

Our Default Condition

This article is parked under Essays: Early Church simply because there's more space here.

Indeed, this is a subject matter of great interest, one that hits home with us all, but requires some fleshing out because it's a bit abstract. Whether we admit it or not, we're tempted to subscribe to the notion of fate, a force that guides us minus any and all concern for our personal well being. In fact, "fate" and "personal" are completely at odds with each other. Another way of putting it is that we're passive to events yet are active just enough to have a say in matters to make us think we can influence events. Sounds rather depressing, and indeed it is.

As for exactly where I got the idea to write about the matter is rather foggy, but I recall a friend speaking of a "default condition" which he and someone else had been discussing. I too know that person who over the years has come off with quite a few profound insights, so naturally I was tuned in. What makes his observations so to the point is that essentially he's a laborer, working in a factory (an oddity nowadays), and is faithful to a daily practice of prayer and *lectio divina*. Lucky me to be the recipient of this double-barreled font of wisdom. Because this is a pure gift, gladly do I attribute the phrase "default condition" to these two men.

The word "default" is used quite frequently nowadays, especially when it comes to computers. To make sure I was on the right track, I checked out the definition to appreciate what's involved. Also I added another definition I had known about but is overshadowed by the more popular one. Two definitions are as follows, courtesy of Merriam-Webster: 1) a selection automatically used by a program in the absence of a choice made by the user and 2) a selection made usually automatically or without active consideration due to lack of a viable alternative...in short, in the absence of.

The first image that comes to mind? While most likely it's out of place, I can't help but think of the example of water associated with Lao-Tzu which by its very nature always seeks the lowest place. This makes it a prime example of a natural default position. Pressing it further, gravity makes water flow as such. Hence gravity is the default condition in nature *par excellence*. Nothing can escape its ultimate grasp. Another way to describe what's meant by default, albeit less inspiring, is the lowest common denominator, the bottom of the barrel. However, that doesn't necessarily make it negative or demeaning. Of concern here is that default is something that has

been built in as part of the original structure. The water just mentioned is essential to the structure of life, so it's an example of something built into a system. Actually when flowing, it reveals the presence of gravity, the mother of all defaults.

The following words from the above definition of default stand out in a stark sort of way: "due to the lack of a viable alternative." That sounds pretty ominous, leaving us with no alternative but to accept the inevitable. Also it's reminiscent of the bottom of the barrel just mentioned. So locating the inevitable within us or better, what we assume to be the inevitable, is of interest here. We're trying to pinpoint our default position, and for 99.99% of us it's a less than positive experience. We may not feel this negativity all the time but indeed it's present and waiting to be activated by a multitude of influences. It acts as a trigger to make us opt automatically for the downward slope which is not unlike the unrelenting nature of fate mentioned at the beginning of this article. Rarely if ever the opposite enters our minds, that we're happy by nature, and happy has nothing to do with being giddy all the time.

There are so many elements that contribute to being unhappy as our default position. We can include being insecure, morose, depressed or whatever other term one may use. Some if not all are operative on a given day. To examine them each and every one of them is beyond the scope of this article; in fact, a professional is required to do that properly. One common denominator belongs to them all, that we accept them as part and parcel of our natural condition and don't ask questions. In fact, rarely if ever do we ask why this is so. Instead, we prefer to develop a wide variety of myths which indeed are valuable because they reflect the reality of what's going on. The only trouble is that such myths can entertain us to the point of distraction and take our eyes off what needs to be done.

As for myths, one of the most influential is the garden of Eden. Not to have a myth is unnatural. We'd wander about without any reference point whatsoever and leave no trace of history for others to see. While we can get plenty of mileage from a myth, in the long run it's due to run its course. Before replacing it, a new approach might be needed and then build a myth on that. More on that toward the end of this article because in many ways that's what we're exploring, the best way to counter our default condition.

Without a myth we'd be left quite vulnerable, open to any and all things that come at us. We don't do anything about this passivity because we feel it's beyond our power and just accept it...fate at work as noted at the beginning of this article.

Reflecting on our default condition some more, we discover that we're lacking assistance, something like an advocate or a defense lawyer. We've been taking it for granted all our lives that the prosecutor—our negative default position—always has had the upper hand. To put it more accurately, never has he had any competition to check his moves. Day after day he blows right by any and all our attempts to counter them. Even worse, never does he get tired so we can sneak by him. If this isn't a definition of lording it over someone, I don't know what other example can match it. No wonder so much slavery had existed throughout human history and unfortunately still exists. It's simply a reflection of that inner slavery to our prosecutor who's always railing against us.

At first glance to escape our default position seems like Mission Impossible. Even if you're going along fine like most of us do in life, something unexpected stops you dead in your tracks and sends you back to square one, the default position from which you had started. This is the most unnerving part of the whole enterprise topped only by the certainty that it will happen again. Then there's the suddenness of it all. Even a lengthy time gap between awareness of our default condition and freedom from it dissolves instantaneously. At least that shows the time gap, while enjoyable for a short time, was illusory.

No small wonder people came up with ideas about reincarnation. We may mock this as primitive or naive, but it reflects our innate desperation in wanting to solve the problem of returning to our default position, the one we've been born into. Either we've reached a state higher than the one before or revert to something worse in the sense of falling into a lower existence. While a given life might be enjoyable, in the end it's one among countless others. We're stuck in treadmill going round and round so in the long run reincarnation is quite pessimistic. Should we stop, we end up in a position familiar to us, the default one, of course. Once there usually we fritter away our time with various distracting activities...nothing harmful but completely useless. For many of us, that's the real kicker when we reflect on it, especially toward the end of life.

Just about all the time we're aware of this predicament not unlike being aware of white noise in the background. No small wonder that reincarnation presents itself as a viable alternative. We may try making a great escape but simply cannot. It gets worse when we're older simply because fatigue sets in more quickly, a great ally of our default condition. Such fatigue may be described more as a numbness. When we were young, we'd notice older relatives at a party just sitting there and get annoyed

at their lack of attention. On occasion they may rise to the occasion, acknowledge us and then fall back to their default stupor. Now it's our turn! While it's impossible to escape the effects of aging, still it's within our power not to make them our default condition.

Favoring our default condition is done in an unreflective manner though we're fully aware of it..not constantly, of course, for we'd go crazy. Still, awareness of its presence is constant enough to cloud everything we think and do. If we want an example, look no further than the prisoner in Plato's cave recounted in Book Seven of the **Republic**. The reason for breaking loose isn't given. The only direct reference is "when one of them was freed and suddenly compelled to stand up" (515 c). Who or what brings this about is anyone's guess. The two key words are *luo* meaning to loosen and *anagkazo* to force or to compel. The way the text presented is rather vague though leans to it coming from an independent source. The source present within the cave¹ intimates that something from the outside is active there. It's a matter of detecting this made difficult because everyone's necks and legs are fettered (cf. 514 a).

One way of understanding this *luo/anagkazo* is that an inhabitant happened to catch a glimpse of a puppeteer behind him as he was showing the people in chains images on the screen. They are called *thaumatopoiios* (singular), literally wonder worker, conjurer or juggler. This name belays their very essence which is to deceive as well as to entertain. By reason of their position above and behind those in chains they are invisible. However, someone managed to see a puppeteer which broke a cardinal rule necessary to keep order within the cave-like dwelling. They are described as human but given their job, they might be some kind of mixture with an alien race of sorts. Although the text says nothing of being forced to stay, let alone pursued, this man hightailed it out of there. He along with the puppeteers knew that somewhere down the line there would be repercussions. As for those in chains, they'd remain in place as usual.

After seeing the light the escapee returns to the cave to inform his former fellow prisoners. What's crucial is that it's a return freely done, not by compulsion. Now he has to deal with inhabitants there who'd prefer to remain with their default situation, knowing no other. Indeed, the puppeteers have excelled at their job. Even before addressing the inhabitants, this fellow knew his life was in danger. He stood a

1. Not exactly a cave but "an underground, cave-like dwelling" described at the beginning of Book Seven. The words are *katageios* and *spelaiodes*.

good chance of being killed by the puppeteers for upsetting a comfortable routine. The same applies to those in chains who resent his presence. Even more than these, the puppeteers would rail at him and attempt to kill him on the spot. After all, he is taking away their livelihood as deceivers.

Before developing that image further, we can continue examining our default position. An image that might fit in with Plato's is Satan as he appears in the first chapter of the Book of Job. He comes across differently from what he had evolved into over the centuries, more as an adversary which is the definition of his name. Satan makes a belated, deliberately dramatic entrance after the "sons of God" which he had planned beforehand. God asks where he had been, presumably knowing what his sons had been doing but not Satan. This makes him stand out from the crowd—someone who doesn't follow the party line—yet at the same time is tolerated. So from among all the "sons of God" the Lord picks Satan to prove Job. It seems the Lord was more interested in seeing how Satan operates than in testing Job's righteousness. In fact, easily Job could be counted among the "sons of God" and thus take his place as another nameless being. Indeed, God has a lot to learn from Satan as the Book of Job plays out.

So when Satan starts afflicting Job with tragedy upon tragedy, the Lord is taking notes and doing so carefully out of sight from his sons. By no means did he want them to be privy to this. If they got wind of it, they'd do the same and being more limited, they would bungle the job. So we could say that the Lord is using Satan to bring Job to his default condition. The way he's described—blameless and upright—sounds too ideal. Most people don't behave so perfectly, and clearly this irked the Lord. If such a perfect person could be reduced to the common state where most humans are, that would please the Lord just fine. Still, as 2.10 remarks, "In all this, Job did not sin with his lips." In other words, he seemed unshakable. Only toward the end of the book does the Lord step in, boasting aloud of his greatness which to any onlooker seems rather foolish, even childish. Finally the Lord gets what he wants from Job: "Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes" [42.6]. End of story? No. We can just picture Satan watching all this unfold. Not only was Job put into his power but the Lord himself who ends up in the same default condition as any other human being.

So Satan as being an image of a prosecutor has won the biggest case in history or so it seems. Then enter Jesus Christ. Satan unleashes his full fury against him but the day before his crucifixion Jesus speaks of another divine being who seems to be on

the same level as he and his Father. That is to say, he speaks of the Counselor or *Parakletos* which means literally someone who is summoned-to-one's-side, *kaleo* and *para*. This preposition is important in that infers being nearby while simultaneously maintaining proper distance. The idea is that a person is standing in the presence of this defense lawyer while he's pleading the case. Of vital importance is not to interfere with the proceedings but to let the lawyer do his job. As with the case of some indigent defendants, he's appointed, not hired. However, unlike someone chosen for the job, he has our interest just as much as heart as if we were paying him thousands of dollars an hour. Lest we forget, this lawyer is versed thoroughly in the law whereas we are not but sometimes think we are.

So at last...at long last...we have a divine being whose specific job is to counter the eternal prosecutor in the person of Satan. Of him Jesus says he'll take an aggressive stand, one not even God has been depicted as doing up to this point: "he will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment" [Jn 16.8]. Jesus goes on to speak of the Holy Spirit in the role of *Parakletos*, words which essentially blow over the heads of the disciples. Then the Spirit goes off the scene followed by Jesus' death, resurrection and ascension into heaven. He makes a dramatic appearance forty days later at Pentecost, resting on the head of each disciple. Without the presence of the Spirit-as-*Parakletos* they are pretty much washed up. However, we are witnessing the dawn of completely new era.

While the Holy Spirit later works his way into Christian spirituality, for one reason or another he gets lost. To put it better, he receives honorable mention, not much more. So to a certain extent, while defeated, Satan as prosecutor finds this an excellent opportunity to rear his head best by manipulating our default condition. That is to say, he continues to prosecute us who act as though we were oblivious to an advocate ever near us. We continue allowing him to have the upper hand strangely helping him at every turn. Even though the *Parakletos* is eternal and thus ever ready to assist us, strangely we prefer to ignore his offer for help. Satan has been playing a subtle game, if you will. He doesn't deny the Holy Spirit's reality down the centuries but makes us prefer our default condition which gets in the way of the *Parakletos* and stays there. In this way our default condition will block out any *para*-ness or any ability for him to be beside us which is what this preposition signifies.

In place of allowing the *Parakletos* a role in our lives, we could say that the prosecutor blinds us to his presence, that *para*-ness so essential to maintain our sanity. He's far too weak to take on the *Parakletos* but gets around this by working on

us. So what would happen if we listened to the *Parakletos*, aka Holy Spirit or *Pneuma* which is *Hagios*, the divine breath which is holy? Actually *Pneuma* is a great name as it ties in with *Parakletos*...a breath which summons us to *para* him, not only to be beside him from time to time but to abide there. So instead of being hammered relentlessly by the prosecutor we, not unlike that person who left the cave-like dwelling in the **Republic**, will find our way into the light.

Many factors are involved which kept the Holy Spirit on the sidelines throughout the Church's history. That's beyond the scope of the current article but seems to be a valid observation. Attention always has been upon Jesus Christ, rightly so, because he's clearly visible, and his Father who although being invisible, is talked about a lot. Somehow the Holy Spirit is squeezed in between the two. Efforts at understanding this have been hit or miss and never quite satisfactory. The reason? Again, Jesus Christ is right out there. The Father is not but presumed equivalent to the Lord throughout the Bible. In this way he's mentioned a lot, even more than Jesus Christ, statistically speaking. We can deal with these two fairly well, but the breath or *Pneuma*? It seems our antennae haven't been adjusted properly to pick up on his movement which is ever present yet invisible. Also we don't like these paradoxes and want a resolution, another factor in our inability to get a handle on the *Pneuma*.

So if we can't understand *Pneuma-as-Parakletos*, we can't understand what our defense lawyer is arguing on our behalf. We may acknowledge his ever present invitation but that's as far as it goes. In fact, we don't even know how to address him. So this ignorance which has been inherited over many centuries keeps us open to continued attacks by the prosecution. All along he's telling us that we've won the case, but we don't accept it due to an inveterate refusal to accept his words. And what are these words? "He will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you" [Jn 14.26]. *Didasko* is the common verb to teach, but it's coupled with something very important, bringing to one's memory or *hupomimnesko*, to bring to one's mind...from under or from below...*hupo*, if you will. Such *hupomimnesko* is specific. It is tied in not with what Christ had said but everything (*panta*) which he had said.

It sounds nice to have this magic-like power to recall instantly Christ's words or teachings. However, more is involved, implementing them which the *Pneuma* does not do but leaves up to the individual person. Here might be the precise point where we became aware...painfully so...of our default condition. We've been set up for a comparison with the divine which by any means is unjust. Now we feel overwhelmed

and wallow in this condition. Strangely, we put a “Do not disturb” sign so as to be left alone in our misery. Perhaps that’s why right after Jesus speaks of the Spirit’s task of *didasko* and *hupomimnesko* he says “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you” [Jn 14.27]. If it weren’t for this peace (*eirene*) we’d be lost hopelessly even with the *Parakletos* by our side. We could say that *eirene* is the bond of that special “space” represented by *para* or beside...us and our defense attorney. In other words, without such peace we would be unable to live with the sharp comparison just delineated. It’d be better to remain chained in the cave-like dwelling than to see the light.

Getting used to that light takes time. “I suppose, then, that he’d need time to get adjusted before he could see things in the world above” (**Republic** 7 516 a). Even putting the transition in such terms as getting-use-to-the-light presents a quandary. Does our default condition lay in the cave-like dwelling or does it belong in the open sunlight? Just one person is detected as getting there. Even with his return to the underground, the prospect of others flocking to the light indeed remains dim. And so the question isn’t resolved but left to each person as it is with the one who walks away from down below to up above. That is to say, there’s no clear resolution which give a certain uneasiness to the whole enterprise. Most people would be bothered by the fact that just one person has left the dwelling below whereas everyone else remained there. It sounds unfair, even when the escapee, if you will, decides to return. Instead of viewing this search for our default condition as unfair, better to consider it as a gamble, the adventure of a lifetime which may or may not come off. Somehow a spirit of gratitude is being propounded here. That is, if our rescue weren’t put in such dramatic terms we wouldn’t be so grateful. Once rescued, we’re bound to gratitude with chains stronger than those holding fast the prisoners.

This gratitude is the only resolution to what seems a never-ending lawsuit between the prosecution and defense attorney. It alone can dispel our confusion because it’s aligned with that peace promised by Christ. When you think of personal experiences of being grateful (I prefer the phrase over the noun ‘gratitude’ because it’s active), we’re at peace. It may be temporary but is a foreshadow of the Real Thing. Gratitude does this by providing the space and quietude in order to allow attention to shift from our supposed default condition to the real one. And the agent doing this is the Holy Spirit as *Parakletos* even if we might not know it at the time. We might have to take this on faith as coming from the witness of other people, but we can tell they’ve resolved the dilemma of the default condition just by looking at them.

To date “default condition” had been used mostly in the negative sense, the one we’re used to, as it hides the real one out of fear to let it shine. The real one consists in our being made whole and entire—that always have been as such—and will remain so. End of story, nothing more. Because it’s so good and apparently so unreal, all sorts of doubts and misinterpretations, even disbelief, are bound to arise. Truly it’s amazing how blind we are to ourselves. It turns out to be the biggest stumbling block out there. Something leads us to think it was imposed on us against our will. Whether or not that’s true is difficult to say. Still, we have to take seriously the role of Satan-as-prosecutor which was described. Something genuine seems to apply there.

This often hard to reach side of our human existence makes writing about our true default condition somewhat of a challenge. Although we all have a desire to express some thoughts about this most crucial of matters, various negative feelings...neutral at best...can’t help but emerge. That is to say, we intuit our basic default condition, can speak about it but in real life don’t live by it. That opens one up to all sorts of criticism which should be taken as such. At the same time, if we don’t sound out the matter even in a defective article as this, never will we realize our true default condition. For sure the obstacles don’t come from parents, culture, religion or just about the whole gamut of *paideia*² out there. Each and every one of these elements contains fear to one degree or another. They contribute to a sense of guilt which casts a pall so thick over our lives it makes you wonder which is real, it or the alternative.

Part of the overall problem is that we have an inbuilt tendency to adopt a discipline aimed at altering or correcting our current behavior. That’s pretty much true across the board. If we accept that our default condition is whole and entire as we know deep down such is the case, we might see through the well-intentioned fallacy such convictions truly are. The almost willful blindness at work needs not to be subject to discipline—our default position—but instead, has to be shed. By far this is easier but rarely if ever promulgated because of the fears we’ve acquired over the years. We’re more comfortable doing something than allowing it to shake off on its own. Such shedding equivalent to taking off clothes and thus being exposed. However, it’s easier and consists of removing these various layers of fear which we know are illusory. Faith in this process, however, enables us to continue which is helped along

² *Paideia* is a pretty good term rooted in ancient Greece which means the rearing of a child to become a suitable member of a *polis*, a city state. It doesn’t end with a child growing up but can extend throughout one’s entire lifetime.

greatly by a growing sense of gratitude. When you think of it, this gratitude gives no place for the ego to take hold and hence no fear.

One may accept what this article has said about our true default condition as more or less beneficial. Then again, it may not be such. What's of final importance is a question that arises naturally, what do we do once we've reached our default condition, the one in which we're made whole and entire? Just hang around? That, however, is a question which reveals that we haven't gotten there. It speaks of a dilemma we try to solve rationally in advance. Instead, we need to develop a mythic understanding, a way to put it into story form. This form may not be at the level of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, the *Aeneid* or Dante's *Inferno*, but still it can and indeed must be done else we'll be left high and dry.

A good a place to start as any (as you'd expect by now) is gratitude. As noted above, gratitude allows no place for the ego to take hold and thus does away with fear. Essentially it means something has impinged upon our lives in such a way that we acknowledge it spontaneously and without reflection. Instinctively we know something is good here even though we can't quite put our finger on it. Refining this a bit, we acknowledge some one...not some thing...has given a cause for gratitude within us. That means a close contact of some sort has been established. Our perception may at the moment may be touch and go, but the chief characteristic to look out for is consistency. One can't help but think of the *Parakletos* described above as fitting the bill perfectly.

At first you might think it's impossible to be grateful around the clock. That's true as far as expression goes, but here it's more a matter of *being* grateful. When you think of those times when we had been grateful, even in a passing way, we're content and know that we have arrived. That arrival point, of course, is our true default condition, not the false one in which we've been raised to believe. The way we know this is true is by reason of there being simply no other place to go, for we've come to where we wanted to be all our lives. This ties in quite nicely with the insight into shedding as just presented, for when we're grateful we don't want anything to stand between it and ourselves. The less "space" the better but yet enough to maintain our perspective. And the *para* of the *Parakletos* provides the answer: not too close, not too far away.

So gratitude is the foundation of our mythic understanding as to who we are. It's put out there not so much for inspiration but as an invitation to actually go ahead and

conform ourselves to it. While “being grateful” sounds boring, certainly it is not. Such a description has a stationary air about it which evokes something akin to permanent paralysis. On the other hand, the activity associated with getting there is full of action, the place where drama plays itself out. By comparison with gratitude this turns out to be quite boring by reason of the rather infantile stuff which hitherto had preoccupied us.

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