

ANAKAINOSIS

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✓ Rank and Worth

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Under the influence of a long Neoplatonic tradition, Christian thinkers of the West have tended to speak and think of degrees of "goodness" in reality. As we move up the hierarchical chain of being--from matter and body to soul, mind and spirit--we meet ever higher "perfections," being becomes more and more "concentrated," as it were, and participates to an ever higher degree in absolute goodness. Moving along that trajectory, and continuing along that road of increasing being and goodness, we finally arrive at the *summum ens* and the *summum bonum*. That final stage of the journey is traditionally identified with God.

This scheme of a Neoplatonic ontological hierarchy, with God at the top, matter at the bottom, and man in the middle, has provided the overall philosophical framework, it seems to me, of a great deal of orthodox Christian theology and philosophy from the days of Augustine to the twentieth century. This is illustrated, for example, by classical conceptions of the *imago Dei* in man, and by traditional interpretations of the *Logos* of John 1.

It seems to me that this whole scheme is fundamentally misconceived. Not only does it treat God as a kind of ontological capstone which completes a basically creaturely scale of being, but it also has a built-in tendency to equate good and evil with higher and lower on that same scale. Consequently creation, as such, is fundamentally deficient, and certain dimensions of our creaturehood (rationality, for example, or morality) are taken to be essentially more God-like than others (bodiliness, for example, or emotionality). The overall effect is a fundamentally Gnostic depreciation of creation in general, and in particular of those aspects of creation that are associated with our corporeality.

Against this view, I submit that the goodness of creation does not allow of degrees, that God is not a member, however exalted, of an ascending scale of being, that nothing creaturely is more divine than anything else of the good creation, and that evil is fundamentally related, not to an ontological deficiency given with the scheme of things, but to a religious disobedience which is intrinsically alien to the world God made.

One corollary of this alternative conception is that we must distinguish clearly between *rank* and *worth*. "Worth," in this connection, refers to *creational goodness*--the quality of being Καλόν, which the apostle Paul says attaches to every creature of God (I Tim. 4:4). Perhaps we could also use words like "excellence" or "worthwhileness" to express this notion. It is the quality which forbids rejection and depreciation, and requires acceptance, affirmation and thankfulness. "Rank," on the other hand, refers to differences of order or relative position in a series. In this sense there is indeed a difference in rank between morality and emotionality, and in general between "higher" human functions and those which they presuppose as substrate. But differences in rank are found in many other contexts in creation. There is a ranking of the different kingdoms in the world: humans, animals, plants, physical things, and a further ranking within each of these realms. The full-grown ranks higher than the embryonic, and the mammal ranks higher than the protozoan. Within human society there are many differences of rank, some having to do with authority relations (parent and child), some with individual training (educated and uneducated), some with civilizational unfolding (differentiated and undifferentiated), some with individual growth (adult and child), and so on.

The point of making the distinction between rank and worth is that differences of rank may never be confused with differences of worth. Mental functions may be higher than physiological ones, but they are not therefore "superior" in the sense of being intrinsically more valuable or worthwhile (to say nothing of being more "divine"). A foreman may be in authority over his men, but he is not at all *worth* more than they. Adulthood ranks higher than childhood but there is no higher degree of goodness in the former than the latter.

This does not mean that distinctions between good and evil, between excellent and deficient, between healthy and sick, do not apply in these areas. The point is that they apply *equally everywhere*. Adulthood is no more prone to perversion than childhood--and vice versa. Rationality is no less subject to distortion than emotionality--and vice versa. An industrial society is not inherently more dehumanizing than an agrarian one--nor does the converse hold.

In general, it is probably fair to say that the tradition of Greek metaphysics, which held sway until the nineteenth century in European thought, tended to confuse rank-differences of one sort (higher and lower human functions) with differences of worth, and that modern philosophy since Hegel and Darwin has tended to confuse rank-differences of another sort (earlier and later historical phases, lower and higher kingdoms) with differences of worth. It seems to me that a Christian philosophy which takes seriously the unqualified goodness of creation in all its dimensions must oppose both confusions, and insist on the distinction between rank and worth throughout, speaking of deficiency or evil only (and always) where that original goodness is *perverted*. (A.W.)