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“What’s Yours is Mine”: On the Goodness of Ownership

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I have decided to throw the word “mine” out of my vocabulary. How can I use it when I know that everything is Yours? . . . I have learned that I must not call what is Yours mine, must not say, think, feel it to be mine. I must free, divest myself of it; I must not have or want anything of my own (“mine” means “own”) . . . I am afraid of the word “mine,” though at the same time I cherish its meaning. I am afraid because this word always puts me face to face with You. An analysis of the word “mine” always leads me to You. And I would rather give up using it than find its ultimate sense in You. For I want to have everything through myself, not through You. To want this is nonsense, but haven’t many other people harnessed themselves to serve it? —Karol Wojtyła, *Radiation of Fatherhood*¹¹

At the heart of the gospel lies a challenge to the ways of the world: “Jesus said to him, ‘If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me’” (Mt 19:21). Christ’s radical words challenge any believer, as they demand one relinquish all that is theirs for the sake of drawing closer to God. God alone is goodness itself, absolute perfection, thus God alone can satisfy the yearnings of the human heart. Yet God does not cling to his goodness like a possession but gives it away by creating a universe beyond Himself and calling all things in that universe “good.” Created things have their own relative perfections but are not the source of their own goodness, and thus are not to be mistaken for man’s fulfillment. For this reason, Christ exhorts mankind to *poverty in spirit*, which helps to free man from the sinful inclination to turn things into idols. However, this beatitude does not mean that man must cease owning things. Rather, Christ calls us to imitate the very generosity of goodness itself.

This is why God gave man dominion over all the earth, so that man might participate in God’s own generosity. In the Catholic tradition, the word “dominion” is sometimes used interchangeably with “possession” and “ownership,” and at other times means “power.” In

spite of this ambiguity, the diverse ways man is disposed to justly use things all fundamentally refer to dominion and are analogously included within the dominion given to man in Genesis. Even when one does not have strict ownership of something, one may still have dominion over it. In simple terms, we might say that dominion establishes a relationship between man and things. They become related to me in such a way that I call them “mine.” However, this opens up a significant question: how can something be mine when everything belongs to God?

Saying “Mine”

This question lies at the heart of *Radiation of Fatherhood*, the last drama written by Karol Wojtyła. The main character in the play is given the name Adam, which emphasizes that this character, like the biblical Adam, is representative of all mankind. Adam grapples with how he can call his child “mine,” that is, how he is to become a father when there is only one true Father. But Adam’s dilemma can also be read as engaging with the more fundamental question of how man relates to all of creation and how it is possible for man to call anything “mine.”

Adam’s words in our epigraph directly refer to his daughter, thus it might appear inappropriate to apply them also to the ownership of things. After all, persons have an integrity as subjects in contradistinction to *mere* objects. Thus we are not proposing to reduce Adam’s use of the word “mine” towards his daughter to be identical with the “mine” of ownership, as this would diminish the dignity of persons to the level of mere objects. Rather, since persons are both subjects and objects, things are analogous to persons and have their own kind of integrity. This analogy helps us to unfold the meaning of ownership through *Radiation of Fatherhood’s* use of the word “mine.” In saying “mine,” Adam must acknowledge that everything that exists is most truly and properly God’s. Hence, saying the word “mine” with respect to anything entails a risk: that we might be like God, and that we might fail to be like God. It is for this reason that Adam says he both fears and cherishes the word. In light of this risk, there are two temptations that arise.

Things are a means, but they are also—in a qualified sense—an end in themselves. God is the end of all things, and He is this end by indwelling all things in a manner commensurate with their capacity to receive goodness.

The first temptation of Adam is to attempt to say “mine” apart from God. We can think of this as cherishing the word “mine” without fearing it. This temptation threatens to twist our usage of the word “mine,” rooting it in ourselves rather than in God. Here we see the root of all sin, which is taking something as “mine” apart from it being “Yours.” The second temptation appears more noble, and for that reason is more insidious. As Adam says, “I would rather give up using [the word ‘mine’] than find its ultimate sense in You.” We might call this approach fearing the word “mine” without cherishing it at all. Indeed, when faced with the magnitude of the word, rejecting it often seems the correct response. However, as with the wicked servant in the parable of the talents, refusing to take responsibility for the goods of the master is also a temptation, which ultimately does not bring us closer to God but threatens to pull us away from Him.

Of course, we do not mean to say that voluntary poverty is a temptation. Even the counsel of poverty honors and preserves the word “mine” in a paradoxical manner. Religious life vows to give up private ownership, but it still retains some form of dominion, whether that be common

ownership or at least some arrangement that entrusts goods to the care of the one making the vow. Dominion and “mine” are not simply rejected, but rather are perfected through the offering of one’s life for the sake of a higher, more comprehensive good. Thus, voluntary poverty is not the temptation we identified above. Rather, the temptation is one of total abdication of dominion, the refusal to relate to things in the world. In order to illustrate the consequences of following such a temptation, let us consider the case of the Spiritual Franciscans.

Spiritual Franciscans

St. Francis of Assisi forged a new way to live the counsel of poverty, wherein he and his followers gave up all of their possessions and became mendicants (beggars). Unlike other religious orders, the Franciscans sought to own nothing, *even in common*, and strove to be radically receptive to God’s providence. After St. Francis’ death, his followers were left with many questions on how to live this radical ideal of the “most high poverty possible” (*altissima paupertas*),^[2] and from there numerous debates and divisions developed. A number of Franciscans, commonly referred to as the “Spirituals,” took a complete lack of ownership to be the defining character of the order. What differentiated the Spirituals from the rest of the Franciscans was their adherence to poverty at the cost of everything else, even schism. Though the Spirituals were not a single unified group, we can nevertheless identify a spiritualistic interpretation of poverty that they held as sacrosanct.

The Spiritual Franciscans wanted to absolutely abstain from all ownership of property and live completely at the mercy of the almsgiving of others. They attempted to abdicate from using the word “mine,” and even “ours,” in exchange for an all-encompassing “Yours.” Relying on a distinction between use and ownership, they claimed that while other people use things *and* exercise ownership over them, the Franciscans only have simple use of things (*simplex usus facti*) without owning them. Meanwhile, ownership was either retained by whoever had given alms to the Franciscans or was claimed by the Pope on their behalf,^[3] so that the Franciscans could use things without having them.

The precise details of the distinction between use and ownership are complex, but what is crucial for our question is that the Franciscan Spirituals refused to have any form of dominion over the things they used. Ultimately, the Spirituals wanted to have their necessities through God’s providence alone, not through their own powers. This vision of poverty may seem reasonable or noble to our ears, and may even superficially appear to be a fitting, albeit extreme, way of living the gospel message. Nevertheless, this idea of poverty was ultimately rejected by Pope John XXII, who criticized the idea that the pope owned property on behalf of the Franciscans, arguing that it obscured the truth.^[4] He insisted that the Franciscans must in fact have some form of dominion over things they consumed—*i.e.*, they couldn’t eat their cake if they didn’t first *have* it.

Some of the Spirituals accused Pope John XXII of heresy, and firmly defended their ideal of poverty without dominion. There were numerous anthropological justifications for the Spirituals’ view, but arguably the most compelling and influential was furnished by Peter John Olivi. He proposed that earthly dominion is an extension of one’s will. Unlike the traditional understanding of the will as the power of human nature whereby man pursues the good, Olivi understood the will as autonomous self-determination.^[5] He argued that the Franciscans had no will to possess the things they used, therefore they retained absolute poverty even while using things. This means that the physical reality of using the thing does not necessitate any actual relationship of the human will to the thing. In this way, Olivi sought to preserve the possibility

of the Franciscans willing God *alone* in the midst of using the things of this world.

This anthropology, which became the bedrock of the Spirituals' justification of poverty, only considers things in their concrete, physical reality as a means whereby human needs may be met. The goodness of things remains outside of them as an end they serve. Thus, the Spirituals don't recognize, at least at the level of human action, that things and man have the same ultimate end, as both are created by the same good God. As far as man's acting in the world is concerned, things are evacuated of their intrinsic goodness and orientation to God. The will must be directed only to God and all other things are seen as mere objects of use on that path. Ironically, the attempt to preserve the subordination of things to God brought things and their ownership outside that order. The Spirituals wrote many treatises on the nature of dominion to clarify what they were abdicating, and ultimately reduced man's engagement with the world of utility as defined internally by the will. Thus they abstracted dominion from the intrinsic ordering of things to God.¹⁰

Ultimately, this anthropology implies an unbridgeable chasm between the interiority of the person and the exterior world. The separation between use and dominion signifies a deeper separation between the actual external operation of the body and the orientation of the will. Thus, we see here a surprising parity between the Franciscans and the vain cry of Adam in *Radiation of Fatherhood*: "Ah, to stand apart from everything, so that I could be only within myself! I should then be closest to You" (336). By grounding dominion in the will alone and denying that the concrete factuality of things themselves are part of dominion, the Spirituals inadvertently sealed man off from the outside world.

Cherishing "Mine"

If the temptation not to cherish the word "mine" leads to the Spirituals' idea of poverty and property, then what does cherishing it look like? Let us return to the *Radiation of Fatherhood* and consider what this word "mine" means. As we see in our epigraph, Adam gives "mine" a meaning: "'mine' means 'own.'" The word "mine" signifies that something (or someone) ultimately bears some relation to who or what I am. As the play unfolds, it becomes clear that this unity between me and what is mine is bi-directional: "mine" signifies that the thing bears some reference to me and is simultaneously a claim that I am expressed or manifest in this thing. Certainly this relationship is asymmetrical in the case of fatherhood, as the parent always precedes the child. This asymmetry is even greater in the case of property ownership, as persons have a dignity which surpasses the things they own.

However, since God is the sufficient and ultimate cause of every creature, it seems that their being requires reference only to Him. Thus, only God can say "mine" of anything in the truest sense. It is for this very reason that saying the word "mine" puts Adam "face to face" with God. He cherishes the word, because in it he recognizes God's dominion over things and likens his situation to God's. For this same reason however, he also fears the word, for who could measure up to such an exemplar?

To cherish this word, we must consider those things about which we say "mine." Everyone recognizes that things can be useful or pleasurable, but for the Spiritual Franciscans, and for us in our own day, there is a tendency to forget that things are substantially good—that is, good *in themselves*. To recognize the substantial goodness of something means to see in it a perfection that it truly possesses. As we noted in our introduction, things are good because they are created by God, who is absolute perfection. While created things possess their goodness in a way such that they really are that goodness, only God is simply identical with this perfection. Every created thing has its perfection only as something first received from

God. This is a strange paradox, because it means that things are good without simply being identical with that goodness. They must enact their perfection.

This doesn't mean that seeking something as good requires *explicit* reference back to God as an ultimate end. In fact, using things exclusively for "God's sake" would underestimate the radical generosity of goodness. We saw this with the Spirituals, who sought to use earthly things as a mere means to the ultimate end of union with God; to be with God apart from the things He created. Yet God does nothing in vain and provides for man *through* the order He creates in the world. Therefore, while using things for some end beyond them is not wrong, it cannot be completely separated from what things are. Things are a means, but they are also—in a qualified sense—an end in themselves. God is the end of all things, and He is this end by indwelling all things in a manner commensurate with their capacity to receive goodness. God entrusts His own goodness to things, not so that they might be sought apart from Him, but in order that they might return to Him.

In a similar way, God entrusts his own power of dominion to us. He grounds our relative dominion of things within His own absolute dominion, so that He might provide for us through our own action.^[7] Though God's causality is sufficient for things, this is not at the exclusion of our own causality. Our power of dominion does not compete with God's, but rather as a "secondary causality" it participates and finds its ultimate justification in God's dominion. Therefore, having dominion over a thing means taking responsibility for helping it manifest the goodness of God in the world. We consider it as a substantial good, created by God and perhaps by participation co-created by man, in order to understand God's will for it and by extension his will for us (in using it).

Fear of the Lord

Cherishing the word "mine" undoubtedly opens a danger that we might mistake ourselves for the ultimate source and end of things. This is why it is crucial that Adam also fears the word "mine." While a certain kind of fear can be a crushing force that pulls us away from God, there is also fear of the Lord, which is a gift of the Spirit. The most perfect form of this gift is filial fear, which is like that of a loving child. Filial fear proceeds beyond fearing the punishments of sin and acts out of love for the generous Father, desiring to not betray Him and the goods He has given. Thus, fear of the Lord begins with awe or wonder, which loves the goodness of God and his generosity in creation for its own sake.

God's gifts remain always good in themselves, which means they remain always His. For this reason, poverty in spirit is traditionally associated with the gift of fear.^[8] This gift enables man to live poverty in spirit by embracing his ontological poverty before God.^[9] Ontological poverty doesn't point primarily to a physical lack, rather it means that everything we have and *everything we are* is from God. Embracing our ontological poverty allows man to turn in awe to everything God gives and receive it with gratitude rather than presumption. Hence, the Church has always taught that property ownership is not absolute, but relative to goodness itself. Aquinas says that even though man rightly possesses things on his own, he should *use* them as though they are owned by all.^[10] Embracing our ontological poverty helps one to be generous like the Father, recognizing that the gifts one has received are for the sake of all mankind.

This generosity is not just towards mankind however, and in fact, through dominion we must become "like God" *to things*. This generosity is expressed in two ways. First, we aid the thing's subsistence by preserving it and guiding it to reach its own proper perfection. To do so we must engage with the thing itself in all of its substantial goodness. If, as we saw with Olivi

above, dominion is exclusively an undetermined act of will, then by definition man's intellect is excluded from the actual exercise of dominion. This would mean that dominion doesn't require knowing *what* the thing is, or what its ends are. More than just self-determining, the will becomes the ultimate determination for the ends of things themselves. Proper dominion, on the other hand, is concerned with the nature of the thing, not primarily with "possessing it." True dominion must let things be, that is, not attempt to interfere or redefine with their goodness. This "letting be" is exemplified by God, both in the act of creation, which fittingly is enacted through the words "let there be," and in the gift of grace, which perfects but does not destroy nature. Man's "letting be" images this, by being both intensely interested in what the thing is, and by unselfishly guiding the thing to be what God has created it to be.

The second expression of generosity is equally important. Left only with "letting be," we might get the impression that true dominion means hands-off abstention from engaging with creation. The typical modern use of the word "nature" implies just such a "un-humanized" world. On the contrary, God takes a risk in creation by sharing Himself, and thus being in things. Created dominion also images God's in this way, so that when I say "mine" I must risk being present in things. "Letting be" must be held together with "being in." Thus, Adam says, "With this word ['mine'] I accept as my own, but at the same time I give myself" (352). Through our dominion, we become "incarnate" in the things we own. Perhaps the most striking example of this is the tenth Station of the Cross, where we see the sacrifice of Christ exemplified and intensified in the treatment of his clothing. Our things and their state of being reflect our own internal states, and conversely what is done to them has a real effect on us.

Ultimately then, dominion means uniting one's interior self with things in the external world. Isolating one to the exclusion of the other destroys the property relationship. By saying "mine," our interiority is poured out into and united with the exterior world, while both remain distinct. Thus, the image of property ownership can be best understood through what Adam says about fatherhood to his daughter, "Gradually I learn through you what it means to be a father: *it means having the strongest bonds with the world*" (358). Contrary to the Franciscan Spirituals, man must turn outward towards the world, and embrace the things God has created through "letting be" and "being in." Through the goodness of things we can encounter the source of their goodness and through us things can reach their own perfection and give glory to God. Authentic filial fear ultimately gives us the confidence to give thanks to God for the goodness of creation, saying with truth, "what's Yours is mine."

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^[1] Trans. Bolesław Taborski, *The Collected Plays and Writings on Theater* (University of California Press, 1987), 337.

^[2] See Oliver Boulnois, "Most High Poverty: The Challenge of the Franciscan Experiment" in *Communio: International Catholic Review* 42.3 (Fall 2015), 452.

^[3] This was established by Pope Innocent IV in *Ordinem Vestrum* (1245).

^[4] John XXII, *Ad Conditorem Canonum* (1322).

^[5] For an excellent exploration of the classical relationship between the human will and the good advanced by Augustine, and an explanation of why Augustine did not understand the will as self-determination, see D.C. Schindler, "Freedom Beyond Our Choosing: Augustine on the Will and Its Objects" in *Communio: International Catholic Review* 29.4 (Winter 2002).

^[6] For more on Franciscan economics as a precursor to modern economics, see Oliver Boulnois, “Most High Poverty,” 457–60; John Milbank, “The Franciscan Conundrum,” *Communio: International Catholic Review* 42.3 (Fall 2015) 476–81; and Giacomo Todeschini, *Franciscan Wealth: From Voluntary Poverty to Market Society* (Franciscan Inst Pubs, 2009).

^[7] *ST* II-II.66.1

^[8] *ST* II-II.19 a.12.

^[9] Christopher A. Franks, *He Became Poor: The Poverty of Christ and Aquinas’ Economic Teachings* (Eerdmans, 2009), 105–31.

^[10] *ST* II-II.66 a.2.

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