

John Locke and the Heart of Modern Gnosticism

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ABSTRACT

If modern thought is characterized by Gnosticism (i.e., the refusal to acknowledge the world as at once created, good, and gift), we can already recognize this fundamental attitude in the thought of John Locke. According to Locke, human labor is responsible for all the value added to the nearly worthless materials provided by nature. Applied to the human person, this doctrine reduces the self to the will, places it in opposition to the world, and conceives of the body as property owned by the self. It also severs the moral and metaphysical bond of child and parent. The embryo becomes property not yet capable of exercising its will and claiming its self-ownership, and the generations are joined only by coincidence of interests. Pope Benedict XVI proposes, as the only adequate response to modern gnosticism, a recovery of the doctrine of creation, which grounds gratitude for the gift of life.

IN HOMILIES DELIVERED in 1981 at the Munich cathedral on the first three chapters of *Genesis* (published by Eerdmans under the title *In the Beginning*), Cardinal Ratzinger identified the need for a new “creation catechesis” as a fundamental task for the church. He observes a trend in modern theology to treat creation as “a question devoid of concrete anthropological importance” (p. 80). This trend appears to threaten the faithful with a profound amnesia, since the creation teaching, as he presents it, is one element and marker of our basic position within world history and among the cultural and theological options available to us. He observes, “it was only with the full intellectual penetration of faith in creation that the Christian penetration of the inheritance of antiquity reached its goal” (pp. 79-80). On the other hand, he contends that “[t]he obscuring of the faith in creation is a fundamental part of what constitutes modernity” (p. 82). As inheritors of this double movement of history, we find ourselves confronted with a choice between irreconcilable cultural trends:

As I survey all the perplexing shifts in the spiritual landscape of today, only these two basic models seem to me to be up for discussion. The first I should like to call the Gnostic model, the other the Christian model. I see the common core of Gnosticism, in all its different forms and versions, as the repudiation of creation. (p. 96)

It is not so easy at first to see how Gnosticism as a modern phenomenon is related to the classical Gnostic heresy. Classical Gnosticism seems essentially dualistic and otherworldly, whereas the mainstream of modern thought strikes us as utterly worldly with a tendency toward monism. This, however, is precisely where Ratzinger improves upon the insight of Eric Voegelin, upon whom he draws for this sweeping characterization of modernity. Both classical *and* modern Gnostics repudiate creation. Classical Gnostics retreat into a world of idealized spiritual purity to insulate themselves against the effects of the malignant physical world; modern Gnostics attempt to take matters into their own hands and make the inhospitable natural world into something more suitable to human wishes. Ratzinger sees this modern attitude coming fully to light in Marxism, in which

creation is defined as dependence, origin *ab alio*. Its place is taken by the category of self-creation, which is accomplished through work. Since creation equals dependence, and dependence is the antithesis of freedom, the doctrine of creation is opposed to the fundamental direction of Marxist thought... The decisive option underlying all the thought of Karl Marx is ultimately a protest against the dependence that creation signifies: the hatred of life as we encounter it. (p. 91)

These words make it clear that creation, as a condition that humans must either accept or reject, has profound anthropological significance. It is a question of our entire attitude toward the gift of life.

As a German speaking to Germans, as a European survivor of the totalitarian century, it is clear why Cardinal Ratzinger would focus on Marx as an exemplar of modern Gnosticism. But the features outlined as essential to modern Gnosticism make their appearance much earlier, though less forthrightly, in the English-speaking world, in the political economy and anthropology of John Locke. Locke is less prepared than Marx to take up the banner against received ideas; he seems to prefer

reforming them to death from inside. For that very reason, it is important to make these implications of his thought explicit.

It bears remembering that Locke's famous *Second Treatise* is the sequel to his less famous *First Treatise*, which was leveled against the monarchical absolutist Sir Robert Filmer. The position that Locke opposes is that "Men are not naturally free" (FT II.6.1). By this Filmer appears to mean primarily that we are all born in subjection to our parents, whose authority is, as Aristotle observed, of a royal rather than a republican character. We are born dependent, and this dependence is ultimately constitutive of our way of being. Locke quotes Filmer as claiming that "A natural Freedom of Mankind cannot be supposed without the Denial of the Creation of Adam" (FT III.15.2-3). Locke, of course, attacks this idea from the side of the implication that Adam was created as the fountain-head of a hereditary political sovereignty, not from the side of Adam's subjection to God; but the *Second Treatise* seems to amount to a movement against this other flank of the proposition. Let's look first at Locke's treatment of the familial relationships, and then at our relationship to the created world.

In a sense, Locke treats the parent-child relationship as something accidental. The child needs the parents because he is not yet capable of "the Freedom...of acting according to his own Will" (ST VI.63.1-2). The parents provide nutrition and education during the period of preparation for independence, and the child's duty to honor his parents is in exact proportion to the care taken for his education (ST VI.67.3-6). The "bare act of begetting" carries with it no claim to gratitude (ST VI.65.7). We will come back to Locke's silence about the mother's care during gestation and delivery.

This way of construing the foundation of filial duty is consistent with Locke's derivation of property from the investment of labor, and it is this treatment of labor that articulates Locke's attitude toward creation. This attitude toward creation is ambiguous at first glance. In chapter two, on the state of nature, Locke sounds a very creation-boosting note:

Men being all the Workmanship of one Omnipotent, and infinitely wise Maker; All the Servants of one Sovereign Master, sent into the World by his Order and about his Business, they are his Property, whose Workmanship they are, made to last during his, not one another's Pleasure. And being furnished with like

Faculties, sharing all in one Community of Nature, there cannot be supposed any such *Subordination* among us, that may Authorize us to destroy one another, as if we were made for another's uses, as the inferior ranks of Creatures are for ours. (ST II.6.10-19).

Here the right to life seems premised upon our being the property of God, who, of course, put his labor into making us. But a moment of reflection will show us that this "bare act of begetting" is just as negligible in the present argument as in the familial context. God made the inferior creatures as well, but made them inferior. It is only our equality that dictates respect for life, and chapter three suggests that this is more a pragmatic consideration than a moral obligation. As Hobbes put it, imputing equality contributes to peaceful coexistence (*Leviathan* XV.21). The lip-service paid to creation here is a non-starter.

Chapter five (on Property) reveals why creation is morally negligible. Locke is making an argument for the natural right to property. The argument again has the appearance of resting on a metaphysical relationship established by the investment of labor, but again reverts ultimately to a pragmatic egalitarianism. Essentially, we should acknowledge a right to property because everyone gets righteously indignant when deprived arbitrarily of the fruits of their labor. They feel that they have made something theirs by investing their labor in it (ST V.27; see Rousseau, *Emile*, Bk.II).

Now, this claim to the right created by labor is a reasonable one, on two counts. First of all, by laboring on something, we are adding something to it. Labor is in fact what gives things most of their value. Locke claims that things derive at least nine-tenths of their value from labor, and get only one-tenth from nature. Upon reflection, he estimates the proportion as 99 to 1. Upon further reflection about the complexity of human economic activity, he revises the estimate, saying that human labor contributes all but 1/1000 of the value of things, whereas "Nature and the Earth furnished only the almost worthless materials" (ST V.43.21-22).

Secondly, what we are adding by our labor is something of our own:

[E]very Man has a *Property* in his own *Person*. This no Body has any Right to but himself. The *Labour* of his Body, and the *Work* of his Hands, we may say, are properly his. Whatsoever then he removes out of the State that Nature hath provided, and left it in, he hath mixed his *Labour* with, and joyned to it something

that is his own, and thereby makes it his *Property*. (ST V.27.2-7)

Note that here we are no longer treated as the property of God, but of ourselves. But why does man have a property in his own person? Can this activity of improvement through labor also explain our sense of having property in ourselves? It can do this consistently if our person is identified with our will, and our will is understood as an indeterminate capacity to choose. This capacity is virtually worthless until exercised, and it is only the choosing agent who can exercise it. The human body too begins as worthless material until it is labored upon by the will of the person whose body it becomes. It is by the action of our will that we develop all of our capacities beyond the merely nutritive. Education is the great labor by which the human species makes of itself something worthwhile, and whatever role the parents play in that education, it can accomplish nothing without the exercise of the child's will. Hence my mind too attains its worth from the labor that I will to invest in it.

If we put all this together, we can discern a perfectly consistent message. The world as given is essentially worthless, and the value that things have results from our laboring to make the worthless material suitable to our wishes. It is the will that imparts value both by determining what will make something valuable and by causing that valuable something to be built up in it.

On this view it is reasonable to understand our bodies as our own property. It is reasonable to understand the gestating child as the property of the mother as long as it remains part of her body and is far more the product of her labor than of its own. If we view human beings as abstract choosers, wholly equal as such, it is reasonable to view them as only accidentally related to other abstract choosers, such as parents, who are moved by whatever incentives nature has planted in them to help along our project of attaining independence. It is reasonable to understand life and the given world as in themselves negligible, as having little to merit gratitude.

It is arguable that this Lockean vision represents Gnosticism in its purest form. The older Gnostics turned away from the created world in revulsion; the newer Gnosticism turns against it in active opposition. By reducing the terms to world and will, modern Gnosticism more forthrightly declares that the world can only be good if our will declares it

such. To quote Ratzinger again:

Human beings' concentration on "doing," on fashioning a new and eventually better world for themselves, has made the resistance to creation stand out with increasing clarity: God's creation and 'nature' are having to defend themselves against the limitless pretensions of human beings as creators. Human beings want to understand the discovered world only as material for their own creativity. (p.81).

Gnosticism will not entrust itself to a world already created, but only to a world still to be created. (p. 97)

This means that Gnosticism will always be prepared to sacrifice what is, or "life as we encounter it," to its vision of the unfettered life of the will, and to deny the reality of whatever places limits on our choices, such as the normative principles built into intergenerational relationships. Modern Gnosticism, under the guise of worldliness, is more thoroughly and intransigently world-negating than its ancestor. Already in 1981 Ratzinger insisted that "[t]he Christian concept of love is the very heart of Christianity and the total antithesis of Gnosticism" (p. 95). The centrality of love to understanding both creation and redemption rightly, and to understanding our right response to them—this more than anything else explains the choice of subject matter for the first encyclical of the new pontificate. Understanding that God is Love—and a world-affirming rather than world-negating love—is the heart of the Christian response to the sway of Gnosticism now and always.