



DAVENANT DIGESTS

WHAT IS WORK FOR?

JOSEPH MINICH





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Introduction

WHEN IT COMES TO POLITICS, ECONOMICS, AND
SOCIAL JUSTICE—PEOPLE ARE JADED.

In an age of Twitter discourse, it is not surprising that we despair of the possibility of persuasion. Caught between safety and freedom, big and small government, individual and public good, it is easy to believe we live in a rhetorical war demanding total victory for one of two sides—and that no intelligible position could possibly be compelling to both. But whether we like it or not, all of us share a common world and have common needs within it, which means that returning to the foundations of political economy can orient us in these confusing times. We are, after all, political animals: if dialogue is our problem, it is also the only solution.

Before Party Politics

BEGINNING AT THE BEGINNING:

We can begin cutting through this impasse by recognizing that there was a time when the slogans of modern American party-politics did not exist. In fact, modern sets of emphases were combined in wildly different ways in the past. Thus, if we want to get to the foundations of political economy, the best thing to do is to think afresh from the beginning, that is, from Genesis. At least three features of the text seem relevant to our reflections: that man was created with immediate access to the resources of the world, that his dominion was a co-dominion accomplished with others and their gifts, and that the world of human cultivation is a world of limits. We will look at each in turn.

First, the early chapters of Genesis portray mankind's intimacy with the resources of the world. God begins the project of cultivation and dominion first by creating the earth, but then by planting a garden and commissioning man to extend it to the whole world. The cultivating God makes a cultivator in His image, and He makes man out of the very earth that man is to cultivate. God blesses this man and gives him the land as a gift.

The primal relation between man and earth precedes and grounds all human systems of exchange and distribution. This is still obvious to us in some sense. While most of us tend to think of the world's resources as accessed through the medium of money (whether given or earned), it is still the case that nobody owns the air, for instance; we freely make use of it without regulation. And while it might seem odd to us, there are plenty of forces seeking to

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monetize even air. It is worth noting, however, that our tacit sense of having a “birthright” to the world’s oxygen is precisely the same sentiment that most cultures throughout history extended to all of the world’s resources necessary for life. That is to say, for most of human history, the world’s resources of land, food, and water were seen as “common” to all members of a community in principle—even if systems of law and jurisprudence governed and distributed access to these to ensure the health of the social body and to avoid conflict. This was as true of Medieval Europe (before the privatizing impact of “enclosure” laws) as it was of smaller tribal societies. We should ask ourselves whether our modern systems of labor and exchange recognize man’s primal birthright, his claim to the resources of this world.



THE GARDEN OF EARTHLY DELIGHTS - THE EARTHLY PARADISE.
BY HIERONYMUS BOSCH, BETWEEN 1480 AND 1505

Second, made in the image of God, Adam is a human echo of God’s own creative activity. God’s creation of the world from nothing and his planting the garden that Adam was to extend echo in mankind’s own activities of pro-

creation, naming, ordering, separating, and protecting. And just as God is free in His activity—making the world according to the pattern of His eternal wisdom—so man’s task of cultivation is quite general, and God permits man to particularize it prudentially. Should Adam begin cultivating the garden in the east or west? What should he name the animals? Should he start digging outside the garden on Monday, or should he seek to understand the qualities

of bark? Adam’s task of dominion is open and to be performed in wisdom.

FOR MOST OF HUMAN HISTORY, THE WORLD’S RESOURCES OF LAND, FOOD, AND WATER WERE SEEN AS “COMMON” TO ALL MEMBERS OF A COMMUNITY IN PRINCIPLE

Not only is Adam’s task open, but from the very beginning, he performs it with another. Eve’s gifts are not Adam’s. Adam’s contribution to creation is not his wife’s. This is most obviously displayed in the different roles they take in procreation, but (contemporary sentiments notwith-

standing) this difference in vocation cannot be abstracted from the concrete capacities of being a particular kind of body, which indicates a distinctive way of participating in this general calling and task. The way in which Adam and Eve participate in being fruitful and multiplying is obviously different, and so, we should expect, are the ways in which they fill, subdue, and rule. This principle extends to their children and their children’s children. Cain and Abel, for instance, performed different tasks for which they were presumably well-suited. Even in the garden, then, we see not only that the task of each person is open, but that their tasks are inflected through their particular natures and competencies.

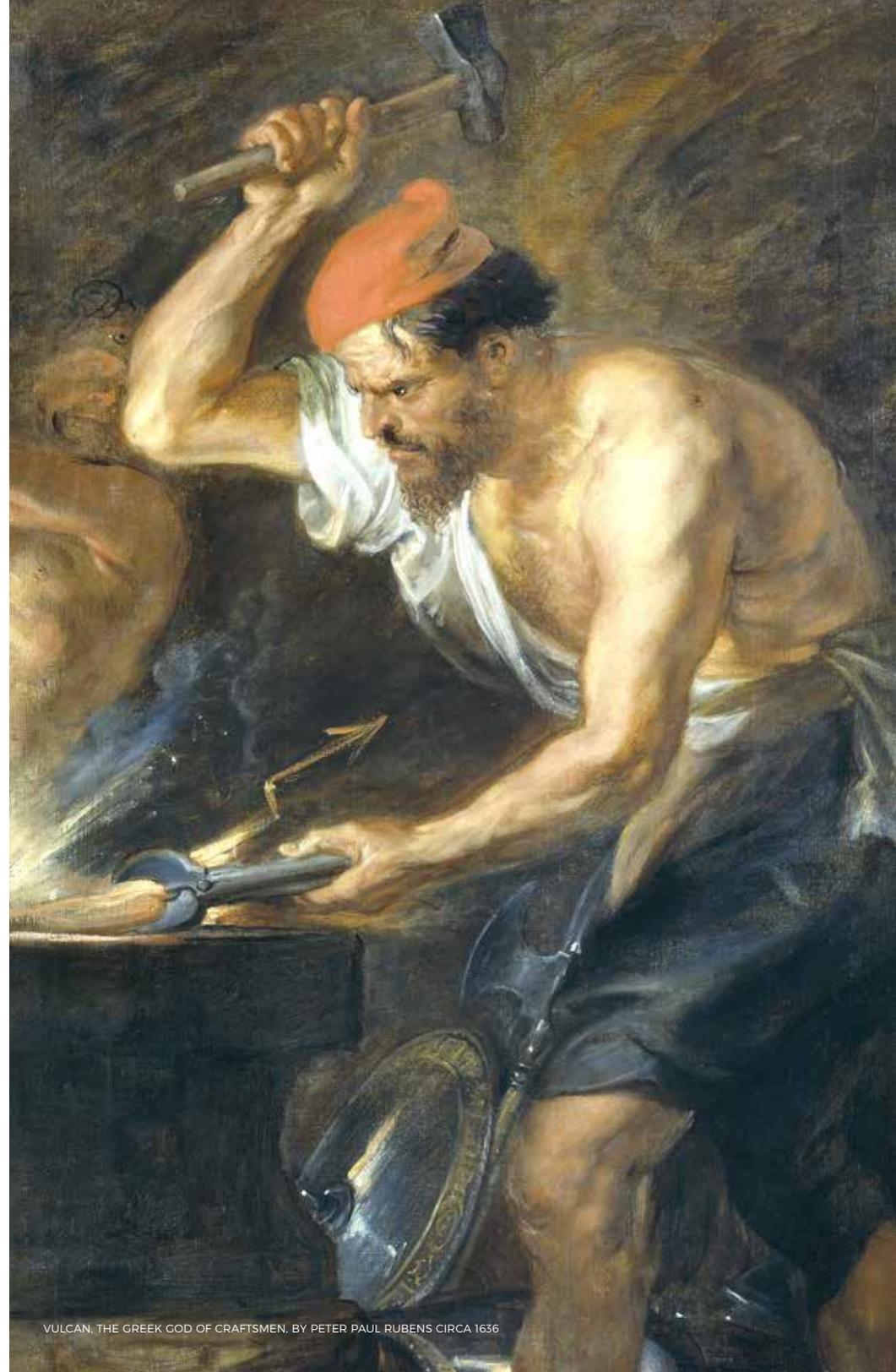
Furthermore, the New Testament sees the continuity of this pattern in the redeemed humanity of the Church. All are to serve according to their gifts and to inflect these gifts through their gendered natures. Paul’s epistles frequently emphasize God’s gifting to each a measure of faith and aptitude within the

church, but the external ordering of these gifts runs along the pattern established in creation. This picture of mankind's relationship to the world is confirmed by ordinary experience. We all feel most "at home" in the human project when we find ourselves actualizing our natures and our particular gifts in ways that extend the reign of God in a maximal way. And so, again, we must ask whether modern labor systems recognize and respect each person's aptitudes, or whether some men sacrifice their own for those of another.

Third, another theme in the early chapters of Genesis is the importance of limits. God did not create a monolithic world, but He separated and put boundaries between land, sea, heaven, lights, men, and women. We begin to see the disintegration of creation when these good boundaries are transgressed. Do modern labor systems maintain proper boundaries between the dominion of one and another? Do we cultivate a sense of *limits* with respect to one another? This is an especially important question in light of the Fall. If one individual is likely to usurp the dominion of another, what is the likelihood of one people or nation dominating another? Even if one people makes better choices, is it their right to seize the dominion of another? If each member of our species has a primal relation to this world, a primal task of dominion over it, and a sets of qualities and gifts which have been given to them to carry out this task, then should we not judge societal arrangements by the extent to which they showcase this original arrangement? Is it not possible that our own system, judged by these standards, will be tried and found wanting?

In sum, does current political and economic discourse really grasp the weight of the claim that each man and woman is a ruler of this world? Have we come

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VULCAN, THE GREEK GOD OF CRAFTSMEN, BY PETER PAUL RUBENS CIRCA 1636

to grips with the fact that *each* human is an agent of God's rule over this planet? If we fully recognize this fact, we cannot help but realize how radically it relativizes the differences in status and class that characterize human relations in history. Indeed, while the New Testament does not overturn human status in the church, it nevertheless situates it against more fundamental realities. A slave or wage-laborer is a brother and an agent of God to whom we owe submission. There are certain ordinary behaviors that we could not continue to take for granted if we recognized the primal dominion of each person, the sacredness of their gifts relative to the human commission, and the justice of a mutual limit preventing us from seizing one another's dominion.

A Churchly Politics

CAN THESE GENERAL PRINCIPLES BE CASHED OUT INTO ANYTHING USEFUL?

With our three orienting points in mind (birthright, aptitude, and limits), we see that the church, from the beginning, recognized the primal relation of man to human dominion. On the one hand, Paul is explicit about the superiority of freedom over slavery, implying some understanding of man's fundamental birthright to freedom. But more than this, the place of slaves within the church is mobile and relativized by a prior relation between each believer and Christ his Lord, a relation which re-establishes man's primal dominion in Christ. Moreover, the New Testament church is organized, as stated above, according to individual gifts and proclivities. God orders the church and its dominion according to the gifts He has given to men.



As for limits, it is fascinating to note the degree to which *freedom* with regard to social behavior is an explicit theme in the New Testament. Indeed, it is precisely by relating the *burden* of freedom that 1 Corinthians attempts to curb chaos and encourage the church to maturity. The motion from chaos to freedom is not accomplished by establishing stronger hierarchies, but largely by people recognizing their limits with respect to one another. If we took 1 Corinthians 13 seriously, imagine how careful we would be to avoid seizing, gossiping about, or transgressing the dominion of another. Paul answers Corinthian squabbling by telling each to die to himself, to put the needs of others first, to lay down his life for the brother. This is another way of saying, “recognize the dominion of your neighbor and limit your own in such recognition.”

As it turns out, then, it is in the surprising call to love that the New Testament is the most politically and economically relevant. It motivates us to ask, “What would a society ordered by love look like relative to the world's resources, to the gifts of each individual, and to the recognition of our limits



PENTECOST, BY JEAN II RESTOUT, 1732

THE RESURRECTION OF CHRIST AND HIS SENDING OF THE SPIRIT ARE THE RAIN THAT HEALS OUR PARCHED AND BROKEN EARTH, REDEEMING THE HUMAN COMMISSION.

we fill the earth with the knowledge of God (Col. 1). This is not opposed to the temporal dimension of the human project—it is the primal site from which it is accomplished. The resurrection of Christ and His sending of the Spirit are the rain that heals our parched and broken earth, redeeming the human commission.

If these are basic values in the Christian project, what does this project look like as it leavens into a society writ large? What does it mean to order a society by the rule of love? Instructive in this regard is the Westminster Larger Catechism (141), which summarizes the duties required in the eighth commandment (against theft):

The duties required in the eighth commandment are, truth, faithfulness, and justice in contracts and commerce between man and man; rendering to every one his due; restitution of goods unlawfully detained from the right owners thereof; giving and lending freely, according to our abilities, and the necessities of others; moderation of our judgments, wills, and affections concerning worldly goods; a provident care and study to get, keep, use, and dispose these things which are necessary and convenient for the sustentation of our nature, and suitable to our condition; a lawful calling, and diligence in it; frugality; avoiding unnecessary lawsuits, and suretiship, or other like engagements; and an endeavor, by all just and lawful means, to procure, preserve, and further the wealth and outward estate of others, as well as our own.

The procurement, preservation, and furthering of the wealth and outward estate of others is especially neglected in our modern discourse on this subject. But for the Westminster divines, this is justice ordered by love.

in respect of one another?” Before I seek to answer this, it is worth noting that the New Testament, written in a context of mass social injustice, takes an uncomfortable turn for modern persons. *In the task of loving, we find a human calling from which we cannot be alienated by the deeds of others—a task for which each is individually gifted.* And if true of Roman slaves, it is at least as true of those whose experience of modern economic injustice or illicit coercion forces them into dependencies and relationships (with managers, etc.) that they did not *ultimately* choose for themselves. While Paul encourages those who can get their freedom to get it, he encourages those who *cannot* get their freedom to love their masters. Why? It is not to reinforce oppressive hierarchies, but precisely because the Christian slave possess dominion relative to the master! Just as the New Testament encourages wives to exercise dominion through winning unbelieving husbands without a word, so slaves actually participate in the calling behind all callings by witnessing to their masters of another reality. In their death to self, they display His life. Indeed, the New Testament’s predominant use of the language of the cultural commission (being fruitful, multiplying, filling, subduing, ruling) has to do with the success of the ministry of the church. We are “filled with the fruit of righteousness,” or

But What About...?

THERE ARE AT LEAST A COUPLE OF OBJECTIONS THAT ARE WORTH HONORING BRIEFLY:

One objection to my claim about man's birthright to the world's resources might be that I have not sufficiently factored in the mediating institution of the family. Is it not via families that access to the world's resources is mediated? Several points are worth making here. First, even if this is ordinarily true, we need to be careful not to reduce the "birthright" of each human person to the world's resources to their family's task of mediation. Indeed, it is unjust when a father refuses, for instance, to provide for his children. This is not just an avoidance of his duty; it is a failure to recognize the child's own claim upon the world given to him immediately from God (and to the family as guarantor and surety). The family administers rather than constitutes the individual's primal claim upon the resources for life. And moreover, in modern systems, we still need to examine *the family's* relationship and access to resources writ large. For many or most families, even when a father provides for his children well, it is still ordinarily by a non-ideal form of dependence on another. Thus, in most cases, focusing on the family as opposed to the individual (in considering these questions) is simply to kick the can of potentially illicit modes of dependence back one step—from unjust dependence for individuals to unjust dependence for families.

Another objection might go as follows: Am I idealizing the past? And is any of this remotely useful in a modern context? I am under no illusions that there have been many communities in history wherein everyone had "fulfilling vo-

cations," using their gifts in some elaborate system of harmony. For most of human history, life has been predominantly about immediate survival, and much of life was perhaps both unbearably difficult and boring. But as human communities complexify, expand, and even enable new modes of flourishing, we can still look at the questions I have asked to evaluate whether we are moving toward the good or exchanging one set of unbearable circumstances for another. Or said differently, are we approximating the good that we can approximate in the current arrangement? The calling of love is not fatalistic—leaving us to passively accept injustice for the sake of being nice—but it presses,

both in our individual lives and in our culture at large, to greater and greater approximation of the good. It is not accidental that a kind of "reform" impulse has been part of the basic DNA of most Christian-influenced cultures. For all the ways this can be distorted, the impulse itself has generated much good in the mixed history of Christian civilization.

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Conclusion

THE MOST IMMEDIATE IMPLICATION OF WHAT I HAVE SAID IS, NOT SURPRISINGLY, THAT WE MUST BRING OUR GOOD-WILL AND PEACE OF HEART TO OUR NEIGHBORS.



PEACEABLE KINGDOM, BY EDWARD HICKS, CIRCA 1834

Together, these allow a certain degree of societal peace to leaven culture, because good-will necessarily cares about injustice, about stolen dominion, about prevented social action, and feels a limitation relative to the free reign of others. But we must first cultivate and have good-will and peace of heart, and only then can we bless others—even our enemies—with them. It is especially in our most difficult relationships that we poignantly display the dominion of God, breaking the cycle of intra-human consumption that so characterizes human affairs. We rule by dying daily.

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How an individual links up into a corporate or social project depends very much on one's wisdom, aptitude, gifts, circumstances, etc. In principle, to whatever extent we are able to be an agent of healing in this difficult world, we are to be such an agent. But identifying those locations is the task of a wisdom. And wisdom lends itself to peaceful hearts and loving souls—not to those who would instrumentalize it in order to seize control of the world

for their own comfort. Wisdom is given to those who see that their neighbor has the immediate calling to possess both themselves and their own participation in our common project. With this vision of our fellows in place, we can begin imagining what a common project with them might look like.



WHAT ARE “DAVENANT DIGESTS?”

Davenant Digests seek to bring the church's past into clear focus for Christians today, and use it to shed light on the challenges of the church's present. Written in a clear, lively, and down-to-earth style, these short introductions aim to answer questions that ordinary Christians have, in terms that ordinary Christians will want to read.



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THE
DAVENANT  PRESS

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