

## The Good | Romans 8:31-34 | August 13, 2017

In the back of my mind the concept of *The Good* sat gyrating, trying to get my attention. It did this morning following the every expanding subject of “all things work together for good” – I wondered how the concept of *The Good* is understood, used and utilized today in our modern/post-modern western world. I trust you are as amazed as I am.

*What then shall we say to this? If God is for us, who is against us? (vr. 31)*

D. C. Shindler, *The Perfection of Freedom: Schiller, Schelling, and Hegel between the Ancients and the Moderns* (Cascade Books, 2012)

D. C. Schindler on our nihilistic quest for freedom...

“Our current conception of freedom is deeply problematic. . . . On the one hand, there is a general recognition — regardless of where one falls in the political spectrum — of freedom as a great **human good**, something worth promoting and protecting even at the cost of sacrificing other **goods**; on the other hand, there has been an impoverishment of our understanding of the notion, so that freedom has come to represent little more in the popular imagination than *the power to choose*. What is problematic about this understanding is not simply that it fails to do justice to the reality that originally warranted recognition as a great **human good**. What we wish to suggest is that this reduction actively undermines the *good-character* of freedom. In other words, our claim is that there is something essentially self-destructive in the contemporary relationship to freedom; the nature of what we pursue erodes the very thing we wish to affirm and cultivate. The problem, in a nutshell, is that we think of freedom as an end but define it as a means, and so we treat a *bonum utile* [i.e., a useful good] as if it were a *bonum honestum* [i.e., an intrinsic good]. But this is not a mere problem of logic or classification. Instead, this confusion has far-reaching philosophical and cultural implications. To put the problem in its starkest terms, instrumental **goods** can only ever be **good** in a derivative sense; a means can be, not just an instrument, but an instrumental *good*, only through a relationship to an end to which it is subordinate. If we make a means an end in itself, we do two things at once: we both *eliminate its goodness* and we elevate its status; we transform the absence of **goodness** into a purpose. Inside of this confusion of ends and means is therefore what we could justifiably call a kind of nihilism. To the extent that we exclude those features of freedom that would qualify it as an end, and at the

same time continue to promote it as such even in this reduced form, our notion of freedom becomes a source of nihilism.”

Accessed online 8/7/17 - <https://marshillaudio.org/addenda/what-beyond-our-choosing>

## REMEMBERING THE SECULAR AGE *by Michael Novak* June 2007

Ever since the fall of Rome, historians and philosophers have noted how often civilizations fall by way of moral decadence. In our generation, we have been driven to some questions of our own. What tools does secularism possess to arrest such decadence? How does a secularist society even diagnose moral decadence? By whose standards?

In secularist analysis, public “awakenings” are treated as matters best left to religions, not to the human sciences, and the secularist emphasis on the unencumbered individual often leads to an odd *theory of the good*. For instance, Judith Jarvis Thompson argues that **the good** is *whatever an autonomous person chooses as a good*. But such definitions deprive secularists of any standard by which to *measure* moral decadence, whether in a single person or in an entire culture. Moreover, precisely insofar as they define the **good** as *whatever* a person chooses, such definitions are inconsistent with everyday speech and strip human critical faculties of any useful role.

For secularists, a kind of Newtonian law of inertial moral decline presents two problems: By what public moral standard ought decline and progress to be measured? And secondly, what tools are stored in the secularist arsenal for converting large numbers of citizens from their downward drift back up to the levels of discipline, self-government, duty, and honor? The classical progressive remedies are “consciousness raising,” “education,” and “raising public awareness.” But such remedies imply publicly available universal standards and moral exemplars to constitute, as it were, a moral avant-garde. The moral relativism of far too many secularists prevents these remedies from getting under way.

The secularism stemming from the Enlightenment has been unable to keep its promise of forging a universal consensus in an ethics based on reason alone. Today ethical schools of thought may be more divided than ever. The philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre has observed that there is now so little common ground shared by the various schools of thought that rational ethical debate has been reduced to exclamatory cheering sections that, faced with an ethical proposition, erupt into

“Hurrah!” or “Boo!”

Professors in countless classrooms in many different disciplines report that students have already been well taught that, when they are faced with any moral proposition, the proper response is, “That’s just your opinion.” They are resistant, then, to resolving disagreements by reasoned arguments. They aver, “You choose your good, and I’ll choose mine.” Reasoned debate is replaced by naked will. I *choose*. Don’t ask me to give reasons” I just choose.

This circumstance seems to be what Nietzsche meant when he observed that no man of reason should rejoice in the death of God. Experience will soon show, he was certain, that with the death of God arrives the death of reason. And what is the path out of nihilism?

Accessed online 8/7/17 - <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2007/06/003-remembering-the-secular-age>

*All things work together for good... (vr. 28)*

**Good = *agathon***

NIDNTT, Vol. 2

**Good, Beautiful, Kind** – The ideas contained in the concept *good* are expressed in New Testament Greek by three word-groups, each with its own separate emphasis. ***Agathos*** is used generally for what is good and useful, especially moral goodness in relation to God who is perfect. ***Kalos*** can be used as a synonym, but in comparison with the ethical and religious emphasis of ***agathos***, it stresses more the aesthetic aspect, and stands for beautiful, fine, free from defects. When applied to acts, it means noble, praiseworthy. For Plato the ***kalon*** is the realization of the ***agathon*** in the sphere of objects. ***Chrestos*** expresses the material usefulness of things with regard to their goodness, pleasantness and softness. 98

*Classical Greek:* As an adjective in secular Greek ***agathos*** means serviceable and good; used in conjunction with a noun it denotes the excellence of the object described. Used as a noun, ***to agathon*** and the plural ***ta agatha*** mean the good or good-things which evoke a state of well-being. They may be material, intellectual, moral or religious, depending on one’s ideal for like... 98-99

In Greek philosophy the concept of the good plays a major role. For Plato the idea of the good is the all-embracing, highest, and indeed dominant idea or form. For the good is the power which preserves and supports in contrast to evil which spoils and destroys. In Plato the idea of the good has a religious colouring, but Aristotle applies it as a formal concept to the totality of human relations. In his *Ethics* he defines the goal of all action as the attainment of some form of good. 99

In Hellenistic thought the ancient humanistic attitude to life was shattered and the predominant meaning of the concept of good is once again religious. According to the Hermetic writings (2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD), the salvation brought about by the deity, i.e. deification, is the good. Thus the predicate good was reserved for the deity who brings salvation, for he alone is free from attachment to the material. 99

*Old Testament:* In the OT the concept of the good is indissolubly linked with personal faith in God. An idea of the good, freed from the concept of God as personal – comparable with the ideas in Greek and Hellenistic thought – is inconceivable. The good is always a gift from God and as such is outside the control of man in his own strength (Gen 3:5). It is presupposed throughout that God is the One who is good, and not just “the good.” This realization is further developed within the OT in the course of a deepening of the relationship of the people and of individuals to God (Ps 34:10; 84:11; 23:6). 99

Thus **tob** [Hebrew] became the regular designation of the goodness of God’s character or actions. The **LXX** [Greek translation of the Hebrew OT, 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC] translates **tob** in this connection almost exclusively by **to agathon**... Thus God, according to the usage of the LXX, becomes man’s highest good, and man finally becomes the lord of his good in the sense that he acquires a right to “good” treatment, as long as he regards God as his highest good. 99

That God is the One who is good is made clear in the OT through his saving dealings with his chosen people, in the giving of the law (Deut 30:15; Prov 28:10), in the historical events of the Exodus from Egypt and the conquest of Canaan (Exod 18:9; Num 10:29ff.). The Israelite found renewed reason for praising God as the One who is good in the knowledge that everything that comes from him is good, whether it be his work in creation (Gen 1:18); **tob** here also embraces the aesthetic moment of beauty, his word (Isa 39:8), his spirit (Ps 143:10), even when appearances seem to say the opposite (Gen 50:20). 99-100

The constant tension between God’s promises and their incomplete fulfillment was bearable for Israel, because they recognized that God’s promises in all their temporal fulfillments always look beyond themselves towards a final, eschatological [end times] salvation. It is in this sense that texts like Isa 52:7 and Jer 32:41 have been interpreted messianically by Israel. 100

*New Testament:* **agathos** occurs very frequently (107 times) in all the NT writings except Revelation (where **kalos** does not occur either)... 100

#### TDNT, Vol. I

The New Testament shares with Hellenism and Judaism a predominantly religious basic attitude. This is determined by God, to whom are referred by Jesus the most important words enshrining the OT declaration: Mt 19:17 “*Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only one who is good.*” The personal concept of God makes it impossible to use neutral expressions. **Agathos** expresses the essential goodness of God which consists in His goodness or kindness. 15

It is from this God that there comes the salvation which is the central point of NT thinking, namely, the revelation of the salvation of God in Jesus Christ... With the revelation of salvation in Christ a radically new possibility of life is introduced: *“Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.”* Romans 12:2. The testing insight into the will of God which is the good carries with it the realization of this insight. It may be said of the Christian: *“For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.”* Eph 2:10. Paul demands the realization of this possibility of existence *“...always seek to do good to one another and to everyone.”* 1 Thess 5:15. This formulation shows us clearly in what the **agathon** consists. It is the love which the Christian is enabled to exercise and which is the innermost purpose of the Law. The good is achieved in concrete I-Thou relationships. This new possibility of existence is the meaning of the life of the Christian. It is the purpose which it must realize. There thus obtains in all its fullness that which Paul formulates as the clear Law of God – *“There will be tribulation and distress for every human being who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek, but glory and honor and peace for everyone who does good, the Jew first and also the Greek. For God shows no partiality.”* Romans 2:9-10. 16

Hence we are given an expression which fully comprehends this whole understanding of life when Paul proclaims his confidence to the Philippians: *“And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.”* Phil 1:6. 17