

INTRODUCTION

Pope Benedict XVI often brings his listeners to the question of truth, no matter the subject under discussion, because he knows that the search for objective truth not only trains the mind but also frees the will. The discovery of truth brings the searcher out of purely individual experience into the realm of the communal and, at the deepest level, the universal. The mind's assent to truth becomes the will's surrender to a person, when ultimate truth is identified with Jesus Christ, crucified and risen from the dead for the salvation of the world. True freedom, therefore, depends on knowing the truth, both in concept and in encounter. The Pope speaks often about the relation between truth and love, between truth and justice, between truth and peace, but most persuasively he teaches about the relation between truth and freedom.

Jacques Maritain considered over many years the nature of freedom in order to reach the truth about it in all its dimensions. He thought and wrote from a philosophical perspective, one in which rational discourse was open to faith but not defined by it. The chapters of this book explore various dimensions of Maritain's thought, sometimes pushing it into areas he himself did not exhaustively explore. In these few pages, I would like to present three notions of freedom analyzed variously in Maritain's work, reflecting on them in a historical context he anticipated but did not live to see fully developed.

In our world and our time, the very idea of freedom is contested. On the one hand, the new militant and scientific atheists base themselves on a highly reductive view of what we human beings can know, and they have convinced themselves and a significant number of others that the iron laws of physics determine all things, leaving no room for freedom. On the other hand, broad groups of what we shall call here, for the sake of simplicity, postmodernists, reject all definite knowledge and the kind of systematic closure the scientists claim to possess, in favor of what is absent, marginal, overlooked, incomplete, paradoxical, and uncanny. Freedom itself is too strong a term for them. Still, they also usually talk a lot about discourses of power, seeking to wrest power away from dominant groups for themselves

and others without being able to say definitively on their own grounds why it is wrong or improper that some groups have power and others do not. Right and wrong are, after all, normative concepts that have to be explained and justified and not simply asserted. Freedom of the most radical sort seems to be possible in this radical problematizing of all settled truths, though it is a freedom that is fundamentally empty. The postmodern destruction of truth does not allow for a really significant free act. All action, in that way of thinking, is and can only be a creative performance whose meaning has always already been deconstructed before it even occurs. Caught between iron scientific determinism and gossamer deconstructive performance, the idea of freedom has no natural contemporary home.

It should come as no surprise that, if the idea of freedom is so troubled in our time, the reality is not doing very well either. Many problems we currently face show obscure but deep and real connections between determinism and radical autonomy, though it would be a long task to trace out all those connections. The new atheists seem to think their own work is all-encompassing truth and denounce the continuing persistence of religion in the most rabid terms: child abuse, mind control, and the root of all evil. These are strong words for a phenomenon that ought to be looked upon serenely as just one among many of the universe's necessary outcomes since, on their own principles, nothing escapes scientific determinism. Religious believers can plead: the universe made me do it. Our diverse group of postmodernists speaks in very similar terms, if to different purposes. They simply add the scientific worldview to the other forms of allegedly oppressive truth claims in the somewhat desperate hope of thereby opening up possibilities for freedom. But the obvious self-contradictions of both schools demand some kind of pragmatic effort to rescue human concerns and permanent value from antecedent errors. It is largely because of this situation that coarse utilitarian ethics have entered so prominently into some of the most sacred precincts of human life.

These and many other phenomena lead us to believe that we need a different analysis of what freedom is in itself and the forms it ought to take in a society, like our own, that claims to value human freedom. We did not get to our present position by chance. It's possible to see behind the situation outlined above one set of consequences of Kant's

view of human beings and the world. In his system, the world is everything we can analyze scientifically, and human freedom lies in distinguishing sharply between what is natural and what is human. Our two main modern camps are Kantian schismatics, each taking one half of the great man's system and trying to build a whole philosophy out of it by ignoring the other half, which each believes is no longer intellectually tenable. To a certain extent, each is right: the scientists have their fingers on a significant truth when they dismiss notions of a human freedom that is alleged to exist entirely separated from nature. That was a weakness in Kant, and it remains a weakness for all ways of thinking that posit the human being as a kind of ghost in a machine. The postmodernists do not bother so much about consistency, because they believe that truth is a construct anyway, even scientific truths, which are not exhaustive and are as incoherent as any other totalizing claim. For them, the machine itself is a ghost, or at least a mirage, and it is dangerous to take it as real.

The problem here cannot be solved by refinements in one camp or another, and, in the meantime, the Western peoples who learned from the Bible their respect for the human person, for the centrality of moral choice, and for the liberty of God's children find that even the secular spin-offs of that tradition are less and less plausible. We need to turn to a way of thinking that restores our belief in these notions, and for that we need a different starting point and a way of proceeding that will do full justice to the physical world of nature and the characteristically human things that are connected to that world, but not reducible to or separable from it. Above all, we have to make sure that the tremendous growth in our knowledge of nature and our advances in developing the technological ways to put nature to human uses do not entirely eclipse the other dimensions of our lives, dimensions like understanding, creativity, will, that have made the scientific discoveries possible in the first place.

Sometimes this problem is presented as the need to find a place for a vigorous humanism in our conception of the world. That is certainly true, but at the same time humanism itself can have just as reductive an effect as the false scientific knowledge and postmodern deconstruction noted above. In historical fact, deconstruction in a broad sense has replaced in many colleges and universities the study of the human things and, as a result, has prevented our swelling

population of college graduates from knowing very much about the rich humanistic tradition, to say nothing of the religious and theological principles on which it stands. Many of those graduates, of course, possess a robust common sense that leads them into important truths beyond their formal studies. But it is not a good thing for a free society to depend on freelance sanity while its official institutions of higher learning are inculcating what is sometimes simply insanity. We can and must do better in conveying the central human things that, under God, help make and keep us truly free.

For some time in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, humanism was often presented as something by its nature opposed to Christianity. The failures of the Christian churches and faith communities to keep up with social problems in this world and, perhaps, an overemphasis on the next world contributed to this false opposition. Properly understood, however, Christianity is not opposed but is indeed the source of some of the values that the Enlightenment recovered in a one-sided way for Western civilization. For example, the sacredness of the human person and the rights of conscience are indispensable notions for the development of any sort of humanism. But apart from Christianity, which enriches them and keeps them in a wider context, even these humanistic notions can go wild, when they do not simply decay for lack of a living root in a deeper reality. In the twentieth century, some people thought Marxism was a kind of humanism that would free large swaths of workers from bondage to capital. In fact, Marxism created a worse bondage for those very workers and literally rode roughshod over human rights and conscience, killing 100 million people in the gulags, forced famines, Cultural Revolutions, and other modern inventions supposed to advance the most far-seeing vision of a truly human and free life. Nazism, too, presented itself as a kind of humanism that would restore the natural vigor of the German people, and it killed 40 million along the way. In these two examples, one international, the other national, we see two glaring instances of what happens when certain "humanistic" principles are emphasized to the neglect of other truths.

Many peoples like to think of themselves as superior to these murderous regimes because they have had no similar bloodbaths and have succeeded reasonably well in guaranteeing rights of conscience

and respecting the dignity of the human person. But in the United States, Canada and Western Europe, we have probably aborted more children than Communism and Nazism produced victims in the camps and purges. We say we believe in the dignity of every person, unless that person happens to be living in the womb or nearing the end of life, frail, unproductive and burdensome to family and society. As the population of almost all the Western nations grows older because falling birth rates are failing to offset deaths, we are likely to see rather nasty pressures on the elderly to unburden us through physician-assisted suicide or, if the elderly resist, perhaps through mandated euthanasia. All this has come about because of distortion of the meaning of freedom of choice and of human dignity, both of which we need to look at more carefully if we do not intend to repeat the evils of which we are already aware, or to create even worse horrors that we cannot yet imagine.

In considering various understandings of freedom, the most prominent is freedom of choice. Freedom of choice has become nearly a shibboleth in the United States and in Europe, as if the bare exercise of the human capacity to choose was an unqualified good, without looking at what is specifically chosen. This kind of freedom, a capacity built into human nature, is necessary if there is to be any ethical life at all in a free society such as we all claim to cherish. But a good portion of what governments do is to protect us from the choices that others make. Our armed forces confront terrorists and armed enemies abroad; our police apprehend and detain thieves, rapists, murderers, white-collar criminals at home; our justice system tries to adjudicate between parties in civil conflicts who make contending claims of harms done. The baseline freedom of choice that inheres in all human beings is not something we celebrate or defend when it is used to improper ends. Freedom is a means to an end, a good end, and we rightly value it personally and socially as a good that makes a responsible and creative life possible. But not all realizations of chosen possibilities are desirable or even tolerable in any society.

Many people might follow the arguments about freedom thus far, but then draw back and object: you are talking about legislating morality. Since we do that all the time with regard to non-controversial questions like assault, robbery, and homicide, there is no reason to be shy about saying openly that, yes, we are talking

about legislating morality. What else would we legislate? The real objection some have about legislating morality, of course, is whether the state should be able to curtail the freedom to divorce, to abort, to engage in homosexual relations, to marry a person of the same sex, to use certain drugs, and other matters which were formerly often crimes and are currently being redefined by some in our society as fundamental rights. This is not the place to go into those specific issues, but it is clear that humans have a natural freedom that makes them able to choose these things; whether a society or a moral system should give its blessing to those activities, however, is debatable. Just because there is a difference of opinion about some matters does not mean we cannot make public decisions about them. A good society will make a number of delicate judgments about contested questions. It cannot be prohibited from making such judgments with the simple invocation of freedom of choice.

We need to look further into the notion of freedom of choice, because it may help us towards a better understanding of freedom's prerogatives and its responsibilities. The present volume is highly valuable precisely because it directs our attention to several ways in which Jacques Maritain offers a much richer and fuller appreciation of what freedom means. He identifies a second meaning of freedom once common to the moral philosophy of the past, but which has largely dropped out of common discourse: the freedom that is mastery over ourselves. Since philosophy began in ancient Greece, there has been a dictate of common sense that, without the ability to order and control the desires we find in ourselves towards a variety of things, so-called freedom sinks into mere impulse and chaos. With Kant in the eighteenth century, a gap opened up between human nature and human will. Kant puts aside all those inclinations that might lead us towards right action, such as love, affection, delight, wonder and so forth, because they form no part of the ethical will as such. Properly used, this insight has some value. But if it is taken to mean, as Kant and many Kantians have meant it over the years, that a pure sense of duty is all that matters in the moral life, then it cannot help but lead to moral resentment for the great majority of people who do not find in themselves an ability to follow duty rigorously, or to moral Phariseeism for the few fortunate enough to be able to act without serious disturbance from passions or temptations. In short,

this is not a picture of freedom useful for the human race as we know it.

That is why in the Aristotelian and Thomistic tradition such a large role is allowed to virtue. A virtue, we have been taught, is a habit that perfects a human power. In other words, by repeatedly choosing what is right, our fundamental capacity for free choice begins to create a second nature, as it were, a settled disposition to act well in certain circumstances. Just as a musician by repeatedly practicing a set of notes becomes capable of playing something he could not before, so the ethical actor extends his initial, free capacities by repeated acts of choosing the good. Notice that this habituation to right action is not the creation of a mechanical response to choices offered, which has nothing truly to do with the ethical will strictly speaking. It is one of the duties of the ethical will to develop such habits. There are passages in Kant's works that acknowledge such second-order duties, and Kant's own life in its legendary regularity shows his living out such virtues himself. It is unfortunate that Kantianism and all modern ethical theories that neglect the empowering dimension of good habits have in the process taken away the normal path to ethical rectitude and virtuosity as well. Few are the persons in any generation who have the naked will power to confront all ethical challenges without long periods of habituation in virtue, whether that occurs by design or implicit practice. A mere intention to be free is not sufficient to secure a free life.

But there is a third level of freedom in our tradition that goes beyond even the bare freedom of choice and the virtuous life. If freedom of choice is the most basic condition of all human freedom and virtue is the perfection of several dimensions of our moral life, these are both only means to an end, what has sometimes been called terminal freedom. Maritain argues that it is only at this level of disciplined freedom that we can invoke the ancient notion of a free person as autonomous, in the true sense of this much abused term. Clearly, autonomy of this kind is almost at the polar opposite of what is often meant by autonomy in contemporary debates. The proper use of autonomy refers to something that is an interior conquest or self-mastery; the debased use of the term virtually telescopes it back into the bare notion of human persons as possessing a capacity to choose

and then exalting the right to choose as exercised by all persons like so many gods, with no restriction but that of not disturbing the freedom of their neighbors.

But this way of conceiving personal liberty quickly shows severe limitations in the social sphere. As Maritain explains:

Concerned mainly with abstract man, this political philosophy fails to recognize all the hard and severe constraints which weigh on the real man: actually, a few may enjoy the freedom so conceived only through the oppression of all the others. The social primacy of justice and the common good are eclipsed. And the inevitable tragedy of free will taken as an end in itself unfolds: the absolute right of each party to realize his choices tends of itself to the complete anarchical dissolution of the whole, and makes any realization of freedom, any work of autonomy, impossible in the order of, and by means of, the common life.¹⁶

Since this state of things is intolerable, it gives rise to a remedy diametrically opposed to it that exalts collective life and all but submerges the individual in social projects.

A better resolution exists in the old notion of society as personalist and communitarian. It is difficult for many people in the developed world to understand this vision of common life in pursuit of the common good, precisely because liberal conceptions of the individual have led us to overlook the numerous ways in which the person is from his earliest days always bound to a community for nurturing, protection, and education. In a similar fashion, we find it difficult to conceive of a common good that respects what is individual because we have inherited concepts of collective bodies that mirror materialistic images: a whole is merely an aggregate of subordinate parts. But persons and the communities they create cannot be properly understood in this perspective. A person is always more than himself, so to speak, even at a natural level. No one teaches himself to speak, for example, and our entry into the human community of speech, meaning, and purpose proceeds by way of

¹⁶ Jacques Maritain, *Some Reflections on Culture and Liberty* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1933), p. 16.

inter-personal relationships, since all persons are interpersonal without becoming solely products of the collective. Maritain and others, responding to the crises of liberalism and collectivism, asserted these truths three-quarters of a century ago. They still await a proper reception into our common ways of speech and thought.

Terminal freedom, however, rises even higher than these social considerations, crucial as they are to human existence, to a properly spiritual level. Being made as we are, we have a natural appetite for the divine, and where that proper appetite is frustrated by some inner or outer obstacle, we tend to make ourselves or some lesser thing into gods. That was the sin in the Garden of Eden, and it continues in some subtle and not-so-subtle forms today. It is no accident that Nietzsche, who rejected every notion of God, was led to proclaim the advent of the Superman. In various combinations and permutations—among them the new Soviet Man, the Nazi Teutonic master race, the radically autonomous individual in liberal Western democracies—these lesser gods are descendants of this same need to divinize ourselves in the absence of God. Perhaps when these substitutes fail, as they must (sometimes in spectacular evils), we can begin to see more clearly how the way to the divinization of man must be a certain holiness and wisdom under God that may lead to participation in the only true Divinity. Again, Maritain puts this splendidly:

Finite and unhappy in his being, man can only escape his limits by adhering with his intelligence and love to a better object. God being at the summit of personality, and man also being a person in however precarious a way, the mystery of the conquest of freedom consists in the relation between these two persons.¹⁷

God and man are not competitors in this view, as if what has to be given up or accepted on man's part were somehow a diminishing of his autonomy. That has been the error of many in the past three centuries or so. Rather, it is the right and full appreciation of what autonomy would mean—perfect union with the Divine—that resolves what appears to be a conflict of wills by moving to a higher level where human freedom coincides with God's.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 24.

This is the truth that the world needs to hear so desperately today because it is the one and only truth that sets us free. This truth roots freedom in love, and in God's infinite love our limited being finds not competition or oppression but authentic liberation. The Gospel names this love, but human reason reflecting on its own capacities prepares love's reception and tells us why we long for it.

Francis Cardinal George, O.M.I.