our understanding of what it is to be human, to live in families and to share in community.¹

3.2 Reflections on Billiard Ball Individualism (BBI)

There are some prevalent and unfortunate undercurrents and assumptions in terms of which discussions of the individual and the *common good* are often cast. These are often problematic.² The major undercurrent I wish to pursue and to undermine stems from a strongly held Western belief that on final analysis various aggregates of human beings are constituted by multiples of entities we would most perspicuously refer to as distinguishable, separable, and therefore distinct and quite separately existing individuals. I choose to refer to this view as “Billiard Ball Individualism,” (BBI).

Let me state as clearly as possible, yet quite briefly, what BBI entails for those who would be its advocates, keeping in mind that it is an ideal type. It comes to the view that in principle whatever humanly “is” exists in independence of other such human beings. It is the belief that a human being could be understood philosophically—and

¹ Once the normative notion of the “good,” as in “common good,” is introduced into our reflections, even more issues arise. These vexing issues include regarding relations between the rights some say that individuals have as individuals, the foundational and intermediary positions occupied by families in fostering and transmitting human values, and those shared, thus allegedly “common” moral aspirations we are so often enjoined to pursue.

² It is a spiritual notion of *the person* that I wish to adumbrate. I believe that some deep failure of understanding has prevented spiritual conceptions of human life from flourishing and the unavoidably central and sustaining role of the family from being sufficiently appreciated. This has allowed secular conceptions of the person to proliferate. If we more fully comprehend our spiritual nature, by no means an easy task, we will contribute to a more insightful understanding of the vital importance of families and communities. We will also achieve a better understanding of the various ways in which the notion of a *common good* can serve us well or serve us poorly.

thus comprehended in its true reality—outside of and in sharp separation from other humans. This comprehension is not thought to be compromised by the concrete embeddedness and complex social relations that are found on the empirical level. Although not a solipsism, BBI does involve a commitment to the belief that most fundamentally the care of the human is isolate, inviolable, and therefore not metaphysically subject to the various relations into which it enters with others. In short, the individual person is viewed more on the model of a billiard ball than that of a multi-dimensional context or interactive web.

This view is by no means patently false. In fact, it has much to be said for it. It has distinguished forebears that have fostered productive results in a variety of significant areas of intellectual investigation intimately adjacent to that of the human. Adoption of BBI's own particular assumptions has also engendered fruitful, if one-sided insights in the course of investigations of the specifically human itself.

Consider Newton's atomism, a great stimulant of BBI. This atomism guided well over two centuries of scientific progress. In philosophy proper, Descartes' methodological commitment to the pursuit of clear and distinct ideas and Hume's frequently stated dictum that the impression of a complex is a complex of impressions, themselves variants of atomism, have motivated inquiries that spread into many domains (Descartes 1981, pp. 3–18; Hume 1960, pp. 1–13). In the twentieth century, these lines of thought not only morphed into logical atomism but came to exert a considerable influence on a number of aspects of libertarian economic and political thinking as well. What was emphasized in each instance was the individual item.

It is helpful to note how philosophical principles, such as Hume's and Descartes', work themselves out programmatically. Four overlapping assumptions form the basis for numerous practices and conclusions. These assumptions can be stated quite succinctly: (1) only what is capable of being known with utter clarity could qualify as the underlying, foundational reality of the world; (2) only simple, decisively distinguishable and separable items could be so known; (3) only such items could be constitutive of reality itself, that is to say, could comprise the nature of things; and (4) all other, more complex entities must be analyzable without remainder into these simple, foundational units.

Over the last century and a half or so, we have seen these principles extended from their initial residence in the *natural sciences* to more decidedly humanistic domains. These domains have themselves increasingly been construed to be under the aegis of something referred to as the *human sciences*. As applied to aggregates of people, the conclusion came to be drawn that only *individuals* were ultimately *real*.

The evolving BBI conclusion that only separable items, individuals, could be *real* was further aided—conviction of its truth made firmer—through reflection on what is referred to in Leibniz as the predicate-in-notion doctrine: to be true of a thing, any aspect of that thing must be part of it (Leibniz 1951, pp. 217ff). It must be internal to that thing. Relational properties, thus, could not truly be part of an entity, at least not in any fundamental way, for though they would have one leg in the entity, so to speak, their other leg would be elsewhere. Consider a simple example. Upon final analysis, a chair's being next to a table could not be an underlying

feature of that chair, for the “next-to” relation is also located elsewhere, *viz.*, in the table. The particular “next-to” relation possessed by the chair would then depend on the presence and position of the table, were it to have the proprietorial residence in the chair that is claimed for it. Remove the table in question and the “next-to-the-table” relation the chair has had simply vanishes.

This Leibnizian line of argument plausibly claims that the chair under consideration will remain the chair that it already was and that it will still continue to be this chair regardless of the items relationally surrounding it. Rhetorically, if not altogether convincingly stated, isn’t that which remains amidst such relational changes the “real” chair, fundamentally unaffected by the vicissitudes of what goes on around and beyond it? Must one not distinguish between relational manifestations, “real” in a phenomenal, *i.e.*, derivative sort of way, and those underlying entities grounding these relations that are actually real in a primary sort of way?

It is easy to see how this line of reasoning might be applied to varying forms of social, communal and familial reality. Your parent dies, but you remain the *you* that you are, and the same would be the case were your spouse to vanish, your neighborhood with the exception of your home to be bulldozed, your community to relocate without you, or your governing bodies to abandon their activities without having secured replacements to perform at least some of their functions.

There are a number of other undercurrents that support the account I am adumbrating. Leibnizian-type motivations and the temptations of a fastidious and contextually emancipated atomism do not comprise the entire story. Another undercurrent supporting BBI stems from a brave and often noble stoic attitude. It avows that you are who and what you are, regardless of what may happen around or even to you. From such an orientation come self-possession and a potentially robust self-reliance. A kind of strength is engendered that would be all too easily compromised, if not completely undermined through a capitulation to various seductive matrices of support and reassurance. In our time, such matrices have often come to stifle initiative and discourage creative, entrepreneurial risk-taking. In this sense, BBI has a courageous and noble lineage, and the consequences of adopting its stance have provided much to recommend it.

Another significant undercurrent supporting BBI arises through the tempting and recurrent Pythagorean-Socratic notion that the human soul—the ultimate human reality for much of the Western tradition—is itself simple and therefore without parts, certainly and particularly without *relational* parts. As simple, such a line of reasoning infers, this soul is indestructible, all “corruption” issuing only from some form of decomposition. As indestructible it is thereby also immortal. This is a compelling, axially oriented *desideratum* that has exercised an extraordinary influence over human life, invariably lived in precarious circumstances and always vulnerable. The insularity provided through the BBI model, thus, offers not only fortitude for dealings *in* the world. Prior to its secularization, BBI itself drew strength from a spiritual inheritance that offered not only consolation but also hope for a final refuge *beyond* this world.

Still another undercurrent supporting BBI is found in the protestant, primarily Lutheran notion of the priesthood of all believers. This is the doctrine that every

human being finally and inescapably faces God alone. To face God alone and thus without the benefit of mediating agencies, it is strongly believed, is to confront a God hopefully of mercy but certainly of judgment and possibly of wrath. Searching and exhaustively uncovering every darkness and depravity of the individual human heart, such judgment is taken by protestant believers to be a relentless activity through which God engages with human beings throughout their earthly lives. This mode of engagement cannot but terrify the human soul. Such was Luther's unequivocal understanding of the matter. At the same time, however, when in conjunction with a supervening grace, this circumstance is said to liberate human beings for productive activities *in* the world. Salvation—immortality now construed through an alternative and significantly life-altering vocabulary—is not for human beings to achieve through their own means, but is divinely and undeservedly bestowed. Invariably, however, it is bestowed only on individuals. In these matters, families and communities can be of no help. All the weight and responsibility falls on individuals.

At its articulated extreme, these most fundamental, salvific concerns of the protestant faith become an utterly private affair in which in every instance only two are involved: God and the individual human being. A spiritual situation is thereby constructed that is damaging in its consequences to the familial, communal, and social. These latter are not given due attention or consideration. The damage inflicted is similar to that which BBI brings about when it constructs an analogous residence in the secular domain.

With regard to each particular individual and very private spiritual relationship, this influential protestant view contends, no third party could possibly know the actual disposition of the matter, nor could that party even be relevant to its outcome. This strongly individualistic stance is the radical core of classical Protestantism (Luther 1972). Nonetheless, on its basis not only is an introspective and relentlessly conscientious individualism encouraged, liberated from hopes of a salvation that is self-constructed, or in important respects even cooperatively aided, but a life *in* the world that is energetically dynamic is also made possible.

Protestant doctrine and capitalist commitments have been significant contributors to an explosively productive set of economically driven historical advances. Such progress has further contributed to the allure of BBI and not altogether without some very powerful reasons. BBI's temptation, however ignorant of its own origins, grows not only out of a potentially isolating, though more typically seductive self-centeredness, it also stems from the observation of extraordinary industrial and technological productivity that has benefitted countless numbers of people. Families and communities have been substantial beneficiaries of this productivity, but according to received doctrine the agency of benefits has been singular individuals acting largely in separation from those families and communities out of which, as individuals, they emerge.

A further undercurrent supporting BBI is found in the existentialist notion—promoted most concertedly by Sartre—that we are “condemned” to freedom as an ineradicable component of each of our individual situations (Sartre 1993). The claim is also made that the choice of those human relations into which each of us

enters—and may then sustain or decide to terminate—is ours alone to make. Also claimed is that each of us is responsible individually and without recourse for each of our individual actions. This existentialist position is a prod to responsibility with respect to one's own person and perhaps to productive and even creative output that is idiosyncratically personalized through and through—a typical existentialist aspiration. Such a position is best construed as a secular successor to the configurations inherent in classical Protestantism. Stripped of those spiritual dimensions that initially shaped it, however, it tends toward isolation and despair. It is a truly radical individualism.

Leaving Kierkegaard, Heidegger and other, more derivative thinkers aside, this existentialist dynamic can be seen to have many of the same strengths and weaknesses that most forms of secular and individualist voluntarism possess. It depends on an activation of the will at the expense of reason and emotion, and it values action over understanding. Though it may motivate the passive and conformist person to awaken to new and stimulating possibilities, this existentialist dynamic has little to offer regarding our ineradicable, supportive, and enriching human connectedness, familial, communal, and social. It is antagonistic to them.

Of course, there are significant, if not devastating vulnerabilities in the derivation of BBI that I have just traced, especially with respect to the existentialist position. One way to highlight a vulnerability of BBI is through reference to children. Children simply cannot be left to their own devices. They are not radically self-sufficient beings. There is an obvious reason for this: a long time passes before children are able to fend for themselves in complex and demanding situations. Measured by the standards of individuality promoted by BBI, children are less than fully formed. It could be argued that very few individuals are so formed and that even these individuals should act in accordance with BBI standards only in carefully considered circumstances. But this is not the tenor of BBI's argument.

In fairness, we must note the counter-objection that BBI consistently launches against those who would challenge its individualist model in this manner. Grant, these proponents state, that children must be partially exempted—at least transitionally—from BBI's normative standards. However, children do grow up. At this point, it is claimed, the transitional exemption temporarily granted them must be lifted. On its own telling, BBI is the only valid account of human beings because in the most value-laden of senses it is the final story. It is forwarded as the regulative *ideal* for human existence. To be sure, many fail to become those fully resourceful and resilient adults of which BBI speaks. It is these latter individuals, nonetheless, who most fully exemplify those underlying “simples” that enter into the constitution of every complex social reality. It is precisely these insular, if episodically outgoing monads, these separable units that are the basic constituents in BBI's largely atomistic account of human existence. Always construed as adjuncts, family and community become progressively marginalized. If not overlooked in actual fact, they are altogether disregarded in BBI's paradigmatically developed theory.

3.3 BBI, Hegelian Possibilities, and Biological Models

I have noted a number of philosophical motivations that lead toward BBI, but have also indicated inadequacies in its stance regarding many of the complexities of human life. Is there a more acute and compelling way to construe the human person than is made available through what the provocative BBI model offers? If there is, how might that way reconfigure our understanding of the familial and communal, and what might its account suggest regarding various notions of a common good?

It is one thing to adumbrate BBI's limitations. It is quite another to provide a complementary and perhaps even divergent option that might replace BBI. Is there in fact a genuinely plausible philosophical (and spiritual) alternative, or must BBI stand as the sole regulative principle that could engender productive results when sorting out the complexities of the human? Cast in terms of philosophical history, how might one supplement or supplant the regulative antitheses that Kant articulates in his *Antinomies of Pure Reason* (Kant 1961, pp. 384–484)? Similar to these antitheses, BBI is at best a one-sided approach. It serves objective considerations far better than it does contextual ones. But, again, in some respects it nonetheless has remained tempting.

BBI, after all, does issue the promise of clear demarcations. It caters to the analytically productive, deeply human urge to sort out and in most cases, if successful, to have uncovered and brought into focus unambiguously simple elements. Extracted from those countless indistinct, overlapping, and oppressively vague complexes that issue and thereby complicate and confuse human lives, these elements provide reassurance. However unwittingly, BBI also caters to the human need for fixed and stable foundations—if not their actual discovery, at least to the focused and orienting possibility of their meaningful pursuit. BBI also renders both credible and compelling a variety of forms of quantification that issue in number counts and, in a more sophisticated manner, in the vocabulary of statistical probability. None of these dimensions of BBI's allure is small or insignificant. They cannot easily be discounted. They speak to authentic, if often misguided conceptions and to the underlying attitudes and desires that drive them.

A selective appropriation and recasting of philosophical history can sometimes prove helpful, especially if BBI has been seen to be fundamentally inadequate. Contemporary human beings, after all, are more than just dispersed individuals, an unfortunate BBI assumption as well as a prescription that has overhung much current philosophical discussion of families and their individual members.

Whether to their benefit or detriment, humans are also outcomes and bearers of cultural, intellectual, and spiritual temperaments and traditions. They flourish or suffer through their various responses to these inheritances. Through reflection on a step Hegel once took, we are offered an opportunity to establish and reaffirm some credentials for partially eluding BBI's clutches (Habermas 1987, pp. 23–44). Reorienting discussions of human life in a more contextually-sensitive and familially cognizant way will thereby become easier. Through Hegel, in fact, we are offered a fruitful alternative to BBI—a set of “theses” to offset BBI's

antitheses—though this Hegelian alternative is not without its own limitations and vulnerabilities.

Hegel understands the person in terms of three complementary yet potentially conflicting dimensions: (a) the conceptions (or images) that a person has of him- or herself; (b) the conceptions (or images) that significant, and most frequently familial “others” have of that person; and (c) the person—that human *self* to whom those images and conceptions found in (a) and (b) apply. Somewhat problematically, each of these three dimensions is claimed to have an unstably coequal status with the other two, though by no means the same status as either of them (Hegel 1977).

There are of course difficulties inherent in such an account. It would seem all too easy to conclude that (c) is unavoidably fundamental, (a) and (b) transparently derivative, and, thus, that BBI might turn out to be foundational in a manner that undercuts Hegel’s tripartite project as just described. In one obvious and routinely grammatical sense, subject-predicate logic dictates that (a’s) and (b’s) are predicated of (c’s) and could not reach any status at all without some (c’s) or other to sustain them. And this is not all.

In a very fundamental biological sense, Hegel’s tri-partite construal of human beings would seem to be undercut as well. It is a newborn infant, separate from birth from other biological entities, to whom various ascriptions are predicated. Many of these ascriptions are deemed appropriate and are adopted and validated, whether through observation or, later, through introspection. Some ascriptions are generated through the perceptions or inclinations of others, but many are self-generated and thus autobiographical in origin. But are not all such ascriptions predicated of a singular biological creature, a separately existing and quite distinct human being?

There is a counterargument to such an objection even on the biological level. It is the chromosomal unifying of two separate genetic strains that brings this new biological entity into existence. It is precisely such a unification that generates its being. Biological considerations, thus, can be made to cut both ways and in and of themselves must be construed as inconclusive.

Note that the emphasis, if not exclusionary commitment of BBI, is to the former biological consideration. The emphasis of a Hegelian model must be on the latter rendition. BBI is reductive with respect to the relational features of the subject matters that become its concerns. BBI takes this stance toward referential ascriptions in general, insofar as they are claimed to rest on irreducible relational properties. In large part, this is because of BBI’s analytic need for unambiguously achieved dissections that overcome all forms and species of adhesion.

3.4 Concerning the Spiritual Dimension of the Human

The underlying, secular bent of BBI lurks in the background of virtually all of the positions it takes. In contrast, religious tradition in the West has stressed that humans are made in the image of God. Between BBI and spiritual belief, thus, there exists an enormous chasm. This impacts not only understandings of the nature and

significance of the family, but it also dramatically influences conceptions of what it is to be an individual person is.

As construed by Western religious traditions, humans are opaque, even to themselves. Only through reference to and confession regarding their personal spiritual nature can this condition be overcome, and then only incompletely. An essential part of the confession must involve the acknowledgement of a foundational dependence upon God. The matter is complex. This dependence can only come to be known through the mirroring medium of that very God-dispensed image that first constitutes humans as human and calls them to confront and recognize that they are spiritual in nature, not just metaphysically but personally.

Relatedness and mediation, thus, are at the core of the very notion of person. A position further from the paradigm articulated by BBI is hard to imagine. *Image* itself is a notion of extraordinary spiritual significance. It may even be of spiritual origin. Methodologically, if not always substantively secular in its underlying orientation, BBI must eschew the relatedness and mediation that an “image” grounded understanding of the person inescapably requires. But without an anchoring in relatedness and mediation, families and communities cannot be comprehended.

As has been indicated by Sellars,³ among many others, some form of “encounter” must have occurred in the context of which an image of the human person arose for each person so encountered. Through this occurrence human persons would have come into being. For humans to come into existence—and not just in terms of an evolutionary or quasi-emergent historical beginning—image-creating encounters would thus have been necessary. Such encounters cannot but be construed as special because they are rationally inexplicable events. In the absence of their occurrence, however, no human person could come into existence. This conviction is at the core of Western religious thinking.

Let us note some consequences of such an understanding for any notion of the common—and much more so for the notion of a common good—as applied to human beings. Construed as special creations requiring for their existence an image-engendered encounter that cannot help but involve an origin from beyond their own resources, human beings cannot help but be comprehended as individuals, not mere instantiations of an overarching “commonality.” That which is common to them will be so in a derivative, not a basic sense, and ministering to what is common to them will require reaching these individuals in a secondary and indirect, not a primary and direct way.

³ Sellars distinguishes between a manifest and a scientific image of human life in the world (Sellars 1971, p. 6). It is in terms of the manifest image that humans become aware of themselves and thus become human in the first place. Sellars asserts that having a conception of itself is an essential feature of humanity. Were human beings to have a significantly different image of themselves, they would be human beings of a significantly different sort. On this Sellarsian view, the claim that human beings are special creations is most fundamentally supported by the fact that to be human one must have encountered oneself, but to encounter oneself one must already be human. This suggests an extraordinary difference between the pre-human and the human. Although he ultimately rejects the claim, Sellars believes that one is driven towards a holistic account in which the arrival of the human is much like an extraordinary event, virtually inexplicable.

This is in large measure because their individuality as individuals will have been constituted as relational, as standing in an essential relation to something which itself derives from a transcendent source. That such constitutive images share certain “common” features will prove to be far less significant than their relatedness to their source—itsself the origin of an imagery that creates the human, imagery accepted through confession and believed in religious terms to be the gift of an individual and personal God.

But if it is a personal God through whose action and bestowed image individual human beings are created, if it is a personal God who is their foundation and source, such individuals might seem to have little of significance in common except separate personal relations to that God. And here lies a serious problem. Is this account only a spiritual variant of that problematic individualism already under challenge? At its theological extreme, this was what was demanded by the dynamics of that protestant thinking previously considered. Is such thinking credible? Is what is now under consideration itself any more credible?

If spiritual creation by means of a personal image provided by a personal God constitutes human existence as something crucially transcendent of the exclusively biological, those other, relational dimensions of human existence must nonetheless also be accounted for. The empirical realities of human life demand a cogent explanation and plausible elucidation. An account of human existence that speaks to a common and shared humanity is hardly avoidable. That such an account leads to an abstractly common as opposed to, say, a familial, communal, and spiritually motivated good is altogether implausible. This would controvert fact. At the same time, however, such thinking does have portions of the conventional wisdom of the Enlightenment’s secular universalism to offer support.

3.5 A Short Reprise and Extension of the Spiritual Alternative to BBI

The alternative account now being forwarded is surely paradoxical. It is neither secular nor removed from the particularities of actual human life. It is unorthodox, if by this is meant not in fashion. To be human is to have encountered oneself. But to have had and to continue this encounter, one must, it seems, already *be* human. Embedded in this configuration of connections and their attendant implications is a core set of conditions in terms of which the continuing viability of the transcendently religious persuasion becomes inescapable. This configuration is at the heart of the conceptual power of the doctrine of Special Creation. It is hard not to conclude that a transcendent spiritual event must have taken and even now continues to take place out of the sustained occurrence of which human beings remain in existence. This conclusion arises as much from a logically mandated space of entailments as it does from a set of spiritual beliefs. A choice between these approaches is not required, for each leads to the same conclusion. Exclusive alternation is not involved.

To these conclusions, however, some supplementary reflections must be added. Three are of particular importance. It is best to begin with the least palatable to the contemporary secular intellect:

1. The constitutive “events” to which I have been alluding must be construed as multiple, not as aspects of one original and singular event. Account must be taken of the continual coming into being of quite specific and unique individuals over historical time. The core claim of Special Creation far transcends issues of historical origin as might involve debates with Darwin.

Consider the core claim once more. Individuals are constituted in their individuality in a spiritually relational manner through the mirroring presence (and mediation) of a divinely bestowed spiritual image of themselves. Appeal to a virtually infinite, yet invariably personal plurality of such bestowals—rather than to a historically singular occurrence—offers the more perspicuous account of this mysterious happening that is our continuing human existence as individuals.

2. As helpfully adumbrated by many twentieth-century secular contextualists, though the thinking is generated from at least as early a philosopher as Hegel, such events could not but happen in holistic settings, in contexts the component parts of which both precede and yet also depend on those wholes of which they are precisely and paradoxically the components parts. The significance of this circumstance is not inconsiderable. To be concretely operative, holistic contexts must be “thick.” They must be intimately embedded in those who grow up in them, and configure and sustain them. The supportive and mediating settings for the development and enrichment of individuals, thus, can only be those families and communities in which those individuals are originally embedded in their historical-biological lives. Any other account would generate intimate familiar particulars out of remote abstractions.

The intimate and familiar provide essential and altogether appropriate nurturing ground for the development of individuals, not only in terms of spiritual support but in terms of social connectedness as well. In comparison, the generic and/or global—the “common” and allegedly universal as decreed from the abstract and distanced agenda generated by a secular overview—cannot but dilute and thereby deplete both individual human lives and the bonds that sustain those lives. Note in passing that Confucius would hardly have drawn these inferences differently. The energies involved are centrifugal. To ignore them might be theoretically elegant, but it would border on the empirically vacuous.

3. Historically, it has been families or family analogues that have provided the settings, those mediating contexts through which human self-awareness and thereby concrete, particularized, human selfhood has emerged. In this, the findings of cultural anthropology, philosophy, and clinical psychology converge—though from the epicenter of their convergence a further question emerges: could there be a credible sense in which the existence of a family more spiritual than biological might come to take precedence? Might it be not just coexistent with the more traditional notion of family, but as its successor and consummation? Doctrines regarding the work of the Holy Spirit in Christianity and concerns for the continuing expansion of *li* in Confucianism suggest something of this nature.

3.6 The Enlightenment Model and Human Selfhood

The reflections I have been offering are not orthodox in any comfortably secular sense. They collide with many conventions and are at cross-purposes with an influential philosophical tradition that has come to dominate in many quarters of the West. This tradition has provided additional support for BBI. Through the dissemination of a variety of United Nations declarations, for example, this tradition has spread further as well. It neither quite appreciates the individual in its genuine complexity nor responds with contextual sensitivity to such nuanced circumstances as are found in families and communities. The tradition in question, of course, is the “Enlightenment.” Not to speak of and to it would falsely simplify our current discussion.

In the thinking of the Western Enlightenment, itself a curious introversion of the rationalist dimension of Platonism, it was thought that knowledge must replace faith and that philosophy must conclusively replace religion. But philosophical knowledge was construed in a traditional manner as best achieved through detachment from the personal and orientation toward the *common*, i.e., toward those constituent elements *held in common* by the items to be known.

Under the influence of Enlightenment-inspired Kant,⁴ moral insight was severed from the enriching bonds of family and community. As part of a deliberate strategy, it was deracinated and in numerous ways removed from those contexts that invigorated it as well. Moral insight was thereby converted from a species of consensus reached through varying forms of localized, often familial and communal consultation into formalized and prescriptive injunctions achieved through the internally generated production and application of highly abstract (transcendental) principles. These principles themselves had to have been generated from out of the resources of a homuncular subject, a virtually monadological subjectivity delivered in principle, if not in fact, from the constitutive, intimately contextualized, supportive and enriching bonds of human connectedness.

Not only this. Regarding the notion of “ontologically” formative spiritual self-imagery that we have just adumbrated, Kant and his rationalist successors (and predecessors) have very little to say. The concern to escape from superstition has had as a less-scrutinized result the hegemonic promotion of BBI’s radically isolated individual—in regulative hope, if not in human fact. It has also contributed decisively to the production of a secularized one-dimensional person as opposed to the multi-dimensional conception of what that self must in reality be, given its actual manifestations within the fabric of human life.

Reasons for such a truncated configuring of human selfhood as is found in Enlightenment thinking are not hard to locate. They derive from several sources. Two are of primary significance in the context of Enlightenment thinking:

1. A notion of dignity emerges—itsself a secular successor to the spiritual notion of dignity noted earlier—whereby human dignity is only to be found through

⁴This is perhaps most clearly seen in Kant’s *Metaphysics of Morals* (Kant 1949).

pursuit of the universal, not through engagement with the specific and the particular. By a line of reasoning suspect in its inferential links, the universal, it was concluded, could itself only be achieved in human terms through the discovery and subsequent adherence to principles free of specific, thus local, historically bound content. Given the parameters imposed by these artificial constraints, the only hope for human contact with and transformative connection to the universal, and thereby at least a derivative dignity, would be through rationally certified principles altogether liberated from concrete settings.

That those personal selves involved in the pursuit of such principles would or could be conceptualized in terms of BBI's notion of persons is surely not just strange. This would in fact be an understatement. Because the notion of (universal) principles involved, requiring Platonic underwriting and the notion of individuals promoted by enlightenment nurtured BBI, is insularly nominalist through and through, the account is also irremediably paradoxical. That these two notions could connect had to involve a conceptual slight-of-hand of enormous proportions.

The Enlightenment's notion of dignity, of course, is very much, if nonetheless covertly, derived from the historically ancient distinction between the universal and the particular. Only the universal, because it is invisible, eternal, and unchanging, can have true dignity. Only the pursuit of it can generate a derivative dignity on human beings living in the world. However much the dynamics of BBI might claim otherwise, on this Enlightenment account the only genuine dignity possible would be *common* dignity together with its attendant *common goods*. But these notions of *common* are at best degenerate, for they are fatally parasitical on a decayed Platonism that has already been undermined by nominalism.

For such a point of view to achieve any traction, the very notion of *common* must be extracted from profusely differing contexts. It must be abstracted from specific localities and from countless diverse, currently embedded and vibrantly living customs and historically motivated traditions. This notion of the common, in short, must be sterilized to become effective, but as sterilized it cannot be effective at all. In resisting all ascriptive reference to differentiated settings, the very notion of the common becomes vacuous. As articulated in terms of one of its major philosophical genealogies, rather than illuminating the human spirit and elevating it to a level less selfish and nobler, it degrades it to the status of lowest common denominator.

2. Not only is such a truncated configuring of human selfhood—and thus of connectedness and of family—motivated by tangled concerns regarding dignity, but it also arises from a number of other sources and considerations. These are important to an understanding of the rise of secularist BBI's conception of the individual and its reciprocally impoverishing displacement of notions of family and community toward the periphery of relevant consideration.

A prime source of the Enlightenment's truncation of human selfhood has been a surprisingly tangled quest for autonomy. Autonomy has been construed as self-determination. It is semantically opposed to heteronomy. The latter is

construed as determination through agents transcendent of and thus hazardous, if not fatal, to the development of autonomous personhood.

Again, traditional distinctions are in play. Reason, the alleged generator of (common) principles, is viewed as capable of self-determination and, thus, deemed capable of overcoming dependency. Desires, emotions, and perceptions, in contrast, are construed as determined by and thus dependent on external, unpredictable, and uncontrollable sources. Desires, emotions, and perceptions are thereby understood to be prime causes and contributors to dependency itself. At the extreme, they are construed as the very constituents of dependency, the implacable components of heteronomy. Without reference to these “implacable components,” of course, any constructive elucidation of the realities of family and community is rendered impossible. Since family and community are altogether real, an account that discounts their reality must itself be wildly implausible. That such an account may seem supportable speaks to the allure of theoretical elegance, not to the bedrock of human fact.

3.7 Autonomy and Community

Within the seemingly univocal notion of autonomy, there are numerous conflations. These conflations provide space for BBI to flourish, however problematically. How does a distinction that in one of its manifestations has controversial philosophical force in a transcendently oriented epistemology find its way into moral considerations that arise out of the contextualized circumstances of family, community, and confessional life? Autonomy as liberation from superstition, custom, and tradition is one (highly problematic) notion. It represents a secular struggle to produce injunctions and commandments rather than to acknowledge and to accept them. However un-thematically, it seeks to secure and to celebrate the individual. This autonomous individual is allegedly made in his or her own image through the generation of self-determining, because altogether self-determined, principles. This individual is also “commonized”—an existential reality, if not a word—through a mandated adherence to the abstracted features these principles must possess in order for them to escape the charge of heteronymous origin and the consequent taint of dependency. (Dependency, after all, is what the notion of autonomy in all of its forms strenuously seeks to overcome.)

The quest for such autonomy, extricated from human historical origins and divested of the fabric of connectedness, construes bonds as bondage. It is both spiritually empty and indifferent to the familial. The dynamic of its agenda requires no less. It is a vacuous autonomy, the very possibility of which rests on a failed understanding of what it is to be a person.

Of course, other interpretations of autonomy are also possible. Autonomy can also be construed as cognitive reliance on subject-generated *a priori* conceptual schemes not themselves derived from empirical content. Another alternative is to construe autonomy as the promise and possibility of a “higher,” more stable and

reflective self-securing rule over a “lower,” more impulsive and immediate self. This lower self gets construed as bundles, perhaps webs of recurrent, often tangled and episodic thought-tinged desires. Taken together or in separation, however, how do these multiple and conflated notions of autonomy render plausible and much less sustainable that truncated notion of personhood upon which Enlightenment-nurtured BBI rests its program? Any conceptually motivated, surgically antiseptic extraction of the person from the constitutive and nurturing bonds of family, community, and confession has extraordinary obstacles and resistances to overcome. (That such obstacles and resistances might not be insurmountable, or might only be surmounted in an extraordinary manner, is adumbrated through the Christian, and not just the Christian notion of a kingdom not *of* this world.)

It was Hegel’s multi-dimensional insight to realize that such a generation of the moral and existential life of human beings—and of the underlying conception of the person that it presupposes and that it requires for its plausibility—was irremediably flawed. Such a program is bereft, even, of sufficient content to enable its pursuit. However honorable BBI’s intentions might be, it lacks concrete resonance with genuine, real-life human situations. However honorable its concern to insulate human freedom from possible encroachments—and to construct a support system to reinforce belief in and commitment to the inviolability of individual conscience—it nonetheless fails to speak credibly to the authentic human situation, spiritual, familial, or communal.

Hegel himself could not remain within this configuration of thought. Although Hegel’s particular views are not of concern, how and why they emerge is instructive and provides a cautionary note. His conclusions were more critical than productive, a circumstance insufficient to his intellectual ambition. With an intellect as subtly conflicted as it was searching and acute, Hegel ultimately insisted on a life of reason that absorbed and overcame specific contexts in the course of their articulation and comprehension.

This requires mention because it underlines an unfortunate truth. Dangers to the constitutive bonds of human connectedness arise not only from BBI. They emerge also through various temptations undergone by some of BBI’s opponents. Specifically, as in Hegel’s case, they can arise from progressivist concepts of history, whether rational, scientific, eschatological, collectivist, technological, socio-economic, or various combinations of the preceding. That any and all progressivist conceptions of history must harbor this threatening feature is altogether doubtful, but that some may possess it is quite certain.

Hegel himself, it is worth noting, was not unaware of such troubling possibilities and the destructive consequences that attend them. One passage is particularly helpful for the purpose of highlighting this:

The religiosity and *Sittlichkeit* of a limited life—of a shepherd, a peasant—in its concentrated inwardness and its limitation to a few and wholly simple conditions of life has infinite value, and the same value as the religiosity and *Sittlichkeit* of well-developed knowledge and an existence rich in the scope of relations and actions. This internal center, this simple region of the right of subjective freedom, the hearth of willing, deciding, and doing, the abstract content of conscience, that in which guilt and value of the individual, his eternal

judgment, is enclosed, remains untouched and outside the loud noise of world history—outside not only external and temporal changes but even those which are involved in the absolute necessity of the Concept of freedom (qtd. in Kaufmann 1965, pp. 268).

With proper qualifications, what Hegel offers in this passage is not only an antidote to various, largely Enlightenment- and post-Enlightenment-inspired programs aimed at human improvement through the pursuit of a somewhat one-dimensionally scripted, prospectively oriented, historical meta-narrative. Through sensible interpolations that supplement an unnecessarily “subjective” tinge to Hegel’s remarks, we can recognize those sorts of supportive, familial, and communal matrices that BBI rejects as cumbersome and derivative. Many grand historical narratives also seek to leave these concrete matrices behind in the service of a coming world in which the variegated and localized complexities of the present serve only as prelude.

Hegel’s template offers the possibility of plurality as well. It is offered in terms of space and opportunities for those differing configurations and interactions that may enter into the composition of diverse families and communities. The internal cohesion of such families and communities does not require that such “groupings” adhere to any set of uniform, largely external criteria. These would be invalidly imposed from beyond the parameters of such groupings in the name of purportedly “common” values. Inescapably, standardization would be promoted to achieve these “common” values.

3.8 BBI Versus Multi-dimensional Relational Selfhood

The Kant/Hegel bifurcation, as it might be labeled, facilitates the drawing of some clean distinctions and indicates clear dangers and limitations arising both from BBI and from Hegelian multi-dimensionalism regarding the relational ingredients of selfhood. This bifurcation is also of heuristic significance, in that its features recur in contemporary arguments between various proponents of libertarianism on one side and numerous advocates of communitarian notions on the other.

If concerns regarding future-oriented historical triumphalism may have waned—though some proclamations regarding human rights and economic globalization appear strongly to favor a standardized adherence to uniformity over a far more flexible and nuanced appreciation of diversity—numerous issues regarding the structure of personhood and the role of family and community in its constitution remain very much alive.

Kant and most of his deontological successors, covert or overt BBI proponents, insist on a common morality, thoroughly decent, if emotionally unresponsive and sterile—applied at its relentless best in somewhat mechanical and repetitive ways that suffer a failure of nuance. The common is sought, but its purchase is at the price of the individual and of specifically particularized circumstances in which that individual is invariably embedded. As a common standard and regulative principle either for the acknowledgment or the pursuit of the common good for a community or family, this model is abstract, insensitive, and heartless.

Although problematic in a different way, the Hegelian tendency is to encourage a greatness of spirit that might easily separate itself from the concrete and ordinary in the course of its perilous reach toward the extraordinary. But where does this situate the embodied personal self, living in specific circumstances that involve interpersonal opportunities as well as inter- and multi-personal constraints—options in some cases, their closure in others? It is precisely in these situations that we find the vast majority of actual human beings.

In terms of the Hegelian model of the person, that person is engendered as person in a mirroring context. Such a generative context is concrete and unavoidably familial and communal in its dynamic, however possible its partial transcendence through the active, thoughtful, and creative trajectories of the extraordinarily gifted may be. Self-conception—an essential constituent of the person—first emerges as self-conception in a specific setting composed of other selves who both conceive that self and in so doing formatively and constitutively relate to it. Analogously, those (equally constitutive) conceptions that others have of an emerging person are themselves directly influenced and guided by what is encountered, however “pre-personal” and undifferentiated that emerging person may be. In such reflections, we find a highly plausible account of individuals within families.

If there is credible danger in committing a genetic fallacy with respect to persons, thereby reducing them in significant measure to the conditions of their origination and their early development, there is also a hubristic fallacy in believing that persons can altogether transcend their origins, reaching an autonomy, a state of extraordinary fruition that entails the overcoming and transcendence of those vital elements that have entered into the very fabric of those persons’ being.

Gnosticism is that philosophico-theological fallacy, the guiding imagery of which involves the descent of the fully formed into an alienating and imprisoning “material matrix.” The BBI fallacy, on the other hand, is that persons may become utterly self-contained and completely self-dependent. This consummation is to be achieved without the contamination of others. But without the sustaining presence of others, surely such a person could not have achieved original stabilization, consequent character formation, and the continuity of an identity over time in the first place. That family and community are indispensable with respect to these crucial matters is a conclusion that cannot be evaded.

A person is a person through an unavoidable and robustly constitutive mediation that is not only concrete and particular, but culturally, historically, familiarly, and communally bound. Appeal to BBI as a higher level of self, separable and in principle transcendent of those ingredients that enter into its very constitution, is at best a distortion. It represents a destructive flight from concrete personhood. In the name of maturity, it attempts to eradicate bonds that in the supportive outreach of their nature nurture attitudes and interactive structures that promote sharing, deliberation, and consensus-guided action. These attitudes enrich families and communities. This enrichment heightens the value of the common in a more legitimate and context-sensitive sense than does the abstract and generic. It fosters the appreciation of the common, now as the jointly and communally shared, which can be drawn from, participated in, and contributed to in ways that are complementary and supplementary.

3.9 *Chimerica*: A Brief Excursus

That extraordinary events have been occurring over the last 40 years that have brought East and West ever closer together is no revelation. That the underlying driver of these cooperative interactions has been primarily economic is no revelation either. Great hopes have been kindled that much will be accomplished that will heighten material prosperity and bring cultural enrichment as well. The degree to which these hopes will be realized and the extent to which they will spread depends largely on what has come to be called *Chimerica*. This, too, is no revelation. Are there, then, any new insights to be had, or does the emerging consensus and conventional wisdom offered at the end of the twenty first century's first decade circumscribe the parameters of reasonable reflection?

Whether in any sense new or not, it is helpful to remember that much of economic progress attained by the West has involved the continual disruption of various habits, patterns, and traditions. Innovative activity has been central to growth. It has often left varying degrees of stagnation, even devastation in its wake.

It is presumptuous for an American professor to speak of China to Chinese people who live its reality. Nevertheless, there is a sense one has that many in China also harbor the hope of recapturing tradition, not just of innovatively transcending it. The Confucian spirit, for example, is one that nurtures human-heartedness (*jen*) and in empathic ways seeks centripetal deepening and the gradual enlarging of connectedness. The Confucian spirit appreciates *Constant Relationships*, and it also pursues the arts of peace (*wen*), including culture, poetry, music, and the arts more generally, in their spiritual as well as their aesthetic dimensions.

Can these cultivated virtues survive the individualistic and competitive temptations of a materially-oriented market capitalism? Will the extraordinary mobility offered through fast moving and productively diverse allocations of capital endanger a more grounded appreciation of family and community? Might intimacy undergo a gradual, if not at times rapid surrender to workplace anonymity? No one can be sure, though it is clear that much is at risk and much will be learned regarding the stability, resourcefulness, and supportive capacities of family-oriented living as the next few decades unfold.

Economic opportunities may not always be friendly to family circumstances. Often they are not. Of course, not all spiritual orientations are supportive in this manner, either. A tracing of the genealogy of BBI has shown this. On balance, however, the matrix of spiritual life has had far more to offer with respect to the needs and realities of family and community. If one accepts the argument that the spiritual is most fundamental, considerable consolation and encouragement are thereby offered.

How the spiritual and the economic come to terms with each other will be a large part of the emerging *Chimerica* story. Should the spiritual find ways not just to accommodate but also to inform the economic, and should the economic ways not just tolerate but also appreciate, even to have reason on occasion to subordinate itself to the spiritual, there is great hope. *Chimerica* will be at the center of these

issues, as families will be at their heart. What will emerge is far more uncharted than many centuries of human life have ever been brought to navigate. There is both promise and peril.

3.10 Spiritual Families

One might think that my family-oriented remarks are only directed toward families in utterly concrete and localized manifestations. To some degree this is the case. But such a conclusion is also misleading, for it disregards an important distinction and the ascending possibilities it fosters. Families have the capacity to be quite selfish. As inwardly turned realities, they can be a detriment to their surrounding human environment. At the same time, they have the potential for generative activities that are communally supportive as well as receptive to the kind of support communities and likeminded families can provide. Under appropriate conditions, families can be increasingly motivated to aspire to more inclusive and pervasive levels of outreach, consideration, and concern. In principle, what families and their surrounding, supportive communities might hold empathically in common with other families, and with communities quite similar to their own, might eventually be extended further. The limit of this potential extension cannot in fact be known, for it cannot be rationally projected.

Again, to what degree such extensions of families and communities might continue to occur—and from what historical starting points and to what realistic and feasible ends they might move—can only be a matter of unquantifiable conjecture. Even the projection of such possibilities is a Utopian undertaking in any historical age. This is in overwhelming measure because spiritual families and communities, and the movements to which they have given rise and have nurtured, have invariably been un-programmed. They have been to a considerable extent unmanaged and have been largely unpredicted, if not mysterious in their origins and their outcomes.

The cohesion spiritual families come to achieve is not that of the commonly common. This is a least common denominator of superficially, if pervasively shared similarities that issue in professions of values and claims to rights. Rather, the cohesion of which I speak arises from a very uncommon intensification of something much more significant: the expansive extension and deepening of empathically concentric, yet outwardly directed venues of consideration and caring love.

The *actual* family empathically protects and cultivates the nutriments of such love. It is the spiritual family, however, through which that love is most likely to find its most dynamic, if also most vulnerable development. It is thus in the resonance of the continuing, if sometimes precarious relations among families and their supportive communities, actual and spiritual, that the uncommonly common is in turn shielded and protected from its diverse opponents, not the least of which are the robust representatives of what I have been referring to as BBI.

3.11 Concluding Remarks

To conclude: It is “common” to distinguish the common from the individual. But how is the individual itself to be understood, especially if it is taken as a means of focusing the common? This consideration has been at the heart of my undertaking. I have highlighted a number of historical and philosophical prejudices that reinforce BBI’s account of the individual as atomistic and external in its relation to other human beings. Such an account goes hand in hand with—and even promotes—a most generalized notion of the common. On this account, the common comes to be construed generically and thus in a thin, virtually vacuous manner. The common is thereby not rendered contentful. It offers little to reflection that is helpful or palpable.

The alternative I have adumbrated is a spiritual and holistic one, derived in part from such (unlikely) figures as Hegel and Sellars. It understands the person to be the consequence of spiritual encounter and thus multidimensional. I argue that for such an account to integrate with the realities of our human lives, it must and in fact does recognize and avail itself of those actual, thick, and real circumstances in which spiritual individuals are nurtured and subsequently develop, *viz.*, families and concrete communities. It is in such specific settings that particular, plural, and overlapping yet distinct families and communities emerge for philosophical reflection as both vital and with the capacity to be genuinely and contentfully helpful in the understanding of human beings.

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