Freedom and the Human Person

Richard Velkley (Editor)

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This remarkable book, a collection of diverse essays by distinguished philosophers delivered at The Catholic University of America School of Philosophy's Fall 2001 Lecture Series, moves chronologically through classical and biblical sources to late modern philosophy. The volume could be said to revolve around the question of the limits of human freedom. At the beginning and the end of the rest of the contributions are two fascinating chapters, one on the ancients and one on Nietzsche. The former is by the late, great classicist Seth Benardete, of whom Harvey Mansfield wrote, "[B]efore he died he was the most learned man alive, and I venture to assert, the deepest thinker as well."

Benardete portrays the ancients' view of freedom as hemmed in by necessity. Humans are ruled by chance and by politics, and the latter is subject to an inconsistency of the human heart, namely the desire to be both great and free. Yet, to be great is to take away the freedom of others and ultimately to lose one's own freedom. There must be restraints on one's desires and freedom; both are tragic if they are excessive. Nietzsche embraces this conclusion: He is on the side of greatness without flinching from the tragic consequences. As Robert Rethy shows, Nietzsche throughout his life considered free will an illusion, and ultimately saw freedom as the will to power. The free man is locked in a struggle with necessity to obtain mastery over himself and others, and this without end; mastery only enslaves the master to a tyrannical drive. It is the slave who longs for freedom and who believes in justice. For Nietzsche, life, the will-to-power, is essentially unjust, and our knowledge of this produces a dissonance in our existence.

By contrast, modern philosophy pictures man as properly pursuing a rational, dissonance-free life. This is evident from Robert Pippin's confrontation with contemporary Kantian approaches to moral theory in the penultimate chapter. Morality is a matter of rationality for Kant and his followers, and rationality is a matter of autonomy. To be absorbed by my social roles, failing to reflect on the demands they place on me and to compare these with a standard extrinsic to them (reason), is to fail to be a person. To be a rational agent is not to be subject to the law of another, heteronomy, but is, rather, the ability to direct oneself to ends for reasons one understands and accepts. In so doing, I give myself the law.

Pippin notes two problems with this: first of all, the source of obligation. Why it is binding to be rational at all is not explained, and the situation in which I fail to follow through on the ends to which I bound myself is not accounted for. The theory assumes that I want to exercise reason in the first place and also has trouble distinguishing whether my failure to follow through on my projects is a moral failing on my part or results from something outside my control. If I do not desire to be rational (autonomous), then my failure to follow through on the means necessary to my ends is my fault, while, if I do desire to be rational, it is not. The proof of my desire to be rational is my following through

on my projects, yet this gives me no guidance as to my relationship to the projects of others; that is, if or when they should be given priority over mine. When it is identified with autonomy, reason tends to become merely instrumental rationality.

Religion, meanwhile, is reduced to a motive for good (autonomy) and optimistic action—aid in overcoming our self-doubt and avoiding any passive dependency on God—as Susan Meld Shell shows in her chapter on Kant's *Religion within the Boundaries of Bare Reason*. By contrast, if faith is a personal relationship with God rather than a mere ideal toward which to strive, the reduction of all laws to self-legislation to the exclusion of God-given laws might be unnecessary. The former views personhood as essentially relational and is the antithesis of the modern project of autonomy (a project that finds political expression in the notion of sovereignty, on which Michael Allen Gillespie provides an excellent meditation in one chapter). If the use of reason—naming, questioning, freely choosing—is a search for a harmful autonomy and inherently rebellious, then is there not a need for God-given law as a limit on reason?

In the chapter by Leon Kass, a fine philosophical interpretation of Genesis, reason is shown in the biblical account of creation to develop in just this unruly way, even prior to the Fall. It is not clear, however, that we must accept Kant's gnostic interpretation of the Fall as being man's *rising* to true human nature; we might say instead that free choice, as lack of obedience and the flaunting of justice, results in the expansion of our desires beyond what is good for us and in fact leads to our tragic domination by a tyrannical master passion. Reason can have a limit in faith without being untrue to itself, as Pope Benedict XVI emphasized during his journey to the United States.

This is an extraordinary volume, with many other rich contributions from wide-ranging philosophical authorities besides those mentioned here. It deserves to be read by those who contemplate moral and political questions.

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Justice: Rights and Wrongs

Nicholas Wolterstorff

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"Human beings, all of them, are irreducibly precious" (361). So asserts Yale philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff in his treatise supporting a "theistic grounding" of human rights. Wolterstorff is both a first-rate philosopher and a Christian, and he concludes that God's love for all people bestows worth on them, and, thus, "natural human rights are what respect for that worth requires."

This sounds simple, but the book is not—neither in its reasoning nor in its breadth. Wolterstorff patiently leads the reader through an intellectual genealogy of concepts of justice and rights, concluding that secular bases for human rights are inadequate.