

On the Elimination of Human Freedom

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During the campaign of Cambyses in Egypt, a good many Greeks visited that country for one reason or another: some, as was to be expected, for trade, some to serve in the army, others, no doubt, out of mere curiosity, to see what they could see. Herodotus, *Histories*, Book III. (Penguin, p. 232)

The future of human freedom has never been particularly bright. Neither was its past, for that matter. "Freedom is a burden," we are told "only to be surpassed by its absence," others remind us. Not only has a good portion of philosophical speculation, much of it quite contemporary, denied that men were free in the first place, but even with its possibility acknowledged, freedom somehow never seems more than barely problematic. He who stubbornly insisted on freedom in people was also forced logically to accept the real possibility of license. And this latter alternative unfortunately appeared to create problems far more unsettling and enigmatic than mere determinism ever did. Further, the more perceptive seemed to be aware of a reality even beyond moral license.

Did not freedom open up the question of defiance, of the very rejection of our own lot? Who asked us to be what we are? The Prometheus myth was echoed by Aristotle when he remarked that men have a natural propensity to rebel against the limits of their mortality --- and in so doing, reject what they are. Men were the microcosmos, the beings that somehow contained all the other grades of being from mineral to spirit. The temptation to rebel against the finite limits of man was a claim to unlimitedness, a claim to be the cause of all being. Yet, many things about men could be changed. Which ultimately were to be those which, on changing, caused man to be something less noble than that being whose highest wisdom was said to be "Know thyself"?

Freedom, moreover, has always been looked upon as some correlative of knowledge. Will was the "rational appetite," as the scholastics came to call it. In men, to act or not to act, to act on this rather than that was not coerced. What men wrought, then, was an expression of themselves. They willed what they did, they were responsible for what came about through their agency. Theologians had no difficulty in holding that perfect knowledge meant perfect freedom. Indeed the most religious of the Greek tragedians wrote in *Prometheus Bound*, "All toil alike in sorrow, unless one were lord of heaven; none is truly free, save only Zeus." God's will came to be identified with his very being. In the Old Testament, men did not steal fire from Olympus but were told to increase, multiply, subdue the earth and name all things but themselves. God was free enough to will that there be other creatures than himself. He was free enough to command men to be men.

Moralists ... have had almost a fetish about discovering the degree of "consent" in any human act. To rise above the pale of mere necessity, an act had to flow from precisely what was most human in them. Thus, from the Greek ethicists on, the illumination of the act by intelligence was precisely what ennobled, dignified it, what made it something distinctive in the universe. This human act with knowledge, and will, and passion flowed from man precisely as man, as from an irreversible, original source, something that in itself need not otherwise exist. But disordered passion, ignorance, ill-health among numerous other impediments seemed to indicate that the really free, conscious human act was a rare enough occurrence, especially if this freedom meant to act precisely as a man ought to act.

Freedom, moreover, beyond its internal religious and psychological reality, has always had economic and political overtones. Economics was originally the area of necessity where what had to be done to keep life itself was performed. Freedom found its proper sphere beyond this necessity in the city where it was associated with law, as it was also in theology and ethics. The free man observed the law because he saw its reasonableness and use for man's living together. Or to state it differently, because he was observant of the law, he was free. Law, Aristotle had said, was reason without passion. Aquinas called it an external guide to right action. We moderns speak constantly of our "civil liberties," that formidable and historically growing list of prohibitions against the arbitrary, unjust actions of government or fellow man the freedom to worship, to speak, to print, to assemble, to petition.

Politics was, indeed, the area of non-necessity wherein personal freedom become manifest in public choices and their results in monuments, works of art, and constitutions. Here men establish who they are before their fellows, before the ages, before the world. History becomes the memory of what men did with their freedom, when and why. Myriads of forms of government might be conceivable according to which men would fashion this freedom to be unique and different, but still men who possessed a common standard of humanness. Even “bad” forms of government were nonetheless governments “of men” though not “of law” because the choice of the less good and of evil were real social choices, ones which betrayed the presence of the human will acting.

The project of assembling not merely to “live” but to “live well” was the task of free men. Politics did not make man to be man, as Aristotle formulated it, but taking man as already man from nature, it formed him by choice and rhetoric and reason to be good “man.” To be merely “man” was thus somehow incomplete, something already given over which men have no real control. They are born from nature and from history, from their two parents as already men or women. What they already are is given to them. Though man might be the measure of all things, he himself was already measured; he received his humanity and, in reception, learned who he was. The project of human improvement or “development,” as it is now often, perhaps improperly, called, was that of living *well*. This was the task of the free moral person and could only be accomplished by those powers that distinguished man from all other creatures in the universe. To ambition continuance in physical life to the sacrifice of all value was looked upon more as the life of the “beast” than of the human. This meant that the terms of man’s actual improvement must be rooted in his knowledge and his choice, in persuasion and understanding, in creating habits and laws whereby men could easily (willingly) do those things whereby men were “good men” and not merely men. This goodness could not be passed on except spiritual-ly and willingly. There was no guarantee that the virtue of the father would be that of the son. Freedom meant that vice did not necessarily beget vice nor virtue virtue.

And when it came to the elusive notion of happiness --- that ultimate reason for which we do all that we do --- this came to mean in Aristotle’s formulation “the activity of the highest and most unique faculties on the highest object within a complete life.” This recalled Solon’s famous discussion with Croesus in Herodotus about not being able to call any man truly happy until he was dead, that is, until he had made all of his choices, until his destiny before the ages was sealed. Thus, the significance of human life was a product of its combined choices which illuminated what it was, what it stood for. Plato saw clearly enough at the end of the *Republic* that this full meaning was not able to be decided completely in this life even about this life. Our evil choices remained in the world as did our good ones. Happiness required that these too be fully accounted for even within the Good because they were free. And yet, as Pindar seemed to have felt in his second Olympian poem, there may be a way to live with this reality that is not disaster. He wrote:

Of things come to pass in justice or unjust, not Time the father of all can make the end unaccomplished. But forgetfulness may still come with happiness. Grief, breaking again out of quiet, dies at last, quenched under the waxing weight of fair things. (*The Odes of Pindar*, R. Lattimore, Chicago, 1947)

This “waxing weight of fair things” that quenches grief hints that men are not solely caught up in their justice and injustice. To forget needed yet a way to forgive.

The Christian gloss on freedom, as it were, was of great moment. In the Christian outlook, the project of human happiness within freedom was real enough but it was exclusively located in any internally or externally self-sufficient object less than God himself. Classic Christian thought argued that the world did not have to exist. It had an origin, a beginning, and it would have an end. History belonged to its very progression. The world was once new. Thus, it would somehow always be new, unexpected. This meant that its very existence, along with that of all creatures within it, was not necessary. The necessity that did exist was, therefore, hypothetical, rooted in this prior freedom and unexpectedness of cosmic existence itself. This also meant that the cause of existence had to be located in a divine will that had its own “reasons” for men to be rather than not to be. This also

resulted in the free mortal being, created for this divine purpose, such that what men were and were to become was grounded in this ultimate choice about why they were in the first place.

Within this cosmos, man occupied a special position because, unlike other creatures, he was directly created for himself. Not only was his species unique, but each individual of this species was unique and created for itself. Each person had a mark of inexhaustible newness, of an identity, a uniqueness, unrepeated and unrepeatably in the universe. This suggested a sort of double non-necessity. The world did not have to exist, neither did Socrates, the greatest of the ancients, nor even less Jesus, the God-man. The positive side of this conception established that every person had a special, unshared status because of his autonomy, his freedom. God took his creation seriously enough to insist that his personal relationship with the mortal creatures was unabashedly free. The only human destiny in the universe was to be a chosen destiny --- from the side of the creature as well as from that of the creator. The world was created, in a sense, that men might achieve their purpose and destiny and do so freely. This meant, of course, that God would have to be in some sense a “hidden” God from the human perspective.

At first sight, the human destiny was seen to be an “inner” worldly one. That is, the conditions of peace, harmony, justice, and order were to be established by men because they chose freely to do so out of their own resources of virtue and knowledge. Nevertheless, there is an aspect of the Christian tradition which opposes the destiny of men to that of the world. “What doth it profit a man to gain the whole world and lose the life of his soul?” This suggests that the ultimate cause of the world and the person cannot be found within the world or the person. Since both world and man depended on God’s choice which is not “scrutable” by anything in creation itself, since “My ways are not your ways,” as Yahweh often admonished in the Old Testament, there was a transcendence in the midst of the human. Human dignity, then, was to be founded upon this transcendental relation or call whereby more than human and cosmic history is involved in the life of each person. It is, furthermore, not surprising that this over-arching relationship has come more and more to be seen as an alienating factor in human civilization, a reason why it has not solved its own problems.

This transcendence, however, does not and cannot argue to a lack of order or law in the cosmos or even in man and revelation. It argues to the relationship of the cosmos and each man in it to God’s own reality is based in choice --- in the case of man, in mutual choice. According to Christianity, this drama of mutual choice is, in the end, what the world is about. Within this context, final issues are resolved. This too suggests the limits of the world since happiness, in its Christian context, is not finally to be resolved by or even in the world, even though the redemption of man, as Paul implied, involves the redemption of the cosmos likewise. The meaning, the newness, the drama of human life consists essentially in choosing God rather than something else. And should we inquire what else might be conceived as an object of choice, we end up with ourselves and the welfare of the world as an on-going system as the most likely candidates.

This implies, paradoxically, that a creature exists in the world who has disaster as a constitutive element in his very metaphysical make-up. The refusal to accept such a being, to accept this as an accurate description of man as a unique, new being capable of radical decision --- or of such a God as his origin --- is, indeed, behind much of the rejection of Christianity, which continues to insist on posing a freedom so full of risk that it threatens to jeopardize what seems most worthy and valuable. But without the possibility and actual existence of such a free creature, the absolute adventure, the seriousness, and unbounded joy that really lies behind creation would not be possible.

I wish to propose here that our problems with the so-called “prefabricated” man stem from this Christian notion that places choice, mutual, free choice at the heart of reality as we know it. Without this radical, risk-filled divine destiny rooted in human freedom which can, in fact, reject God, the world, and even itself, the vitality would disappear from our world. Anything that would jeopardize this, anything that would lessen or eradicate this transcendent relationship would directly attack the kind of beings we are. The question that confronts us, then, is twofold: Is it possible to produce a human-like being that is unconnected with this transcendent destiny

given to human personhood, say, by breaking his normal process of begetting? And is it possible to propose the accomplishment of “the human,” of “improving” man such that man’s goodness no longer be seen as resulting from his own moral choice according to ethical law and religious destiny but be rather programmed in him through some other means? Under the rubric of original sin whose transmission had to do with birth from the race of Adam even though birth itself was the highest of goods Christianity has felt that there was indeed something wrong with the human condition. And Christianity was not out of sympathy with the words of Zeus at the beginning of the *Odyssey*, “What a lamentable thing it is that men should blame the gods and regard us as the source of their troubles, when it is their own wickedness that brings them sufferings worse than any which Destiny allots them.” The correction or redirection of this wrongness and wickedness was so basic, in the Christian view, that it was not within the power of the human species to restore. More, this involved the very initial destiny of man to be associated with the inner life of God as his personal destiny whatever be that of the world. For Christianity, the response to the human condition and its “fall” was redemption, which derived, like creation itself, from unmerited grace on its divine side and from “conversion” on its human side. Though this satisfyingly unsatisfying doctrine of original sin may not be overly popular any more even if it seems constantly to reappear in uncritical secular forms such as in Robert Heilbroner’s *The Human Prospect* and under marxism disguised as capitalism still without it or its imitation, we have considerable difficulty in explaining why men with their radical, free intelligence have not actually succeeded in eliminating what they conceive to be their problems. Indeed, it might well be argued that the very project of modernity, which even our most apocalyptic secularists are now finally rejecting, was precisely the desperate effort to eliminate the consequences of original sin. Some three approaches were conceived to accomplish this feat it is more than coincidence probably to see how these ways are increasingly coming into conflict with each other in our times. These are the socialist, biological, and technological projects to eradicate from man the causes of his evils, those conditions that seem to prevent him from being altogether good by himself.

The consequences of original sin, it will be recalled, concerned birth in pain, labor in sweat, in being turned out of a garden in which nature conformed to man’s will. The increasing and the multiplying, the subduing the earth were, evidently, designed to be relatively smooth operations. Why they were not is one of the fundamental mysteries of the human condition. Later speculation, and this not exclusively Christian, come to concentrate on coercive government, slavery, and the division of property as the particular consequences of original sin, each effect in a certain sense lying outside the human will itself. From this latter context, already found also in Plato and the Stoics, the project to rid ourselves of property, government, and human inequality was seen as the means whereby the original state of integrity in man could be restored in some, usually planned, future. Such a hope lies vividly behind all socialist traditions and is directly related to the ultimate origin of human problems.

The technological solution began rather from the sweat of the brow and Aristotle’s Statues of Daedalus wherein men had the hope of achieving their well-being not via slavery or via labor reform but by technological means so that human wants would be met by the union of nature and technology. This is more of an elitist approach, perhaps originating in modern times with someone like Saint-Simon, and argues that political reform is really beside the point until unlimited energy can be produced and applied in order to free men from the exigencies of their original condition. The biological revolution --- with its earlier counterpart in the psychological --- roots man’s problem, on the other hand, in the very structure of his birth and family life, indeed in his very formation. All social ills are the faults of imperfect genetic configurations and family relationships that impinge on a more ideal physical corpus. Thus, we have the approach of the genetic engineers and the various Freudian theories.

The Christian solution, of course, held that we should first seek the Kingdom of God and all these things would be added to us. The import of this should not be overlooked. For it means that there is no ultimate solution that does not involve man’s freedom and his relation to God. The elevation of other hypotheses as explaining causes of man’s ambiguous condition constitutes the major threat to man’s being. We are no longer sure that the various projects to eliminate what is wrong with man cannot succeed. Much literature and planning currently suggest that they can. What is in doubt is, should these alternatives be successful, whether there will still be man. We have, then, a deep conflict situation about the meaning and condition of the *good* man in the world.

And we have proposals to create him quite at odds with religious and moral presuppositions, indeed in despair of them. Plato began philosophical speculation when the good Polis, Athens, killed the best man. We now must wonder if the knowledge state will not remove man altogether.

Whether the relative incidence of good and evil varies much from generation to generation or from place to place is difficult to judge. Certainly the kinds of virtue and vice seem to vary from people to people and age to age, yet it remains doubtful whether any given society does not in its course manifest most of the standard varieties. On rereading Aeschylus or Aristophanes or Plato or Tacitus or Paul or Augustine, it is difficult really to believe much in moral evolution. This would suggest that no age is closer to beatitude than any other. It would also assume it was a major illusion to propose to men that they can still achieve perfection in this life, by whatever means, such that they will manifest none of the vices of men. Indeed, it might almost be said that a healthy society needs to protect the very possibility of vice, to be leery of the notion that sinless men can be produced by some worldly process. If this be so, it would appear to argue to a kind of freedom that does not place one age or people in an advantageous position over another. No class or generation exists for the sake of the future enjoyment or betterment of another. This relative constancy in the incidence of good and evil has not been easy to accept because it seems to negate any sense of progress in the fundamental sense of spiritual, moral improvement.

This lack of obvious improvement --- Solzhenitsyn points out, for instance, that the Czar's prisons were considerably more humane than Stalin's or even Brezhnev's --- has become a major cause for the more radical modern proposals to reformulate man and society such that evil would be completely identified and eliminated by means other than religion or ethics. Christianity, with its patient proposal for change based on freedom, repentance and grace, is judged to have been around too long even to pretend that it holds the key. "Look at Ireland or Lebanon" has become something more than a geographical expression. What is of interest here, however, is that the price of this elimination of evil by political, biological, or technological means invariably involves the elimination of freedom itself. This is the cost of the accomplishment of such higher goods. This consequence forces us to hesitate, to reconsider what we are about when we talk earnestly about improving our human lot. And from a Christian point of view, it clarifies what it is we want to protect, what we can change.

We are helped in this by the very level of technology we have achieved, by the possibility that our kind need no longer inhabit this planet alone. What has been called the "extra-territorial imperative," the fact that our well-being need no longer be considered solely from the limits of the planet, Earth, forces us to ask what it is we should export should we decide to send man elsewhere. To put it another way, would it be possible to send man in such a way that those so-called effects of original sin, however they be described or defined, be removed. We ought to know how much we want to tamper with man's distinctive characteristics. Do we want to live more than four score years and ten? Do we want to render sex "in vain" by producing our kind in some other fashion or by some other process? Do we want to jeopardize our own uniqueness and irrepeatibility by producing duplicates of ourselves instead of new persons? Do we want to remove suffering and evil and imperfection at the cost of the moral control we ought to have over ourselves and our lives? All of this involves some kind of a judgment about the kind of beings we are and want ourselves to be.

From this, the question arises, is there a "better" kind of human "being" available to us than the one historically and naturally given? What made man to be man was never subject to a human will. Man was by definition and experience that being born of woman by a mysterious nine-month process. Men did not invent themselves nor this process. They believed in a special status, even sacredness, of this fruit of conception and birth. Indeed, around this concept, society was to be formed. In the *Epistle of James*, it is written, "Of his own will He brought us forth by the word of truth that we should be a kind of first fruits of His creatures. . . ." (1:18)

There was always a problem about human birth --- Plato and Aristotle advocating infant exposure in certain cases, a much more humane system in a way than our present practice which makes no effort to find out if what supposedly is "deformed" really is so. Herodotus tells of tribes where the aged slipped off on their own to die.

Was there to be another criterion for legitimacy in existence other than simple birth of woman? Was there a norm of race or excellence or health or intelligence according to which we were to judge the reality of what was human? Are we correct now when we see our enforced law defining what is to be protected by human legal sanction as anything over three months, or six, or nine, or even later? Or is it the other way around, was the human already decided for us such that our task, our freedom was fundamentally to accept what was given, perfect or not, desired or not? Does the problem, in other words, always reduce to our wills and our choices?

The question is whether the human enterprise is merely a human enterprise or whether it already consists in more than itself. Even to remain human do we have to recognize that we are also the sons of God? This latter has been the Christian view such that men were what they were supposed to be in their form and substance. In so far as there was another law in their members according to which they did other than they would, this was not a defect in their being, in their physical make up requiring a new "genesis." Its remedy was the drama of the free mortal and could only be confronted in that freedom. The search for a means to improve man other than through his intelligence and freedom and his grace is ultimately a kind of despair, a refusal to accept the kind of being man is created to be. This refusal is working itself out in our time in political councils, biological laboratories, ecological schemes, and technological structures all aimed in one way or another at eliminating the results of original sin by a method that bypasses freedom and reduces man's beatitude to this worldly dimensions.

In the beginning, I cited a brief passage from Herodotus to the effect that some Greeks visited Egypt merely "out of curiosity, to see what they could see," and for no other reason than that it was wondrous and interesting. The great spiritual problem of our age, and it is no less than that, consists in the realization and belief that God did not err in creating us the men we are nor did he leave us without a way to achieve that for which we were made --- that is, nothing less than eternal life. This way does not consist in changing our structure or the locus of our ultimate happiness but rather in keeping the one and achieving the other through freedom that may lead to worldly disaster. This freedom challenges us to realize that as men, we are already what God wanted us to be but that as free men we must also choose to accept our humanity as a gift which grants us a good we did not and could not expect. Paradoxically, our good is ultimately not ours.

The unceasing curiosity of mankind wants to possess a knowledge of good and evil. What remains for it to recognize is that the elimination of freedom is a real possibility now being proposed in our laboratories and political cells as the answer to the problem of making men good. If we must reject this controlled "good" to remain free, so be it. Freedom thus turns out to be a greater risk than even the Divinity might have wished. If the doctrine of heaven is now to become a kind of earthly, secular project resulting from man's knowledge and will, we should not be surprised if the doctrine of hell is likewise so secularized and brought forth in the same process. Reflecting on this possibility from the prospective of Christian revelation, Josef Pieper wrote:

Viewed from within temporality, the history of man will not end simply with the triumph of the true and the good, not with the 'victory' of reason and justice, but with something that again may scarcely be distinguishable from a catastrophe. And the prophecy seems to speak not primarily of a cosmic catastrophe, nor of what might be called physical exhaustion of the historical forces of order, but rather of a tremendous exponential increase in power of a pseudo-order, a world wide tyranny of evil....

Pieper then cites Dostoyevsky's terrible passage from the Grand Inquisitor: "In the end, they will lay their freedom at our feet and say to us: Make us your slaves, but feed us." And then he continues: "Because this (apocalyptic) conception of history allows room for human freedom to choose evil --- and what is more, for the Evil One as a demonic power in history --- divisiveness, failure, irreconcilable discord and even catastrophe cannot, on principle, be excluded from history, not even from its average course." (*Hope and History*, Trans. R. Winston, New York, Herder, 1969, pp. 84, 86) Thus the freedom we seem more and more to be left with is our

choice of an imperfect world in which freedom remains or a perfect world that is in fact more of a hell and a catastrophe in its efforts to improve the lot of men.

In the First Book of his *Retractions*, Augustine reconsidered: “Each of these, namely, faith and good works, is ours because of the result of the free choice of our will, and yet each is the gift of the spirit of faith and of charity to us.” (1, XXIII, 2) What we must now confront is the fact that beyond faith and good works, even our being lies open to our free will, even admitting as we must that our very being too is a gift of the Spirit to us. In the *Alcestis* of Euripides, Death says to Apollo, “You cannot always have more than your due.” This search for more than our “due” is the driving force of much of the intellectual ferment of our era. And it is odd that it seeks to avoid or eliminate death for the perfect who are chosen to live. For the Christian, the imperfect, the sinners, the weak still remain the locus of grace. Nietzsche was prophetically right in sensing this. We are, in fact, given more than our due, but only as the result of the free choice of our will which is the gift of the Spirit of faith and of charity to us.

The elimination of human freedom is becoming now possible to creatures who wander about for mere curiosity, to see what they can see, to creatures who can, in other words, destroy their own capacity for curiosity and freedom to see what they can see. I suspect that Christianity, whether it likes it or not, will find that more and more the crisis of faith will be reduced to one issue, that of keeping men free, of reminding them that their evil as their good comes ultimately from within a man, and there alone, as it reminds us in the *Gospel of Mark*. (ch. 7) Christianity indeed will even find itself defending the possibility of what it clearly calls vice because it realizes that the schemes to remove it also destroy the humanity of our kind. God chose the weak and the foolish to confound the strong. It is probably no coincidence that the strong are in the process of choosing to eliminate the weak and the foolish. God, we are told in the Old Testament, will not be mocked. A careful reading of much of our scientific and political and psychological literature suggests this is literally a statement of fact.

What we never suspected, in conclusion, was that this ultimate mocking of God would be incarnated in his image, in an attempt to create another kind of good man and good earth than the one classically proposed in ethics and Scripture. “We should not try to create a world that frees men of the limits of our human condition,” Stanley Hauerwas has written, “for it is exactly such a desire that creates our inhumanity.” (“The Morality of Population Control,” *Catholic Mind*, June, 1975, p. 20). Of the many complex issues of our era, this, ultimately is the central one, the only one that really matters.

Man is the risk of God.

“So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them....” (Genesis, 1, 27-28)

God is likewise the risk of man.