To See the World in a Grain of Sand:

The Family, the National Community and the Common Good

by [Christopher Garbowski](#) (October 2020)

Chrystus i dzieci (Christ with Children), Witold Wojtkiewicz, 1908

Michal Gierycz, a Polish political scientist, set himself the task of coming up with a political anthropology of his country in relation to the EU. He wisely hit upon using the key concepts from Thomas Sowell's book of 1987 *A Conflict of Visions: Ideological Origins of Political Struggles*, in which the role of visions underpinning political ideologies is explored. Sowell argues social visions act as a kind of cognitive road map that guide everyone, since no mind can encompass social reality in its full dynamism and complexity. Crucially, when political leaders tap into broader social visions, they are able to create an agenda for both thought and action. Sowell focuses on two such broader contrasting visions that he persuasively argues have inspired politicians and influenced societies for the last centuries, what he terms the constrained vision and unconstrained vision of human nature. The constrained vision sees human nature as flawed and with a tragic bent, while the unconstrained vision is a moral vision that focuses on human intentions and ideals, and at times veers toward a dangerous utopian bent.

Upon presenting and critiquing Sowell's anthropological conceptions, Gierycz develops them further for his specific analysis plumbing the understanding of human nature in current European politics at the EU level, that he argues tend toward an unconstrained anthropology.[1] Conversely, he finds the constrained vision particularly useful for probing a national community. In his explication of a constrained anthropology on this basis he concentrates on what he takes as its underlying theological assumptions that interest him. Both in Sowell and in other contemporary political thinkers such as Ronald Dworkin and John Rawls Gierycz detects an implicit assumption of the doctrine of the original sin through an awareness of the inherently flawed side of human nature. Yet although human nature has its limitations, he argues following Sowell, taking this fact into account allows for organizing social matters in

a more realistic and stable manner than would otherwise be possible. From a historical perspective Gierycz points out that even in Greek philosophy a constrained vision of the human being was present in the concept of natural law, which implied certain limits. The social nature of humans was also stressed, starting with the family and working upwards. Later modernity largely went its own way with a greater stress on individualism but certain currents within it maintained a constrained anthropology to some degree, for instance it can be detected among the communitarians. Some communitarians even praise such broad communal feelings as patriotism. Gierycz probes the theological underpinnings of Sowell's stress on the checks and balances necessary for the state, eloquently captured in James Madison's famous statement: "If men were angels, no government would be necessary."

In my previous essay, [The Wedding of High and Popular Culture](), I conducted a preliminary discussion of beauty as a transcendental. Largely in the above sense, the limitations of human nature are a key to my exploration of the good as a transcendental in what might be called its practical form, without which it is effectively an abstract ideal. I myself will "limit" the range of this exploration more specifically to the problem of the common good as it is developed within the smallest unit, the family, and arguably the largest workable unit to date: the national community. An even further constraint, the Blakean "grain of sand" through which I will try to see the world of the family and beyond, is primarily the national community of Poland where I have lived almost four decades now and raised my own family.

To begin with, on account of the trials and tribulations of their history, many Poles feel a particularly close relationship with their country. How can one describe this sense of belonging? Patriotism is a good starting point. Poles prefer to distinguish between a positive patriotism and a negative nationalism. However, for all its virtues

patriotism is rather narrow in scope for describing the fullness of the relationship between a national community and its homeland, especially at a notional level. And so despite its problematic nature, for my purposes few terms exist to replace nationalism in this vein. Whether one calls it patriotism or not, nationalism in its arguably positive version is the emotional and ethical relationship between the members of a national community and their homeland.

Among the more prominent supporters of a "positive" nationalism are the Israeli scholars Yoram Hazony and Yael Tamir. The conservative Hazony argues a nation offers an unsurpassed basis for a state, since it allows for the realization of the human aspiration for self-government and communitarian freedom in the most satisfactory way. He points out that nations confer meaning on individual members, providing means for the development of the particular, that is, true cultural diversity through the distinct culture of each nation. Although nations have their faults, he counters that "liberal imperialist political ideals have become among the most powerful agents fomenting intolerance and hate in the Western world today."[2]

Tamir extols somewhat different facets of nationalism among which she acknowledges the human need for political leaders and policymakers who prioritize serving their own national communities. Essentially she has a fairly organic sense of the nature of nationalism, also claiming that there is no clear distinction between patriotism and nationalism, which may sound odd—one can imagine a patriotic duty, but hardy a nationalistic one—but is perhaps valid at the conceptual level if not at the vernacular one, at least in her argumentation. Tamir calls for the development of a liberal form of nationalism to counter that of the populists who according to her are essentially filling in a vacuum in liberal politics. In her view, among other matters: "Unlike civic nationalism, liberal nationalism does not ignore the

role of identity and membership; hence it is inherently attentive to (. . .) the disadvantages with being a minority and seeks ways of ameliorating them."[3] Liberal nationalism thus possesses a measure of non ethnic inclusiveness. Tamir even feels this project can help overcome some of the failings of liberalism.

Regarding Poland, although it is currently ethnically uniform—before the Second World War that was not the case—some elements of Tamir's liberal nationalism are likewise present or worth consideration there. However, currently more pertinently for the question of a positive nationalism in the country, Hazony discusses the role of religion in nationalism. He is hardly alone, it has been fairly convincingly argued religion continues to play a key role in the lasting appeal of nations to the members of national communities in today's world. What then is the connection between religion and the political community? Rabbi Jonathan Sacks makes a major point when he argues that religion protects the members of the national community from the overbearing tendencies of the state. Sacks pertinently claims religion is "part of the ecology of freedom because it supports families, communities, charities, voluntary associations, active citizenship and concern for the common good. (. . .) Without it we will depend entirely on the State, and when that happens we risk what J. L. Talmon called 'totalitarian democracy,' which is what revolutionary France eventually became."[4]

Now a major context for many aspects of Polish social and political life, entry into the EU with the close ties and proximity to the wealthier European countries that ensued has provided a model for many enterprising Poles, affecting lifestyle and worldview. At the bottom of the European context—both in its positive and negative consequences—are obviously deep ideological currents and broader worldviews competing with each other. Polish political philosopher Julian Korab-Karpowicz emphasizes the importance of religion in the

public sphere, stating: "Although not everyone is religious, when considering a flourishing society the final end of humans should always be taken into consideration." This seemingly uncontroversial view goes against the grain of more aggressive secular views that banish religion from the public sphere when possible, relegating it strictly to the private sphere. And thus any presence of religion there, especially in the political realm is categorized as interference. What binds a number of these views is the sense that religion does more harm than good.[5] Advocates of this view exist in Poland as well, most notably found among those advocating a woke worldview, which is gaining strength here. But needless to say the political issue is hardly the whole story; neither in Poland nor elsewhere. There are also competing views of what constitutes the good: for instance, how we define human dignity and all the matters that stream into that question.

A further consideration of inquiry concerns religion and nationalism as major axiological building blocks of socio-political community. In his *Trust: A History*, Geoffrey Hosking has indicated generating trust as one of the most important social functions of religion. In Western Christianity, beginning with the parish, which augmented solidarity in numerous forms, and especially through supporting that basic unit of trust, the family, the rings of trust expanded outwards to largely end at the evolving nations. Hosking looks at the EU and its modestly successful attempts at providing "a broader radius of trust" for its older and newer members, but points out that when a crisis breaks out, the peoples of the various national communities look to their own nation-states for solutions and protection. And when a genuine crisis broke out this year, Polish political philosopher Dariusz Gawin noted during the period when the fear of the coronavirus epidemic in mid 2020 had already reached a high level that the members of national communities paid attention to the steps taken by their own governments which concerned them directly: "The televisions in Warsaw, Berlin or Rome do not show the

commissars of the European Union providing the most up to date information or uttering key decisions. (. . .) Attention is focused on the governments of the particular states. They are the sources of genuine power and are responsible for the manner in which they use it."

The above illustrates Hosking's point that with all their resources more finely attuned to their citizens' needs, "we must probably expect the nation-state to outbid all rivals in providing a focus for different kinds of trust for the foreseeable future."[6] Trust is thus an element of creating larger community conducive to the good life at a basic level, but it can only be spread out so far to remain a relevant social force. What needs to be stressed st this juncture, in the light of the existence of a crucial good such as trust, speaking of a national community is not an oxymoron.

Nevertheless, as alluded to above in many analyses nationalism is on the defensive, and not without substantive reason. The historical sins of nationalism are fairly well known; the relationship with fascism comes to the fore. But, among other natters, behind these views is often enough a limited historical awareness that, as Jakub Grygiel puts it, "one of the greatest threats Europe faced in the twentieth century was transnational in nature: communism, which divided the continent for 45 years and led to the deaths of millions."[7] Tragically, one can say, there simply is no form of organizing human affairs that is incapable of taking wrong turns or possibly carrying out atrocities. More specifically, neither the national nor transnational orders are immune to aberrations. Here one must recall Augustine's observation that every good has its shadow: consequently, abandoning the path of a particular good such as nationalism once in a given case it turns sour for a time can lead to new errors—as arguably seems to be the case with the most uncritical advocates and agents of the current European project in their naïve "unconstrained" belief that transnationalism will solve

virtually all contemporary social problems—if the new course is not approached with care. Which is not to say that nationalism does not need reexamination or to be approached with caution if it is to work socially and ethically for its community at home and abroad. In political terms both forms have their uses and abuses.

In the case of Poland at any rate, bearing in mind that during the Second World War and under communism the country experienced violent oppression from both a neighboring fascist imperialist regime and a transnational one it is easier to understand the deep and fairly widespread commitment to national sovereignty, in some cases perhaps excessively demonstrated, as well as the gratitude to the religion that aided in obtaining it. And what Poles experienced from totalitarian transnationalism should not be lost on the members of the European community who were more fortunate in this respect. What is often termed Euroscepticism in Poles is to a great extent a different vision of Europe that is rooted in its weighty historical experience.

Religion within the national community fosters forces such as trust that work toward the common good. This is a key task for a society of East Central Europe that has exited a collapsing political system which in its Soviet heartland had promoted "maximum distrust," as Hosking has argued. The European Union that Poland has joined, on the other hand, was supposed be the safe harbor anchored in freedom. However, some things are also rotten in Denmark, or rather Brussels. In a manner not dissimilar to Hazony, Polish philosopher Ryszard Legutko who is a member of the European Parliament notes that those who call themselves liberals are quickly becoming more intolerant of opposing viewpoints and those who refuse to conform are treated with scorn and the machinery of the state is used to bend individuals or groups to their will.[8] And the problem is beginning to also penetrate the Polish national scene in its own manner, that is without the assistance of

state machinery for now, but—for instance—from outside pressure through woke policy promoted in international corporations where many young and some not so young Poles are employed.

Polish society is divided along a number of lines; hardly unusual in any pluralistic society. The new divisions have not been adequately named. Michal Kuz, a Polish political scientist, has coined the self-explanatory terms "localists" and "internationalists" to describe perhaps the most pertinent current divide within European societies.[9] These worldview divides are also visible along political party lines. Poles generally consider themselves European and their attitude toward the EU remains quite positive across the board, with only a small group of genuine Eurosceptics present in the society. To put it in more traditional terms, in Polish society there is a small although growing group of cosmopolitans and right-wing nationalists at opposite ends of the spectrum, while most citizens range somewhere in between. But the divide naturally does play a role as to how this attitude toward Europe is expressed, or patriotism itself for that matter. Poles have their own Europe, or rather several of them, nor is Europe necessarily limited to the European Union. However, for examining the Polish national community closer it is best to start at its most basic unit: the family.

The virtually iconic Solidarity movement of the 1980s has been called a "self-limiting" revolution. This was largely the strategy of its leadership, aware of the genuine threat of intervention by either the Polish communist regime or its Soviet overlord. John Paul II's insistence on nonviolent resistance also played a crucial role. But there is a key scene in Andrzej Wajda's *Walesa: Man of Hope* (2013) that illustrates one of the less noted yet essential social forces maintaining this strategy. After the August strike of the Gdansk shipyard workers in 1980 has been renewed despite the seeming initial success of negotiations, kids gloves are off

and the regime's forces are gathering for what seems to be an inevitable violent confrontation with the workers occupying the shipyard. Two workers are near the gate and discussing the turn of events. The first worker is young and unmarried. He is ready for a fight because he can no longer tolerate living under the "Russian" heel. The second is slightly older and married. He wishes that they had quit while they were ahead. Within his film Wajda seems to stress how both workers' arguments have their validity.

The struggle of both perspectives is personified intensely in Walesa himself who fights for freedom and dignity but is always aware of the consequences for his family. Indeed, virtually all his actions are shown to have consequences for his wife and family. Nevertheless, in *Walesa,* Wajda shows clearly enough that at a certain level family was a key to successful resistance. It inspired political realism not to be too rash, but also additional motivation to persevere in the fight for change.

In communist countries dominated by the Soviet Union, family breakdown was generally quite widespread. This phenomenon was likely among the major sources of the demoralization of communist societies. And it seems hardly accidental. Next to religion, the family as an institution was in quite low esteem by Communists since it made the individual family members more difficult to manipulate. In Poland the two were indeed closely interrelated; Cardinal Wyszynski who led the Polish Catholic Church from the Stalinist period to Solidarity had made it a primary concern to strengthen the family. In a manner of speaking it can be claimed Solidarity truly began in the home.

It was with this significantly enhanced through religion reservoir of "human capital," to use economist Gary Becker's term for the contribution of the family to society and its economy, that after 1989 Poles started their struggle to transform their economy from a backward centralized command

economy inspired by a form of prototypical progressivism, or "scientific socialism" as the communists boasted, to a market economy to become, as one economist put it—"Europe's growth champion."[10] Obviously, a crucial role was played by the radical plan that steered the transformation, but it is could not have been as effective as it was without the hard work of millions of Poles. And undoubtedly the mutual support of spouses played a largely unnoticed lubricant to that exhausting effort. I can well recall the blood, sweat and tears that poured out of Polish families at that time attempting to get ahead or simply make ends meet—yes, I'm speaking in metaphorical terms, but just barely.

And so, unsurprisingly, despite its success at one level, the stress it induced upon Polish society had enormous consequences at numerous other levels, and continues to have reverberations. Among other matters, the initial economic uncertainty and increased mobility which often shattered traditional familial support systems within Polish society in larger cities were quite possibly factors contributing to its current demographic crisis. As it deepens this phenomenon which is accompanied by an increasingly aging society will likely also hamper further economic growth. Demographer Mary Eberstadt argues a low birth rate is a key factor in restructuring the family in a manner which generates a substantial decline in religious practices.[11] Things have not gone so far in Poland, but a clear distinction exists between the higher level of religious practices of older Poles who have experienced Communism and the younger ones who have not.

Like no other institution in the country the Church continues to promote family values in Polish society, among other means through religious education that has returned to the public schools; significantly, although the divorce rate increased in Poland shortly after 1989, it has by and large leveled off and remains among the lower rates in Europe and

marriage is still quite popular despite the alternatives. At about three percent of domestic couples in 2019, the percentage of Poles cohabiting or in common law relationships is also low by European standards.

Social psychologist Janusz Czapinski compared the two major phases that he distinguished in the development of Polish society after accession to the European Union to those famously described by Abraham Maslow in his hierarchy of needs for individuals. Czapinski's observed Poles had spent their early years in the EU dealing with their more basic needs, that is on advancing their sense of material well being. Once these needs had been met to a substantial degree they turned to higher ones, such as augmenting their sense of identity and self-worth. In this new ambitious tendency, he also saw political consequences: during the seminal elections of 2015 the Law and Justice party that was more in tune with this change within the aspirations of Polish society ended up victorious. In other words, this political event was a democratic response to a very understandable national urge; nevertheless, it was at this point Poland's more complex and often negative relationship with the EU effectively began, especially at the political level.

The development to some extent extends Pascal Bruckner's insight expressed in *The Tyranny of Guilt*, that a "sobered up Europe" constantly obsessed with its earlier sins of colonialism is nevertheless "no less arrogant than imperial Europe because it continues to project its categories on the rest of the world and childishly boasts that it is the origin of all the ills that beset the world."[12] In this context, it would seem not entirely incorrect to claim that the EU's taking out their suppressed sense of global superiority on the presently weaker countries of East Central Europe can be understood as a manner of kicking the cat, so to speak. Although no doubt the "cat" is not altogether innocent.

In *The Strange Death of Europe*, Douglas Murray

expresses surprise at the degree that Europeans, especially the elites, hate themselves. He also detects a palpable sense of ennui in the continent: the sense that "life in modern liberal democracies is to some extent thin or shallow and that life in modern Western Europe in particular has lost its sense of purpose."[13] Nor in Murray's view does the largely reductionist message of science offer much hope, while contemporary high art offers little inspiration. Not religious himself, Murray complains that most European Christian churches do not particularly help the situation since they have lost confidence in their own message and their religion has largely been reduced to a form of "left-wing politics, diversity action and social welfare projects." And so unsurprisingly they have either lost or have difficulty keeping their flocks. Murray is essentially describing what sociologist of religion Christian Smith has termed "Moralistic Therapeutic Deism," which consists of a watered-down religion. In other words, the various Christian Churches have largely engaged so much effort in accommodating themselves to the times that they have little of their own to provide when the times themselves are the problem. What Murray adds is the observation of a perceptive non-Christian that confirms the phenomenon, while pointing out Europeans are not buying it. They are abandoning the Churches, but nothing has effectively replaced the hole that has been left where previously meaning was created: a fact that he bemoans. And in his Madness of Crowds of two years later the author extends the list of agents that through ill conceived "unconstrained" views challenge and hinder our societies in the striving for the common good.

The lost sense of purpose Murray intuits in Europe and beyond suggests the continued presence—possibly even intensification—of the existential vacuum that Viktor E. Frankl has indicated decades ago as a problem within modern societies, whose members consequently seek compensatory pseudo-values at various levels or resort to power in

different guises and baser instincts when they cannot find fuller meaning.[14] Frankl was among the earliest moral psychologists that pointed to religion as a deep source of meaning and self-transcendence for the individual. The voice of religion, most powerfully represented by the Catholic Church in Poland, has historically guided Poles through their greater and lesser trials, and despite its problems continues to direct a good number of Poles toward a self-transcendent communitarian self, which is so vital to developing the common good. Will it manage to do so in the future? This is only one pertinent question impossible to definitively answer, but which is a key to the fostering of the vocation of the national community and with no salient replacement in sight.

It is in a person fulfilling his or her vocation that it can be said the good approaches a transcendental. A vocation is a calling: where does a national community's call come from? At one level both from within and beyond the community: from within through its self understanding, from without at the very least through its deeper relation to its neighbors and furthermore to humanity. At that juncture, when diligently approached, the limitations of the national community are no longer boundaries but starting points towards a form of self-transcendence. Together these sources work for the nation to create its own beauty which it shares through its culture and art and through its members to journey however awkwardly and with a greater or lesser number of detours toward the truth that potentially unites us all.

The good essentially starts its journey in the home and finds its broader fulfillment in the national community through which humanity itself is enriched. These are not the only paths to the common good but they are crucial. Serious impediments to that seminal journey are the threats to the family both in Poland and in so many other national communities as well as the contemporary barriers that need to be overcome in the struggle to create the common good within

them.

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[1] To simplify matters, I do not give Polish book or article titles in my article.

[2] Yoram Hazony, The Virtue of Nationalism (New York: Basic Books, 2018), 11.

[3] Yael Tamir, Why Nationalism? (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019), 181

[4] Quoted in Rupert Shortt, Does Religion Do More Harm Than Good? (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2019), 37. See also Jonathan Sacks, Morality: Restoring the Common Good in Divided Times (New York: Basic Books, 2020).

[5] Shortt, *Does Religion Do More Harm Than Good?*

[6] Geoffrey Hosking, Trust: A History (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 194.

[7] Jakub Grygiel, "The return of Europe's nation states," Foreign Affairs 95, 5 (2016): 99.

[8] Ryszard Legutko, The Demon in Democracy: Totalitarian Temptations in Free Societies, trans. Teresa Adelson (New York: Encounter Books, 2016).

[9] Michal Kuz, "Globalism and Localism in the Perspective of Polish Politics," The Warsaw Institute Review, 27 June 2017. Retrieved: https://warsawinstitute.org/globalism-and-localism-in-the-perspective-of-polish-politics/.

[10] Marcin Piatkowski, Europe's Growth Champion: Insights from the Economic Rise of Poland

 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

[11] Mary Eberstadt, How the West Really Lost God: A New Theory of Secularization (West Conshohocken, PA: Templeton Press, 2013)

[12] Pascal Bruckner, The Tyranny of Guilt: An Essay on Western Masochism (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 36.

[13] Douglas Murray, *The Strange Death of Europe: Immigration, Identity, Islam (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 258.*

[14] See Viktor E. Frankl, Man's Search for Ultimate Meaning, revised edition (New York: Washington Square Press, 1984).

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