The Politics of the Soul

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Abstract

This paper discusses the idea of a "Politics of the soul", in counterpart with the liberal and neo-liberal Politics. In the first place, an account of the soul is given as it is rooted in Plato and Aristotle. On the second place it is shown how modern liberalism is contradictory in its own terms because, by the means of separating nature and culture, it ended up denying freedom and liberty. At last, the author recovers the idea of *ecclesia* to show how it is possible to consider community and good sharing as the basis of a new society.

Keywords: Culture, Freedom, Liberalism, Nature, Soul.

Recibido: 08/07/2013 • Aceptado: 03/03/2014

Resumen

En este artículo se desarrolla la idea de una "política del alma", en contraste con la política liberal y neo-liberal. En primer lugar, se explica el concepto de "alma" y su enraizamiento en Platón y Aristóteles. En segundo lugar, se argumenta a favor de la idea de que el liberalismo moderno termina por contradecir sus propios términos y negar la libertad al separar la naturaleza de la cultura. Por último, el autor recupera la idea de *ecclesia* para mostrar cómo es posible considerar la comunidad y el intercambio de bienes como la base de una nueva sociedad.

Palabras clave: alma, cultura, liberalismo, libertad, naturaleza.

The politics that we practice today is a politics without the soul. I want to argue that it is thereby a perverse politics, an anti-politics and even, in the end an impossible politics. If we are to survive as recognisably human, we need to return to a politics of the soul, albeit in a new guise.

What do I mean by a politics of the soul? More fundamentally, what do I mean by the soul? Very simply, "soul" is the medium in which we dwell as human beings. There is no other space in which we could humanly live. As the possessor of souls, we are able to move our bodies, whose parts are coherently held together in a pattern that can itself be described as soul. A soulful reality is a shape deemed "living" by virtue of its capacity to reposition and reshape itself within its environment. Such a reality is also aware of other souls who inhabit the same psychic space and within this space of other, non-psychic realities. Thus Aristotle declared that the soul is not only the form of the animal body but also "in a manner all things". In the case of human souls at least they are capable of thought, or of consciously reflecting on all that they are aware of. They also have the capacity for freedom, through which they can move their own psychic motions or thoughts, themselves.

Because conscious thought and freedom seems redundant from the point of view of nature –its necessities and blind spontaneities– and because they cannot be adequately explained in materialist terms, many cultures, religions and philosophies have argued that the core of the soul can exist apart from the body and that it must be derived from and governed by a higher and invisible spiritual power that directs all of reality.

Today of course such rational views would be nonetheless widely contested. More widely still they would be held to belong to the sphere of private opinion and private debate. Affirmation of the soul would not be seen as very relevant for public affairs and certainly not as the basis upon which public affairs should be organised. Surely that is not feasible, given the extent of our disagreements over metaphysical matters? Is it not self-evident that we need to base our political, economic and even most social arrangements on principles

that are metaphysically neutral, on procedural norms that are fair to all and to many competing perspectives?

That notion lies at the heart of our contemporary liberal assumptions. But I would like to argue that they are not really metaphysically neutral and that in the end they lean inevitably towards materialism. If that is the case, and if one believes in the reality of soul, then liberalism is not really a humanism because it tends to deny the ontological space in which we can alone operate in a truly human fashion. In doing so it has to appeal to a sub-human or a post-human space in a way that is becoming increasingly manifest.

So I will claim that where one does not base the social and political order on the reality of the soul, then in the end one is on a path that will either undo itself or finally undo humanity. But initially, just what does it mean to speak of a politics of the soul?

The clearest reference point here is Plato. In the *Gorgias* he defines the "art of government", that is to say the political art, as that which ensures the good health of the soul in the way that medicine ensures the good health of the body. From our modern point of view this is thoroughly confusing. For Plato appears to say that politics is identical with psychology –something supremely collective identical with something supremely individual and private. His reason for doing so is that he thinks that there can only be a specific art of human governance, a political art, if there is such a thing as a psychic reality. For otherwise, if human beings were only physical, they could be adequately governed by medicine. It follows in consequence that governance has a problematically dual application: politics must be psychological, because people must be freely and consciously encouraged towards the good life; they cannot just be manipulated. On the other hand, psychology must be political, since the soul should not be ruled by the body, but by an authority superior to its own nature —the authority of the good, the true and the beautiful which Plato took to be objective spiritual realities.

In Plato's consideration of psychopolitics however, there is always a problem. Which comes first, the political soul or the psychic city? The problem arises because Plato rightly thought that our will and desires are only moved by the scope of our vision. Thus we

always will the good, but are too often deluded by false simulations of the genuine good. Yet in that case, how can the lost and deluded individual really reform himself? He needs help in the shape of a teacher, a community and finally a good *polis* or city. But because governance applies also to the individual, good cities can only be built by good men, whom Plato took to be religiously-inspired philosophers. We seem to be trapped in such a vicious circle that often Plato suggests that only the intervention of divine inspiration and providential luck –as in the case of the daemonically-guided Socrates himself– indeed a kind of 'grace', can undo it. A genuinely human, virtuous life, depends on the periodic irruption of extraordinary individual charisms, however we may account for this.

In another way also, Plato insisted on the crucial place of the religious dimension. For him good governance, right order, does not just mean the superiority of the soul over the body, whether for the individual or for the city, though it does indeed involve that. More fundamentally he places in parallel the diseased body and the diseased soul, or alternatively the healthy body and the healthy soul. As his programme for the education of the guardian class in the *Republic* well shows, he is primarily concerned with our integral well-being as embodied souls, or soul-informed bodies. In the case of the body, good government means the control of the body by psychic wisdom, which will advise you to listen to your doctor rather than to the blandishments of the archaic equivalent of TV cooks. Since there is nothing human higher than the soul, does this mean that psychic self-control is the highest private political art?

But this is the idea that Plato is perhaps most anxious of all to refute. For if self-government means merely self-control, then why may this not be exercised simply in terms of improving one's own power and corporeal contentment? Understood in this fashion, the rule of the soul could be just the conscious and manipulative, suavely urbane augmentation of military strength and pride, which we know can subdue our spontaneous and baser passions for the sake of the pursuit of glory. And this is just what the sophists, according to Plato, took psychic governance to be: a power over words whereby one could manipulate others to one's own ends. For this perspective, the

pursuit of political rule is naturally undertaken for the augmentation of the fulfilment of one's own private desires.

This aim would seem to bend the political back into the psychic, albeit in a monstrously narcissistic variant. However, Plato's claim is that in reality sophistry tends to remove the psychic from the political sphere. This is because, for the sophists, as for the historian Thucydides, we must split reality between nature or *physis* on the one hand, and *nomos* or law, on the other. Nature and culture have nothing to do with each other, because nature is inexorable and meaningless, inciting of blind passions, while culture, shaped by law, is entirely wilful, conventional and artificial. This ensures that individual expressions of soul are conscious manifestations of a blind will to power, as it were vagaries of nature, rather than revelations of natural order. And in seeking power in the city they have to try to incite and manipulate all sorts of blind and egotistic human passions. In this way, ironically, through the highest exercise of a refined and cynical artifice –that has today reached a new pitch in contemporary advertising and celebrity culture– they encourage the invasion of the civic realm of *nomos* by ever-greater manifestations of pre-human *physis* which we can never hope to command.

Plato's refusal of this picture is actually in harmony with the archaic wisdom of most human societies. For they do not generally divide nature from culture, but think of nature as itself including many cultures and of human culture as itself a natural manifestation. In Platonic terms this means that the realm of the *psyche,* though higher than the material, is still fully a part of nature. It is for this reason that he thinks that political life cannot be accounted for in terms of anything pre-political –for example, as we would now tend to think, anything evolutionary. As he puts it in *The Laws:* "habits, customs, will, calculation, right opinion, diligence and memory are prior creations to material length, breadth, depth and strength, if (as is true) soul is prior to matter". Notice here again the mix of public things like "habit and custom" with private things like "diligence and memory" as equally belonging to the psychic sphere.

It follows for Plato, as perhaps for most pre-modern human beings, that if human culture cannot be reduced to pre-human

nature, and yet is itself fully natural and fully in continuity with pre-human nature, that it must be guided by a power and by standards higher than itself. The sophists denied this, but thereby they effectively denied the integral reality of the human, since they split the psychic sphere between the invading ravages of egoistic nature on the one hand and the arbitrary contrivances of the human will on the other, which inherently can know no bounds. This must eventually encourage the creation of a post-human superman, if there are no given, natural but transcendent restrictions on the human exercise of power.

It then follows that there can be no art of politics, defined as an exercise of justice, irreducible to either natural necessity or an individual will to power, if the soul that rules itself or other souls is not guided by the transcendent reality of the true, good and beautiful. In practical terms this means that the just ruler does not *merely* ensure that the social realities of brute force and material need are kept in their spatial places by reason (for this risks reducing reason itself to a subtler kind of coercive power) but rather that he continuously tries to ensure through time and on differently arising occasions that these subordinate things, and all different things are harmoniously and proportionately blended in such a way as to participate in the transcendent *kalon* which is both goodness and beauty. To do this is to exercise intuitive and non-technical *phronesis,* a capacity somewhat akin to the Daoist virtue of "inaction" and one which of course Aristotle learnt the importance of –as of so much else, in the main– from his master Plato to whom he remained largely faithful.

For Plato then, it is clear that the reality and irreducibility of the soul cannot be disconnected from the transcendent realm, which he understood to be the realm of the gods and the forms, even though he did not think one can entirely prove the reality of this realm, but must resort to the language of myth and the practice of ritual in order to experience its reality.

Now modern people might find themselves happy with the idea that religious beliefs can keep alive in individuals a sense of the objective reality of the Good and of the irreducibility of human conscience and freedom. They would however not tend to see the

religious dimension as anything that need be publicly affirmed – and indeed would be all too conscious of the dangers attendant upon doing so. However, from a Platonic perspective this would be entirely illogical. Why? Because, as we have seen, the psychic is for Plato as much the shared sea in which we swim as it is a kind of vital salt-water bubble inside ourselves. If the guidance of the soul depends upon its vision of transcendence, then this is needed as much in public as in private, precisely because the good person requires the training by the good city every bit as much as the good city can only be shaped by good people.

One can here usefully say a little more about the fundamental Platonic *aporia* as to which comes first, city or soul? As I've already indicated, Plato tends to resolve it by invoking a divine irruption which interrupts the vicious cycle. However, this is not for him a *deus ex machina* insofar as occasional inspiration is linked to the poetic recitation of good myths which can benignly "charm" the soul and to the practice of religious liturgy and sacrifice. It is indeed liturgical practice which for Plato tends to mediate the private and the public –in ritual we are most privately before the gods and yet most of all "with" others in our shared human predicament. This was best realised by the "theurgic Platonists" like Iamblichus and Proclus who insisted against Plotinus on the "complete descent" of the human soul into the body and equivalently on the way contemplative ascent has to be matched by a divine descent towards human beings of the gods in ritual and magical practices.

The theurgists tended to insist, beyond Plato, that the philosopher ruler did not risk contamination by political engagement, precisely because the rituals of the city were crucial for his own education. Thus the wise man requires a combination of peaceful theoretical reflection with political engagement. This view informed their support of a "mixed constitution" blending monarchy and aristocracy with democracy –and it also accentuated the elements of populism in Plato which one can too easily ignore. Whereas the sophists sought "democratically" to manipulate and alter popular opinion, Plato often appeals to this opinion in its perennial and generally unalterable character –especially with respect to morals and

religion– *against* the advocates of democracy which he took to mean merely that we should be ruled by prevailing fashions. Equally he exalts in the *Gorgias* the art of humble artisans over and above the political arts of rhetoric.

However this more balanced view of what shapes human wisdom entirely depends upon the idea that the life of the city –our psychic life in common– is already guided through shared habits and customs and rituals by the realm of the gods, as Plato had himself already indicated in *The Laws*. By noting this, one can I think go on to suggest that the new sense in Plato of a "universal" good lying beyond the insight of any one given culture relates *both* to a new validation of a social rebel like Socrates, who might see further than his own time and place, *and* to the idea that within a community there needs to be another spiritual, mystical community – which need not be an elite one– in order that the often brutal processes of politics may submit to something higher than themselves.

But why should not the critical jolt of the individual conscience be enough here? I would argue that it is not enough precisely because the main reality of all human association, including political association *is itself psychic*. In other words it is to do with friendship, as both Plato and Aristotle taught; it is to do with benevolent generosity as they taught in common with Confucius in the Far East. It is to do with a reciprocal sharing of all that it is good. Only secondarily is it about organising the distribution of material goods and about designing laws which are always somewhat arbitrary, yet should reflect as far as possible non-arbitrary justice.

Now one crucial way to remind politics and politicians of this truth is to specifically identify a socially inward spiritual community to which politics is finally answerable. A community whose seeking of harmonious relationship with humans, animals, plants, gods and God is in excess of either material need or coercive law. Hence Plato already spoke of a city of the philosophers; in the case of Buddhist civilisations we have the phenomenon of the *Sangha;* in the case of Islam (so much at times philosophically influenced by Plato) of the *Umma*. Most dramatically, in the case of Christianity one has the idea of *the Church* –most dramatically because here the separation from

the political state and yet the political centrality of the spiritual community was taken the furthest of all.

Here I think one can argue that while Confucius indeed grasped the universality of the ethical, he could not so far disentangle it from the customary as to arrive at the sense of the validity of individual rebellion, nor the need for a spiritual and higher "politics within politics". Meanwhile, the original Hindu impulse (later much modified) amounted to a kind of higher spiritual sophistry in which the individual soul achieves most power and most magical influence precisely by removing itself from the community and from normal earthly aims.

In any case, there would seem to be something singular in the early western simultaneous discovery of the transcendent Good, the priority of the individual person and the need for a spiritual community. Another and arguably more consummate version of this is conveyed by the Hebrew Scriptures and then by the New Testament. And yet this discovery of the universal and of the individual did not originally break with the primordial human sense of the continuity of nature with culture, nor of the need of the individual for human relationship and succour by family, friends and community.

I think that, today, what our politics needs is a revival of the archaically western vision in a new form. It needs this rather than the fearful combination of western libertarianism with an eastern technologism of the spirit, collectivist autocracy and temptation to spiritual nihilism that could be arising in Asia. And it needs it rather than the lamentably disenchanted and voluntarist transcendence increasingly advocated by Islam to the relegation of its profound mystical legacy. But above all it needs it rather than our modern liberal political legacy since the 17th C.

Why should this be so? Surely this liberal legacy has further released individual freedom and our respect for the individual? Surely it has increased true spiritual community in the form of a spirit of diversity, whereby we are less likely to confuse our own preferences with transcendent norms? Now I think that one can candidly admit that those things have proved true up to a point. *At first* the exaltation of negative freedom of choice helped to sweep away many rigid

restrictions and hierarchies that have eventually seemed without justification even for their often Christian instigators.

However, *in the long run* liberalism seems to swallow itself and to reveal that, as a mode of sophistry it erodes the very political field which it claims to save. This self-swallowing turns out to mean that, eventually liberalism is exposed as *tautologous* and as only applying to itself, thereby revealing nothing of the deeper truths about human association.

Let me explain what I mean in three instances, going backwards from postmodern liberalism through modernist liberalism to original, early modern liberalism.

Postmodern liberalism advocated deconstruction, whereby one reveals the arbitrariness of any construct and the way that 'higher' values are only revealed by their complicity with contrasting 'lower' ones. This very simple exercise of course proved for a time eminently marketable and made many a career. However, its validity depends wholly on the assumption that every artificial construct is *merely* arbitrary and that the co-dependence of higher and lower somehow disproves the inherently hierarchical nature of their relation. But of course, only liberalism itself makes this assumption about human constructs: they are the result of contractual agreement and so forth, since there can be no consensus about objective values. Thus liberalism imagines it can deconstruct the non-liberal –the religious, the deferential and so forth– but in reality all that liberalism can deconstruct are the works of liberalism itself. And this tends to deconstruct liberalism itself as only the operator of the deconstructible. Of course the postmodernists knew this, but they could not exit from the liberal logic on which their scepticism depended.

The second and modernist self-swallowing of liberalism concerns the law of diminishing returns on marginal utilities as expounded by neo-classical economics from the late 19th C onwards. The problem is that, as with deconstruction, this law only applies to the products of liberal choice itself. Trivial material goods or things which are *merely* the election of my passing fancy (which is all that liberalism and neoclassical economics can recognise in terms of valid desire) of course are subject to the reverse lure of boredom and

lose their significance and so economic value over time. But that is not true of *symbolically* valuable objects, like your grandmother's ring, nor of *relational goods* whether enjoyed along with other people or other natural realities. I can constantly find more, or more to treasure in a person or a beloved landscape. And a non-liberal economy could realistically express, even through all modes of exchange –through contract, price, salary, profit and interest– our often *mutual* appreciation of such things, since human disagreement is just not as absolute as metropolitan liberals like to fantasize.

However, if liberalism encourages an economy based on our boredom with shallow things, inciting us to want always *more,* then liberalism *itself* is of diminishing utility. At first it unleashed a thousand blossoms of creativity, but in the long term it undermines creative impulses to produce the genuinely valuable and it equally undermines the *trust* upon which all economic exchanges ultimately depend. We have recently seen all too well how an *entirely* amoral market is actually a dysfunctional market.

In the third place, liberalism has now swallowed its own early modern origins, as Jean-Claude Michea has argued. These had overwhelmingly to do with an abandonment of the politics of the soul. The process (as Michea fails to recognise) had begun well back into the Middle Ages but was certainly consummated in the 17th C. It arose to a large degree because agreement in the transcendent good started to be associated with conflict and warfare. Yet in the face of an increasing exigency for peace at any price, Thomas Hobbes and others oddly assumed a hyperbolic violence, a war of all against all as the natural human condition. They did so in part because they thought (and unsurprisingly, after the all too many wars of religion) that disagreements regarding the Good were not subject to rational arbitration.

But this exposes to view a remarkable *chiasmus.* While Christianity believed that reality was originally and at heart peaceful, and only violent because of the irruption of sin, and yet in practice had often encouraged warfare, liberalism exactly reverses this. In the name of reducing conflict, liberalism nonetheless thought that reality was inherently agonistic and humans naturally egotistic and

prone to conflict. For this reason 17th C liberalism totally rejected Renaissance humanism with its high view of the psychic dignity of man. Here it often assumed the legacy – as with Adam Smith – of Calvinist and Jansenist doctrines of total or near-total depravity.

Liberalism then, is most fundamentally a *pessimism*. It tries to invent what Michea calls "a realm of lesser evil" on the perverse basis of the worst human tendencies. Even when Jean-Jacques Rousseau reversed Hobbes and proclaimed the isolated subject wholly innocent, his Genevan inheritance still resonated in his view that society always corrupts trhough a contagion of mimetic violence. Today we tend to have in consequence a combination of "right-wing" Hobbesian liberalism in economics with "left-wing" Rousseauian liberalism in culture. Though the two appear in media politics to be at odds, this is a charade to prevent us from seeing that no democratic debate actually exists: nearly all of us are economically right, culturally left, but liberal either way and in secret collusion.

How, though, does liberalism think order can arise from amorality or even from vice? In two ways which are really but one: by the invisible hand of the market or of civil society which coordinates perfectly separate and isolatable private desires. Or by the visible hand of government. But in either case –and nearly always the two processes are combined– human relationship is sidestepped, and we are mediated behind our backs by an act of instrumentalist and rationalistic manipulation. This is always carried out in the name of pure abstract "growth" –ether in collective wealth or collective power.

Yet in the long run, if all human interaction is bypassed, we start to lose the skill for it. We trust only ourselves and no others, and certainly not the government. Nor does the government trust us: thus one gets the pursuit of private profits whose ease of gaining is to do with the fact that they merely transfer and do not grow real wealth; thus one also gets increasing number of posh criminals who calculate that they can flout the social contract and get away with it; thus again one gets increasingly criminalised politicians who bleed the system for their own private interests.

In this way, liberalism more and more produces the war of all against all that was its own presupposition. But this does not thereby

prove that presupposition, because it is only the practice of liberalism that has produced the circumstances which it originally merely assumed. For despite the many wars over truth –and are they not more noble than liberal wars over money?, and less terrible than the wars that have been instigated by nihilists who have taken liberal logic to its limits? – human culture could never have arisen without practices of trust– of gratuitous gift, counter giving and gratuitous giving again which anthropologists have long known forms the main bond of all human societies. In this sense "society", as socialists and anarchists argued against the liberals, is indeed more fundamental than either law or contract, either politics or economics.

Therefore in all three ways we can see how liberalism is self-eaten by its own mean and sordid declarations, however well-intentioned. Thereby of course it has devoured itself in a fourth way that corresponds to its second, 18th century phase of liberalism as political economy. Only liberalism is subject to its own fantasised government by the hidden hand, because only in the case of liberalism do private actions have no public intentionality upon which a wider public intention could be constructed that is in continuity with the first actions, even if they never envisaged this upshot –just as the shapers of the Anglo-Saxon *moot* never envisaged the modern Houses of Parliament. But where there can be no such continuity, as in the case of liberal principles applied to itself, then the hidden hand works to produce chaos out of a perverse attempt to produce order out of chaos and not, as hoped, order out of chaos at all.

At the heart of these four self-swallowings lies the refusal of the reality of the soul and so of the political sphere as such, properly understood. For with liberalism, the realm of the psychic and of the psychopolitical is corroded from two opposite directions, echoing the sophistic division between *physis* and *nomos.* On the one hand everything human is declared only natural –we are a bunch of greedy apes with bigger brains. On the other hand, everything human is declared entirely artificial, just stuff that we have made up. And by the way this is true of 17th C "New Science" also; it was alternatively seen as the new and literal truth of nature, equivalent to the knowledge of God himself (eg. by Galileo Galilei) and as "merely" the pragmatic

truth of technological control, telling us nothing about deep nature at all (eg. by Marin Mersenne.).

In this way liberalism tends to make the human vanish in two directions –archaically in the face of the tide of pre-human nature; and futuristically, as we can today see more clearly, in favour of a "post-human" project that can hopefully subordinate human egotism and the unpredictabilities of desire to a cybernetic future that will augment the liberal "peace of a sort" into an absolute but absolutely eerie biotechnical tranquillity.

However, these two directions by no means amount to a coincidence of opposites –except, perhaps, at the utopian point when experts would have willed away their own will in favour of a sheerly "natural" cybernetic determinism. But before that point liberalism always imposes upon us entirely contradictory imperatives, which negatively reveal the *unreality of trying to abolish or ignore the soul.*

Thus liberalism declares, as we have seen, that all is natural and yet all is artificial, because it cannot admit that we are "supposed to be cultural", that nature yet more reveals herself in the human experience of love for nature, for other humans and for the divine. This duality further plays itself out in the contradictory demand that all sacrifice their liberty to the needs of growth and yet that the "rights" of all to assert themselves against this need are equally absolute; in the view that we must submit to inexorable economic necessities, and yet that economic processes are the ultimate expression of human freedom; in the demand that we work all the time and yet equally relax and consume all the time; in the view that all our actions impinge on the freedom of others and so must mostly be criminalised and exposed to public ridicule in the name of "transparency", while equally we enjoy a right of absolute privacy to do what we like so long as it is (supposedly) done "only to ourselves". This despite the fact that any damage we did truly to ourselves and our own soul, would render us the most dangerous of citizens. Whoever loses his own soul, cannot in fact gain even the world, because thereby he has destroyed the human world also.

Of course, we need sometimes to work and sometimes to play: to discern what is the work of nature in us and what of spirit; to

expose some things and keeps other hidden; sometimes to put the community first and sometimes the individual; to criminalise some things and leave others wrongs to the force of shame and social disapproval. But the point is that, without the vision of the transcendently good, we have no 'prudential' or 'non-active' way to make these discernments, and so liberalism is involved in an increasingly hysterical shuttle between the poles which are always variants on the arch-poles of *physis* and *nomos*. Above all it tends to encourage the foolish view that anything not against the law is acceptable, while endlessly criminalising minor offences and utterances.

For this reason liberalism is now not just the enemy of politics, of high culture, folk culture and human flourishing, but also the enemy of freedom itself and of true civil liberties which are rooted in discernment of justice, respect for the reality of the individual soul and of the superiority of the spiritual community, lying freely beyond the law and beyond economic calculation.

It is for these reasons that I think we must recover, in the wake of Kathleen Raine, the spirit of the archaic West. Yet this does not mean restoring unjustifiable hierarchies and inequalities that liberalism rightly swept away. Christianity already democratised Platonism with its "ultra-theurgic" message of a God who reached down to be born in a cradle and with its more open yet more extreme mystery of bread and wine. The higher wisdom had now become just that ordinary and yet unfathomable love or reciprocity known to all human cultures.

In the course of the 19th C, various socialisms, co-operative movements and finally Catholic and much Anglican social teaching started to realise these more egalitarian implications of Christianity, not in the name of the liberal left, but precisely in criticism of its egoistic pessimism.

They appealed indeed, as Michea argues, to what George Orwell called "common human decency" which Michea equates with the practice of gift-exchange or of reciprocity. However, one can question Michea's view that this can so readily be a secular vision. For we now know more clearly than did Marcel Mauss that gift-exchange was always a cycle involving nature and the gods as well as human

beings. If gifts could be bonds, then that was because they were sacred symbols. The problem indeed is that that tends to involve many different visions of the nature of "goods" that are exchanged, which are only symbolically valued 'goods' because they participate in an eternal Good, which different cultures might perceive differently.

Therefore liberalism was not wrong to see a problem of conflict as arising from these competing visions, and a general secular gift-exchange is but another illusory universalism (to rival that of liberal egoism), it might be argued. Yet the price paid by liberalism for the refusal of the politics of the soul is too high –in venturing a drastic cure, it finally threatens to kill the human patient.

What can be suggested here instead is that Christianity has already univeralised gift-exchange. Normally, the symbolic enclosures of gift-exchange have been gradually deserted in favour of abstract and relatively secularising structures of law and contract. But the *ecclesia* was conceived by Paul, partially, perhaps in the wake of the Roman Stoic sage Seneca, as a cosmopolitan practice of reciprocity beyond law and contract. The good exchanged here shared in, and was validated by a symbolic gift that was nothing other than one fully generous and sacrificial human being who was thereby deemed divine. In this way the *aporia* of intimate but exclusively symbolic gift *versus* universal but impersonal norm was resolved in terms of the universality of the *yet more absolutely particular* –as Hegel and more recently Alain Badiou have helped us to see. This particular has further proliferated through the equally "particular" style of the Christian legacy which has nonetheless shown a "Catholic" capacity to be receptive to the multifarious insights of other human traditions.

But whether or not my reasoning in this instance seems acceptable, I do not see how we can sustain the genuine Western legacy unless we revive, more democratically, its archaic idiom. This is required I think both to sustain the absolutely incomparable value of the person and of relational reciprocity in free association. We need both the mysticism of the individual soul and the spiritual and liturgical community of souls, in whatever sense.

To say this is to advocate a kind of "enchanted transcendence" which sees all worldly realities, including cultural ones, as symbolising something higher and hidden. For this perspective respects both nature as wider than the human and yet the higher place of many degrees of flora and fauna, with humanity at the top, within that nature itself. Allowing that our psychic culture belongs to *physis* allows us also to develop a humanistic ecology that avoids a triumphalism about the human ability to control the natural world.

This perspective is to be preferred to the "disenchanted transcendence" of Jansenism and Unitarian Newtonianism that drove so much of the Enlightenment –where the creation does not symbolise an arbitrary God, but is rather his plaything. Fallen human beings are then encouraged like their maker to dominate nature, even though they cannot be trusted to relate to each other, but must rather bend to this deity's providential cunning that distils a simulacrum of the political out of psychic disorder.

But enchanted transcendence is also to be preferred to the enchanted immanence or pantheism of the pre-romantic Goethe and other 'radical enlightenment' Spinozists, or more recently of Heidegger. For while this perspective allows us to wonder at the irreducible enigma of nature, it denies the reality of personal forces behind nature and so the sanctity of our own interpersonal life.

Katheleen Raine was so much more perceptive than most university academics in realising that romantics like Blake, Shelley, Wordsworth and Coleridge, like their German contemporaries Novalis, Hölderlin and Freidrich Schelgel, or their French ones Joseph Joubert, René Chateubriand, Maine de Biran and the young Victor Hugo, actually refused this impersonal pantheism just as much as they refused the cult of "Nobodaddy", or the worship of monstrous wilfulness. Instead, as Schlegel put it, they "lifted the veil of Isis" to reveal once more the Blakean "countenance divine" which in the daylight, "doth a human form display".