

Why It's Best to Focus on Fixing Yourself

"Acquire a peaceful spirit, and then thousands of others around you will be saved."

This statement was made by [St. Seraphim of Sarov](#), a Russian Orthodox monk who lived in the 18th and 19th centuries. And though it was addressed to a Christian audience, I think the concept behind it is very relevant to everyone today.

In part, St. Seraphim words are inspired by the very ancient idea of man as a "microcosm"—"a little cosmos"—who is a representative, a mirror, of the "macrocosm" of the entire universe. One can find the idea of the "microcosm" in the pre-Socratic philosophers, and the term was perhaps coined by Democritus (460-370 B.C.), who wrote that "man is a universe in little." It is most famously present in Plato's *Timaeus*, where he describes the world as a great human being and each individual human as built in its image.

In the Christian understanding—classically expounded by [Maximus the Confessor](#) (ca. 580-662)—the idea of man as microcosm was linked to human beings' special mediatory role in the universe. In the Book of Genesis, God called Adam and Eve to be "deified"—to share in the divine life—and exercise "dominion" ("lordship") over the entire creation. They failed in this, and the responsibility of each Christian is (in some sense) to pick up where Adam and Eve left off: to be a mediator for the world—to become deified and, through that deification, to help deify others and all of creation. (By the way, this probably implies that Christians should care about the environment.) In the Christian understanding, therefore, being a microcosm is not just a reality but a task.

This idea of the intimate connection between the particular

and the universal, between the microcosmic and the macrocosmic—is also found in the idea of “economy.” In modern times, our understanding of economy tends to be limited to the societal realm of good and services. But in Greek *oikonomia* literally means “the laws of the household,” and implied that the activities that take place in one’s household should be in harmony with the larger “households” of society and the universe; and moreover, that one’s activities in the household impacted the harmony of society and the universe.

So, why do I think all of the above is relevant?

We live in a world that thinks mainly on the macrocosmic level. We are beset by news of many troublesome events in the world over which we have very little control. We find ourselves embedded in growing systems of government, business, and education whose rules are largely made and controlled by others. All of this has the tendency of overwhelming us and making us feel passive, which can further lead to anxiety, frustration, and anger.

But we are not completely passive; we can do something. We can be microcosms. We can undertake the hard work of growing in virtue and exercising that virtue toward our family, friends, and acquaintances. This will have a ripple effect upon others around us, and even the rest of the world. Indeed, it might be the most “useful” thing many of us can do for the world.

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