

*Acknowledging the dignity and the  
transpolitical perfection of each human person*

## *Theology and America's Liberal Democracy*

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AMERICA IS RIGHTLY called a liberal democracy. The majority rules, but the liberty of each individual is protected. Consequently, the majority is not really free to do everything it pleases. It is limited by a standard which exists independently of what it wills at any particular moment. This standard is found in "the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God," the truth of which is "self-evident."

When an individual violates these laws, he does so only by denying the truth about himself to himself. He replaces thoughtful openness to nature's intelligibility with willful blindness concerning the limits of his own nature. By grounding the limits of government's and the individual's will in "Nature and Nature's God," the Declaration of Independence and implicitly the Constitution assert the truth of a "natural theology," an account of the relationships between man, God, and the universe. Knowledge of the truth of this theology is personally accessible to every human being.

The Declaration's natural theology is sometimes thought to be nothing more than an articulation of the Lockean-Jeffersonian account of "the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God." What this God teaches cannot be known through the authority of revealed religion. It is known through the deduction of the consequences of one's own most candid experi-

ence, the one which reveals the truth about one's own natural condition to oneself. This experience is fearful anxiety for one's self-preservation in an essentially hostile universe, one in which God does not care for individuals in particular and consequently in which each individual must care for himself. The experience generates knowledge of rights, all of which are deducible from the right one has to decide how best to preserve oneself. On its basis, it is possible to conclude that the very idea of natural rights is incompatible with Christian teaching or Christian experience.

This extreme view does not consider that it may well be possible to revolt against the Christian tradition while retaining certain presuppositions derived from Christian experience. One could attempt to trace the Declaration's defense of individual liberty to Socrates, but only if one forgets that he claimed it only for himself and a very few others and viewed most human beings as chained to the "natural slavery" of a given political order. The Declaration's view that the individual's perception of self does not depend on the given political order and results in the discovery of a liberty which is both good for and equally possessed by all human beings is decisively biblical and Christian.

According to the biblical-Christian view, every human person is capable of leading

himself away from the superficial distractions of political things to a perception of himself as he really is, independently of all political judgments. The goodness of the experience is guaranteed by the fact that it culminates in knowledge of a personal God, who knows me as I truly am. For the Christian, the authority of the political realm is limited by the knowledge of each person's transpolitical existence.

The experience of human dignity inherent in the discovery of natural rights cannot be accounted for on Lockean terms alone. It points to and ultimately depends on the Christian experience of personal transcendence. Christians discovered the experience of the dignity of the individual self or "person." As long as this experience is remembered, the individual cannot simply be understood as a "citizen," as a means to some political end.

Consider also that the theology of the Declaration of Independence is not exhausted by Locke's and Jefferson's "Nature's God." Two other references to God were added by its signers to Jefferson's original draft. The Declaration's signers asserted that they were "appealing to the Supreme Judge of the world for the Rectitude of our intentions." This "Supreme Judge" is the God of the Bible, the Christian God, who knows and judges the purity of the individual's heart. Such judgments right human error and provide the justice which rewards those who really intend to act justly and punishes those who merely appear to be just but who, in truth, are not.

Finally, the signers possessed "a firm reliance on the protection of Divine Providence." They believed that God cares for human beings and provides for their good. They surely did not believe that the correctness of their ideas or the justice of their cause would guarantee victory on the battlefield. Hence they must have believed that merely political victories are not necessarily genuine victories. There is a type of success higher and more substantial than political success. This conclusion stands in contrast to the Machiavellian foundation of Lockean thought.

The general assertion of the Declaration

considered as a whole is that knowledge of "Nature's God" is not incompatible with the Christian belief in a personal, transpolitical God who cares for and rewards and punishes human beings, who are free to choose between good and evil. This assertion is strongly reminiscent of the "natural law" of medieval Christendom, which the Lockean "law of nature" was meant to replace. The natural theology of the Declaration of Independence, then, does not mean to replace Christian doctrine but to create an order which would allow the political realm to exist in a way consistent with the Christian idea of personal freedom.

The founding view of the goodness of liberty, then, is more biblical than Socratic or Lockean. It is not Socratic because it does not make liberty dependent on the completion of the Socratic program of philosophic education. It is not Lockean because it does not understand political liberty fundamentally to be a means for the effective pursuit of power and wealth.

Consider that the argument for the protection of property in *Federalist* 10 and in Madison's thought as a whole also cannot be reduced to an economic or "technological" argument. The protection of property means the protection of everything which is genuinely one's own from political dominion. It means the protection of the transpolitical integrity of each human person. In his most comprehensive reflections, Madison claimed that property includes not only "that dominion which one man [justly] claims and exercises over the external things of the world." It includes "[i]n its larger and juster meaning . . . everything to which man may attach a value and have a right." The latter definition includes one's own opinions and, what is "of peculiar value," one's own "religious opinions," those concerning one's duties to God. Madison went as far as to say that "[c]onscience is the most sacred of all property," because it is what is most one's own.

Does not the possibility of and goodness of freedom of conscience ultimately presuppose the truth of the "medieval" opin-

ion that it is possible for each human being to experience his transcendent dignity by knowing God's will? Does not the Madisonian understanding of liberty point to the "Thomistic" principle that each human being has the personal responsibility freely to seek the good? The acknowledgment that all human institutions ought to be designed to support this free, personal responsibility frees the Church, the academy, and the family from political control, because their existence is far more *for* this transcendent personal striving than is the merely political realm. It has been often remarked that the founding obsession with liberty was opposed to the Platonic-Aristotelian emphasis on political education for citizenship and statesmanship.

America's natural theology, to conclude, is not purely Lockean because no genuinely theological perspective can be. If it requires illumination from some "pre-modern" perspective, it is more plausible to search for the key source of illumination in Christianity than in Plato or Aristotle. This conclusion becomes even clearer when one sees the connection between the "democratic" views of moral and intellectual liberty in the American and the Christian traditions.

Those who deny that the Declaration's natural theology owes anything distinctive to Christianity might well accuse me of defending a position which concedes too much to the nihilistic charms of the positivism of contemporary social science. It is true that I must acknowledge that political scientist Robert Dahl is not wholly wrong when he asserts in his enormously influential *A Preface to Democratic Theory* that "the logic of natural rights seems to require a transcendental view in which the right is 'natural' because God directly or indirectly wills it." Consequently, "such an argument inevitably involves a variety of assumptions that at best are difficult and at worst impossible to prove to the satisfaction of anyone of positivist or skeptical predispositions."

Dahl's general point seems to be that Lockean epistemology cannot support the American natural theology. For Locke and

Dahl, freedom is freedom through skepticism. They deny that anyone can show that there is a natural or divine order which human beings can discover and which limits and directs personal and political choice. Each of them denies that it can be shown to him that he is limited by any will but his own.

Dahl's skepticism is evidence that the Cartesian-Lockean epistemological assertions have created an America in which almost every sophisticated person believes that natural theology is nothing more than the attempt to impose dogmatically one's own will upon a universe which, so far as human beings can tell, has no order or purpose of its own. The same sort of criticism which destroyed divine and aristocratic authority and brought into being liberal democracy is also capable of destroying the founding authority of liberal democracy. The creative possibilities of Locke's thought depended upon the plausibility of the "surface" or exoteric aspects of his teaching, which appealed to traditional prejudices. But the "naked essence" of Locke's thought, to use John Courtney Murray's phrase, which was aimed at allegedly Christian and Aristotelian hypocrisy, in time eventually worked to destroy Locke's own "judicious" hypocrisy.

Given this skeptical liberation from the dogmatism inherent in every assertion of natural or divine order, how can Dahl justify the limitation imposed on government by the idea of liberal democracy? For him, it is clear that, in the absence of self-evident natural or divine guidance, "political equality" becomes "an end to be maximized." He "lay[s] down" the "postulate that the goals of every adult citizen of the republic are to be accorded equal value in determining governmental policy." It is the only postulate consistent with the absence of moral or political authority independent of the individual's idiosyncratic assertion.

The positivistic political scientist, then, also relies on a "self-evident truth." It is clear to him that what he asserts to be just or unjust or good or evil has no "cognitive" or other "objective" status. It is the prod-

uct of the unique emotional requirements of his particular self. He knows that what is "evident" to him is not necessarily evident to others and that there is no compelling way of evaluating competing claims of moral or political "evidence." From a natural or "epistemological" perspective, all such claims are equally arbitrary. Consequently, candid self-analysis reveals to him that he has not the authority to impose his evidence on others. His evidence is just as worthy or worthless as everyone else's, and government has no "objective" basis to give preference to one claim over another. Candid self-analysis in the skeptical absence of dogmatism causes one to limit one's will to oneself by negating any illusion one might have about one's own moral or political superiority.

Dahl's understanding of the purpose of government can be, and has been, criticized for denying the possibility of any public purpose and hence for reducing political life to the competition among separate but equal selfish forces or "interest groups." Given the atomism generated by its radical moral and epistemological skepticism, moreover, it is not even clear that it can explain how even an interest group can come into being. Its more fundamental problem, however, is its view of the experience of the individual. Each individual is free to assert without restraint the particular "goals" of his unique "self," but he has no foundation for justifying such assertions beyond this "self." Freedom through skepticism is freedom for the experience of the essential arbitrariness of one's own will through the recognition of the impossibility of a natural or any other form of theology. Dahl's individual encounters the experience of nihilism: everything is permitted because everything is equally worthless or insignificant in the eyes of nature and God. God is dead, or He might as well be dead, because He has given to human beings nothing of any real value. Of necessity, we are all "self-made" men.

Does the candid, skeptical self really have the tendency to accept the limits imposed on it by the requirements of liberal

democracy? Does it really tend to limit its will in view of its essential arbitrariness? Remember that Dahl argues that positivism and skepticism have destroyed the illusions of theology and natural rights. These illusions must have been human creations. Human selves must have been creating in response to human need. What was the need? Apparently, human beings need to believe that there is some "cosmic" support for their humanity. Human dignity, they need to assert, must have a more secure foundation than human assertion. It must be more than purely self-created. This need, Dahl might conclude, is the foundation for the theological experience.

Skepticism or reason epistemologically understood destroys the credibility of such experience. But does it destroy the need for an understanding of human dignity that is grounded in a reality that exists beyond one's own self? If such a reality does not exist, ought I not attempt to create one by imposing my "goal" upon others, by creating a political reality that gives my assertion of dignity an existence beyond myself? Cannot the unsupported self desire to become a "godlike" tyrant, to create a world according to its own image? Precisely because my assertion is arbitrary, and because I do not want it to be, I cannot rest content with the relativism of Dahl's liberal democracy.

But, Dahl might reply, political creations with arbitrary foundations do not, from a theological or natural perspective, really change the status of the "self." Candid self-analysis ultimately reveals the ultimate futility of all such efforts, and hence it should limit drastically what one ought to demand and expect from political life. But if I come to recognize both the indifference of God and nature to my particular existence and the futility of my self-sufficient striving to impose my will on my "environment," should I not conclude that human liberty itself is an evil? Is not liberty ultimately defined as liberty for genuine self-consciousness? If self-consciousness is nothing more than an experience of human worthlessness, does it not reveal

my experience of myself as a human individual and as an evil to be destroyed? Does it not reveal the bankruptcy of the goal of liberal democracy?

Consider the two most powerful intellectual currents today calling for the destruction of liberal democracy—behaviorism and Marxism. According to the Marxist, liberal democracy or capitalism must be overcome by a final revolution which will bring history to an end. At the end of history human beings will be definitively satisfied. They will no longer experience the alienation of self-estrangement that the bourgeois man associates with self-consciousness.

Marx says this alienation, in truth, has an economic cause. Consequently, when economic scarcity is definitively overcome for all human beings, everyone will be satisfied. Self-consciousness will become an experience of free self-realization unconstrained by any form of necessity and in harmony with the whole species. One will no longer experience oneself as an isolated, radically contingent individual. This terrible experience is merely a reflection of capitalism's economic individualism.

At the end of history, Marx acknowledges, human beings will still die, and they will be aware of it. Consequently, there will not really be complete freedom from necessity, and one will still be able to differentiate one's own good from the species' good. It seems one will still experience oneself as an alienated individual. Although there will be "plenty" of "products," there will not really be enough from a perspective which is both self-conscious and materialistic. The ultimate scarcity is scarcity of time, and, as long as human beings are still both self-conscious and mortal, scarcity will continue and so will alienation. History cannot come to an end on a Marxian basis.

Perhaps Marx's vision can be salvaged with just a few alterations in the name of consistency. If human beings are called those who are both self-conscious and mortal, they must be called, by definition, unsatisfied or alienated. If the end of his-

tory produces satisfaction or the end of alienation, then those beings heretofore called human should properly be called something else. They become either gods or beasts. They are not gods, because a god is a being which is immortal. They must be beasts, that is, they must lose that quality which makes human beings distinctive from a liberal or individualistic perspective—self-consciousness. If human beings were no longer aware of their mortality or radical contingency they would no longer be unhappy. They would be happy or, better, content, as we humans today call the animals content. If liberal democracy is to be overcome in the name of the end of history, the goal to be achieved is the elimination of self-consciousness, the abolition of man properly so-called.

This conclusion, of course, is explicitly affirmed by the behaviorist psychologist, who attempts to abolish freedom and dignity or humanity in the name of the survival and contentment of a certain type of organism. A moment's thought reveals that the goals of Marxism and behaviorism are essentially the same. Both aim at the creation of docile, cooperative "species beings" totally content with their environment. The enemy of this contentment is individualism or human freedom.

There is a tendency today to view this destruction of individuality in a theological context. The movement is from the "privatization" of theology in the "bourgeois" perspective toward the comprehensive transformation of humanity as a whole envisioned by the "theology of liberation," which more or less equates the Marxist goal with the bringing of the Kingdom of God to earth. This liberation will involve the abolition of human suffering, all of which, having been man-made, can be eliminated by man. This liberation will eradicate all political distinctions, as well as the ones between heaven and earth, the spiritual and the material, and man and God.

Apparently destruction of the Declaration's natural theology does not necessarily culminate in nihilism, because the "the-

ology of liberation" shows that this destruction can be given a theological interpretation. Alexis de Tocqueville in his justly celebrated *Democracy in America* calls this interpretation "pantheism," and he calls its emergence the "principal effect on philosophy" of the democratic revolution in thought. As the "system" which most effectively destroys human individuality, pantheism portrays the completely homogeneous vision of the universe which is the foundation for purely democratic political idealism. Tocqueville is able to see quite clearly and distinctly the journey democratic thought takes from liberal democracy to pure democracy. It ends with the affirmation of the truth of pantheism.

The revelation of the truth of pantheism is democracy's "ideal." Consequently, it is, for Tocqueville, the key source of democratic "poetic inspiration." Every "philosophical system," every natural theology, for Tocqueville, is a form of poetry. Every vision of the universe which is not purely chaotic "ennobles" nature.

The democratic vision of the universe, from this perspective, is necessarily a "natural theology." Its skepticism prohibits the inclusion of "supernatural beings." Gods and heroes have been reduced to their merely natural proportions. There is nothing beyond the visible and tangible world for the democratic imagination. Democratic poetry "ennobles" what is "really" true from this democratic or homogeneous and materialistic perspective.

The destiny of "the human race as a whole" is the true democratic poetic vision. This destiny cannot be known to any particular individual. It is the product of human effort but not of individual choice. Consequently, the democratic poet must conclude that the ordinary achievements of the individual find cosmic significance as part of an unknowable but "universal and consistent plan by which God guides mankind."

The democratic poet, then, sees divine purpose in the growing success of the democratic movement and humanity's

collective technological striving. All this success must have a point; that this point eludes the individual and apparently does not radically alter his human condition only shows the error of dwelling on the individual's perspective. At first glance, it makes sense to call this divine process "history" and to celebrate it as humanity's liberation of itself from the chains of natural necessity through its own efforts, as does the Marxist. But because history's divine goal is not chosen or even affirmed by human actors, human beings cannot truly say that historical success is a manifestation of human freedom.

The dualism between history and nature is also opposed to the democratic intellectual quest for comprehensive "unity," the most general of general ideas. More to the point, humanity will not really be free as long as this dualism exists. Human beings will still have bodies and die alone. They will still be individuals. Hence the genuine theology of liberation is not historical but pantheistic. The distinction between any form of human freedom and brute natural necessity must be eradicated. Brute, man, God, and inanimate nature must all become one. Human distinctiveness must completely disappear in order for one to see this vision of the perfectly democratic or perfectly homogeneous natural theology. The individual must see that his individuality is nothing but an illusion and hence will his own destruction in the name of consistency.

The affirmation of the truth of pantheism through the destruction of individuality or self-consciousness is the only "theological" doctrine which is perfectly compatible with the homogeneous and materialistic view of the universe implicit throughout the development of modern political philosophy. Individualism or self-consciousness appears as a problematic exception to this general view, and the partisan of homogeneous materialism cannot explain it. He might attempt to explain it as an evolutionary product of the species' instinct for self-preservation. But this explanation is not very scientific, because the experience of history teaches the incom-

patibility between the consequences of self-consciousness and self-preservation.

The proper explanation of self-consciousness is as a mysterious "accident." No "theory of evolution" can satisfactorily account for the emergence of humanity. How and why humanity came to be is not known. From the perspective of homogeneous materialism, humanity is an "error," an example of "deviant behavior" about which the "scientific method" cannot give an account.

It is the task of science and scientific enlightenment to replace error with truth. Consequently, it is the task of science to eliminate humanity or self-consciousness. If it cannot, then science is not truly science. It is the project of science, of the enlightenment, to make homogeneous materialism wholly true. In so doing, it makes pantheism really true. A human individual is, for the homogeneous materialist, an animal who is for some inexplicable reason aware of his mortality and is dissatisfied with it. He is a beast who wishes to be a god and who can, to some extent, delude himself into thinking he really is godlike. The scientific destruction of humanity eliminates the characteristically human illusion that a human being is a being "in between" beast and God.

Without the existence of humanity, the distinction between beast and god also disappears. A being who lives in serene contentment, experiencing nothing but the sweet sentiment of its own existence, is simultaneously bestial and godlike. He is in need of nothing, so far as he knows, because he is not an individual in the Lockean or Christian or Socratic sense. He has no "historical" experience of his past, no "technological" concern for his future, no sense of his likeness to God, no curiosity about his cosmic status and the structure of the cosmos. He is divinely self-sufficient because, for him, each moment is complete in himself and is completely satisfying. It is an experience of the truth of pantheism.

Pantheism is the democratic remedy for the error inherent in the "naked essence" of Locke's anti-theological or materialistic

individualism. For Locke, the experience of Aristotelian-Christian-biblical natural theology, even as it is found in the Declaration of Independence, is an illusion. The idea of natural theology is generated by the experience of the world as one in which there is ample provision for the meeting of human needs. The crucial opinion, to repeat, is that there is "cosmic" support for the individual's humanity: the world was created for beings made in the image and likeness of God. The truth of this opinion, moreover, is somehow self-evident to human beings, who use it to guide human choice.

For Locke, God and nature provide almost worthless materials. All that is given is formless matter which must be fashioned for human use by human labor. Human beings, once enlightened or freed from self-made illusions, can see only that nature is the source of all human dissatisfaction. The fundamental truth is human embodiment and hence human mortality. Human freedom is nothing but the mysterious existence of individual self-consciousness, which is fearful and uneasy, and reason, which is nothing but an instrument to direct labor in the interest of alleviating the pain produced by fear and uneasiness. Locke teaches the terrible necessity of this worldly self-reliance in candid acknowledgement of the absence of a God who provides for or even cares about the needs of individual human beings.

For Locke, the imagined existence of a natural theology created by human beings is simply additional evidence of their fundamental neediness, of the truth that no one has provided for them. It is this experience of fundamental neediness, this consciousness of mortality, that causes human beings to need a God who cares for them by satisfying the need for immortality. Yet, according to Locke, this need would be satisfied only if each human being were really immortal. If this were so, the distinction between man and God would disappear. Because man desires to be God, he imaginatively creates a God, who gives him a godlike freedom from brute natural necessity. But, in reality, only

if man were God, would there be a God.

The Lockean analysis gives human beings no alternative but to make themselves as godlike as possible through their own labor. But this alternative is not a satisfactory one; technological successes do not really bring freedom from fear through genuine individual security. In the best imaginable situation, death would be eradicated as a necessity, but not as a possibility, because it is impossible to eliminate all contingency from the infinite universe. In this situation, the place of fear in the individual's life would increase immeasurably. He would live in a lead house and never go outside. If death is avoidable, then all human effort must be concentrated on avoiding it. Courage and the other virtues become no longer the best ways of facing the necessary finitude of human existence, but insanity purely and simply. If death is avoidable, human life becomes pure misery, because there will never be any rest from the "technological" effort to avoid it.

The necessary failure of the Lockean project points to the truth of pantheism, which really seems to make human beings divine and relieves their human misery simply by eradicating their individuality or human distinctiveness. Pantheism makes manifest what Lockeanism only implies: the truth and goodness of the experience of human liberty cannot be shown to exist by merely human beings.

This disappearance of the Lockean individual provides the crucial reason for suspecting that the experience of the truth and goodness of human liberty, at least democratically conceived, is decisively Christian. According to the key document

of Vatican II on religious liberty and human dignity, "the right to religious freedom is based on the very dignity of the human person as known through the revealed world of God and by reason itself." Consequently, "freedom has its foundation not in the subjective attitude of the individual but in his very nature." Because the human person truly transcends the chains of political, social, and economic necessity by virtue of his nature, because he can know God and the good, human liberty really exists and is good for human beings.

Liberal democracy, understood in this light, has a genuine moral-religious foundation in its acknowledgment of the dignity and the transpolitical perfection of each human person. From this perspective, the political successes of the proponents of modern liberalism can be seen as genuinely good. Although they may have been inspired largely by the reductionistic "error" of Lockean materialism, they can be redeemed by the fact that the liberal end of this materialism may well have somehow (although ultimately incoherently) presupposed the truth of the Christian personal experience.

Redeeming the democratic view of liberty requires inquiry into the nature of and the possibility of the truth of the distinctively Christian experience. This possibility is too often slighted or even ignored, even by those who seem to have the greatest desire to reinvigorate the idea of natural theology as the most effective antidote to the nihilism of the aimless relativism of positivism and of the ungrounded and hence unlimited assertiveness of historicism.