Journal of Markets & Morality
Volume 5, Number 1 (Spring 2002), 127–134

Is Entrepreneurial Activity Necessarily Pleasing to God?

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> *The more dominant freedom becomes for our self-understanding, the hazier the notion of freedom seems to become and the more ambiguous are the uses of the rhetoric of freedom.*[1]
>
> —Christoph Schwöbel

I appreciate and am very much in sympathy with many of the observations that Michael Novak has made in his paper. I, too, think that we ought to be suspicious of the suggestion that political and economic power must somehow be entirely consolidated for the sake of social justice. I agree with his assertion that our understanding of economic action ought to be fit within the discipline of political/moral philosophy and ought to consider "personal initiative," "the habit of enterprise," "the ability to inspire trust in others," and the other things that he has included under the heading of "human capital."

Of course, I suppose that if I were an economist, all of this would make me nervous, for I cannot imagine—Gary Becker notwithstanding—how such things could ever be "operationalized" for the sake of rational analysis and forecasting. But, speaking as someone who is less interested in predicting the future than in simply understanding the present contours of economic culture, I certainly resonate with the suggestion that human capital is where the heart of the matter lies. So I agree with Novak's insistence that the decisive question is anthropological: Who is man? Though, of course, anthropological questions always eventually beg theological ones.

Yet, it seems to me that the answer Novak has given to the decisive anthropological question is not yet adequate. He writes that economics is now arriving at the point of affirming that "[e]very human being on earth is an acting subject, capable of reflection and choice, a *spirited* animal capable of activities and a range of consciousness no other animal matches, aware of universal community and irrepeatable personal meaning, faced with scarcity and sensing the impulsion to acquire, create, trade and barter, discover, and better our condition." But this list is not complete, and the reason that it is not complete is that it excludes *responsibility* and, specifically, the crucial human *responsibility to live before the face of God*.

Now, it may be inferred from Novak's concern for human dignity, personal liberty, and morality that he does intend to place a high value upon individual responsibility with respect to human persons, but it is simply not clear to me—at least, not from this paper—that the notion of responsibility before God plays anything more than a subordinate role within his social vision. Indeed, a certain ambiguity with respect to the God question seems to pervade the argument. This is particularly evident in the suggestion that "even without theism" many Western classical liberals have arrived at essentially the same kind of social vision that Novak wishes now to endorse; that is, of "human being as free and self-determining at his core, with every human individual living out a story of weighty moral significance, of great importance both to his or her personal destiny and to the dynamic *élan* of the culture as a whole."

But can we really have all of this without theism? I do not think that we can. For, as Nietzsche saw so clearly, and as the advocates of postmodernism have reiterated of late (and not simply because they have read Nietzsche but because they are close observers of contemporary culture), without theism we must place phrases such as "weighty moral significance," "personal destiny," and even "living out a story"—all of which are at least implicitly theological—in inverted commas. Indeed, without theism, all that remains of the classical liberal social vision is simply something like the following: that every human individual is of great importance both to himself or herself and to the dynamic *élan* of the culture as a whole. But this is a truism, just another way of saying that each one values himself or herself, and that the way that each of us lives has an effect upon others. In short, the classical liberal social vision, which appears so attractive and compelling at first hearing, is not quite as attractive and compelling after its implicit, but unsupported, theological premises have been eliminated.

And so, there are very serious problems with omitting responsibility before God from our list of essential anthropological qualities and attributes. In the

first instance and with respect to Novak's paper, it is precisely responsibility before God that makes sense of his opening references to Abraham Kuyper and Pope Leo XIII. When Kuyper, for example, speaks of "eternal existence," "the state of purity from which we fell," and our need for "conversion," he is obviously referring to our relationship with God and not simply to humanly constructed insights. Of course, the same is true when Pope John Paul II comments on the social doctrine of *Rerum Novarum* and insists that its whole argument hinges upon the belief that "man … is the only creature on earth which God willed for itself."

It is also responsibility before God that qualifies human beings as, to use Novak's term, *spirited*. This term has always, in the Christian tradition at least, implied spirituality and humanity's special relationship to the *Spirit* of God.

Last, and most important with respect to the consideration of democratic capitalism, it is only responsibility before God that has been, and will *ever* be able to discipline human passions, appetites, and cleverness. It is "the fear of the Lord," to use the language of the Old Testament, that is "the beginning of wisdom" (Prov. 1:7). Or, in the language of the New Testament, it is only in conjunction with the love of God that the love of neighbor is able to become the ordering center of human praxis (cf. Matt. 22:37–39).

Still, of course, raising the matter of responsibility before God begs the crucial modern question of human liberty, and whether it is possible to reconcile human freedom with divine sovereignty. British theologian Colin Gunton discussed this several years ago under the rubric of the ancient problem of "the One and the Many."[2] The modern discussion of liberty, Gunton suggests, may best be understood as a kind of contest between expansive modern aspirations and traditional theological affirmations:

> … between the God who appears to impart particularity only to that which is a function of his will, and therefore to deprive of true particularity; and the human will which appears to achieve independence only in the kind of arbitrary self assertion which appears to be the mark of divinity. The ingredients of the development are a God unitarily conceived, and largely in terms of will; the divorce of creation and redemption in the concept of divine action … [i.e., as in modern Gnosticism]; and a world whose shape is attributed largely to the (essentially unknown) predestining will of God. There can accordingly be seen to take place a kind of reflex process that takes the form of a human filling of the vacuum left by the irrelevance of the unknown God: A process of self-assertion, in which responsibility for the ordering of the world—personal and nonpersonal alike—is transferred to the human from the divine will.[3]

I think that it is true to say that a great many modern thinkers have, particularly since the eighteenth century, concluded that it is simply not possible to reconcile the traditional Christian affirmation of divine sovereignty and agency with human liberty unless (a) we avoid the question altogether by insisting that such questions—and indeed that religion in general—is nonsensical and irrelevant to the practical tasks at hand; or unless (b) we somehow collapse the notion of God's sovereign agency into human liberty considered socially and historically.

As Gunton's comments already indicate, the second strategy has been the most intellectually and socially significant—certainly within Western democracies—and this has been noted by any number of observers. Eric Voegelin, for example, coined the term *immanentization* to describe the process in which the universe of traditional Christianity, once conceived in terms of God's gracious invitation to humanity to enter into covenant with Him, is transformed into an exclusively human universe in which God is held to stand "behind" or "within" humanity's free construction of history, meaning, and value.[4] Along similar lines, Barth spoke of "humanization," in which God is incorporated "into the sphere of sovereign human self-awareness" such that what was once perceived as standing outside and over-and-against humanity is now experienced and understood inwardly.[5]

The immanentization of traditional Christian theology is evident in any number of places in modern thought. We see it in Locke's secularized understanding of providence. We see it in Kantian ethics, where God's agency is so invisible that we are left to assume simply that God somehow helps those who help themselves. We see it in Hegelian idealism, and in its Marxist inversion, where the Absolute Spirit and human historical striving are all but indistinguishable. And, most relevant to our present discussion, we see the collapse of divine agency into human liberty in the classical liberal defense of free enterprise; that is, along the lines of Adam Smith's "invisible hand" (which, by the way, is one of the reasons that modern economic theory has become so scientistic and mechanistic). For, once the matters of divine agency and, hence, of responsibility before God, have been collapsed into anthropology, there is no basis left for exempting human nature from modern science's reductive account of nature *as such*.

At any rate, it seems to me that Novak's position stands basically in this same modern tradition of immanentization, albeit in a weak sense. Novak's suggestion that entrepreneurial activity within the liberal-democratic system somehow automatically fulfills one's economic responsibilities before God

seems, to me, to collapse divine agency into what he has termed *cultural élan* or, more specifically, into "the spirit of enterprise."[6]

But here we must be clear: The persistent quandary that the strategy of immanentizing divine agency into human liberty has created for modern society is precisely that of rendering individual liberty problematic. This is ironic, but we can see this at a number of levels. In the first instance, it is simply not clear that what is called "freedom" in modern intellectual discourse has any real bearing on the experience of real human persons. This is perhaps most clear in Hegelian idealism and Marxist historical materialism. Yet, even closer to home, in the apologies most often made for free-market capitalism, the freedom so often celebrated is restricted by a market mechanism that is simply not open to the full range of human aspirations and, indeed, is not even able to process the qualities of goodness, virtue, and faith except to the extent that these can somehow be quantitatively translated into price signals.

Furthermore, in the modern pluralistic social environment, just how do we go about deciding whose freedom is to be considered consonant with the divine purpose now held to be invisibly embedded within the system? Or, put simply, whose liberty is the most important? Socialism, of course, privileged the liberty of the working classes—or at least of their representatives—over and against the liberty of the owners of capital. The reason for this privileging was that the liberty of the working classes was believed to be consonant with the proper unfolding of history, while the liberty of the owners of capital only served to impede historical development. Democratic capitalism, on the other hand, privileges the owners of capital over and against—though some would argue that it is ultimately "for the sake of"—the working classes. Why? Here again, because entrepreneurial activity is believed to be on the "right" side of historical development, the engine of progress.

Now, here, I have to confess that if it were up to me to choose between socialism and capitalism I would choose the latter, and for just the sorts of reasons that Novak suggests; that is, capitalism tends to distribute social power more broadly than socialism, it encourages democratic polity, it allows for the limited exercise of religion, and so forth. But the problem remains that within the market system—and particularly to the extent that this system is legitimated by way of some kind of immanetized theological understanding—it is the liberty of relatively few persons that is really valued, though it is hoped that the material fruits of their entrepreneurial activity will keep all of the others—whose are significantly less free—satisfied with the arrangement.

Therefore, it seems to me, that if we desire more than material prosperity *as such*, that is, if we desire the kind of society in which human dignity and

personal liberty are truly valued, we are going to have to insist that the God question and the matter of responsibility before God cannot continue to be buried within the rhetorical defense of the system per se. For only as people are made aware of their responsibility before God and, consequently, before neighbor, will the natural human proclivity to neglect justice and to "add house to house and field to field" be mitigated. True, existing laws and habits derived largely from our own Christian past may continue to soften the effect of capitalism's "creative destruction" to some extent. Yet, one has the sense that the globalization of democratic capitalism may well prove to be quite profoundly disappointing for all those who, as Novak suggests, are now experiencing "the birth pangs of liberty."

In short, *the question of our responsibility before God in economic matters cannot simply be collapsed—a lá classical liberalism, or by way of Austrian school theory, or by means of some kind of reinterpretation of natural-law theory—into faith in entrepreneurial activity*.

But how can we raise the question of responsibility before God without surrendering human freedom to divine sovereignty and agency? And how can the question be raised "neutrally" in our contemporary context of religious pluralism? As to the second question, I do not think the matter of responsibility before God can ever be raised "neutrally"—it always entails a *call*, as Abraham Kuyper would surely have contended, to *conversion*. But as to the first question of whether the Christian affirmation of God's sovereign freedom necessarily obliterates human liberty, let me make two brief observations: one theological and the other historical.

It has been suggested, along the lines of Gunton's analysis cited above, that the crux of the modern dilemma with respect to freedom lies in the way it has been conceptualized and, specifically, in the way that modern thinkers have mistakenly immanentized traditional theological affirmations of God's absolute power and freedom to act, ascribing this power and freedom instead to human action. Particularly since Kant, it has been assumed that human freedom must be understood in terms of the absolutely unimpeded power to choose and to act. As we have seen, however, such an understanding of freedom runs into all sorts of difficulties when it comes to interpersonal relations, difficulties that are only exacerbated by the revolutionary dynamics of the market economy and by the process of commodification. If Gunton's analysis is correct, furthermore, this problem may stem from the fact that the modern position on freedom emerged out of a context in which Christian theologians had for too long stressed God's unity—and hence His sovereign and irre-

sistible agency—at the expense of His *tri*-unity. This, combined with the Church's stubborn resistance to enlightened liberalism, appears to have led Kant and others to conclude that traditional Christian understanding simply could not be reconciled with human freedom.

Yet, what has emerged out of the recent renewal of trinitarian reflection are ways of thinking theologically about the divine nature—the divine *being-in-communion* as it has been termed[7]—that, far from obliterating human freedom, actually provides a kind of ontological foundation for it. After all, if what has eternally united Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is, finally, *love* and *gracious self-transcendence*; and if the creation reflects, not simply God's power but the overabundance of His *love*; and if the call to Christian faith is a call to each one of us to participate uniquely in the divine life on the basis of Christ's work of love on the cross and in the power of the Spirit of grace; then we clearly have little to fear from the Christian God in the way of any kind of loss of individuality and freedom. Indeed, everything this God has done and continues to do *enhances* individuality and *intensifies* genuine liberty. As the apostle Paul writes, "[W]here the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom" (2 Cor. 3:17).

Our actual experience of freedom, I think, resonates with just such a concept, for it depends far less upon being absolutely unimpeded than it does upon being empowered by others to act in a fashion that is truly and distinctively our own, and in preserving and enhancing their freedom to act similarly.[8] To experience liberty, in other words, is to be *set free* by the gracious actions of others, and ultimately to have been set free by the gracious action of God in Christ. To act freely, then, is—having been granted grace—to act graciously with respect to others.

In conclusion, my historical observation is simply that, to the extent that Western liberal democracies have been truly *humane*—and I believe that they have been in a great many respects—this does not owe to the operations of democratic capitalism per se but to the decisions of many people to live responsibly before God and to extend the love of Christ to one another, whether they would have articulated it in exactly the way that I have, and very largely in spite of the modern philosophical tendencies just mentioned. Kant was wrong. The political-social problem is not soluble even by a nation of sensible devils. It never has been and it never will be. Also wrong, I believe, are all suggestions that the larger social goodwill somehow emerges automatically out of billions of decisions made simply on the basis of practical, rational self-interest. On the contrary, insofar as our society has managed

to preserve humanity and justice, this is because people have chosen to live and work *before God* and to live compassionately and graciously on the basis of the grace that they have themselves received in Jesus Christ. When people cease to so live, our society will devolve into inhumanity and injustice, democratic capitalism notwithstanding.

Notes

1. Christoph Schwöbel, "*Imago Libertatis*: Human and Divine Freedom," in *God and Freedom: Essays in Systematic and Historical Theology*, ed. Colin E. Gunton (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1995), 58.
2. Colin E. Gunton, *The One, The Three, and The Many: God, Creation, and the Culture of Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).
3. Ibid., 58.
4. Cf. Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics: An Introduction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952).
5. Karl Barth, *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century: Its Background and History* (London: S.C.M. Press, 1972), 84.
6. In this connection we note that, from the seventeenth century onward, the increasingly secular quality of European society and culture may, in large part, have stemmed from a similar assumption; that is, that pursuing one's secular vocation to the best of one's abilities somehow fully satisfied the demands of Christian discipleship. See Klaus Bockmuehl, "Recovering Vocation Today," *Crux* 24, no. 3 (1988), 25–35.
7. See John D. Zizioulas, *Being As Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985).
8. See Colin E. Gunton, "God, Grace, and Freedom," in *God and Freedom: Essays in Systematic and Historical Theology*, ed. *Colin E. Gunton* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1995), 122.