

BOUND TO BE FREE: LIBERTY & HUMAN FLOURISHING

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The Good Samaritan by Eugène Delacroix, 1849. Vincent Van Gogh would copy this depiction in 1890, recasting it in his own style and mirroring it.

TWO VIEWS OF FREEDOM

For those standing in the stream of Augustinian realism, military power and the martial nature that drives certain human beings to wield it are not judged as something necessarily to be overcome. Instead, they recognize that given the conditions of this world, martial power is a basic, even salutary, property of responsible political life. However, because human beings are motivated both by love and kindness as well as selfishness and cruelty, the Augustinian realist also knows the use of force must be viewed with cautionary skepticism, and deployed only within carefully prescribed constraints. Within the Christian intellectual tradition, the way of doing this is best exemplified in just war casuistry, which the late ethicist Jean Bethke Elshtain described as a moral guide for reflecting on the necessity and limits of force that accounts for, and seeks to reform, the presence in human beings of “two different states of nature: the state of integral nature and the state of fallen nature.”¹ These states can be recast as original innocence and original sin.

These twin anthropological realities were not present at creation. In the cradle garden, God created human beings so that we might love as He loves—both one another and God Himself. To make this love possible, God was required to construct humanity with moral freedom—for love is free or it is not love. Because the actions of free beings can never be perfectly determined by anything else, there was risk in creating humankind with liberty. The risk was the possibility of revolt against God’s love. That we did in fact revolt is proved in the ongoing tug between the two fundamentally conflicting kinds of human desire: *cupiditas*, which enshrines a form of self-love and tends toward the domination of others,² and *caritas*, an orientation to the good and love of the neighbor. This latter includes a recognition of one’s own interdependencies,³ an admission able to be made without fear by also recognizing that “dependence on others is not a diminution but an enrichment of self.”⁴

This is an admission that human beings are not *limitlessly* free. Thus, the Augustinian realist endorses a notion of freedom as an acceptance of limits and as the undertaking of

virtuous acts in submission to something beyond the self—namely, the character, requirements, and aspirations of divine love. Such an endorsement enjoys an ancient pedigree, for from the Greco-Romans down through to the medieval Scholastics, the pairing of freedom and virtue was inextricably tethered to the pursuit of happiness as human flourishing.⁵ In the hands of the great Christian academics, human happiness could never be a matter of arbitrary individual will. Instead, it had to be defined externally, grounded in the divinely intended purpose of human being itself.

But just as Christian thinking on these matters was reaching its greatest sophistication, a contrary view of freedom emerged. This new rival conceived of freedom as voluntaristic—nothing more than arbitrary willfulness with the license to reject basic constraints.⁶ Freedom, thus conceived, severed the teleological dimension of human happiness, and the long-established connections between flourishing, freedom, and virtue were cut away.

This matters ethically, for this latter view of freedom, when paired with *cupiditas*, fuels

PHARISEE OR GOOD SAMARITAN?



Feb. 27th, 1917.

Nations, too, make moral choices. Jay N. Darling, cartoon from the Des Moines Register, 1918. Creative commons.

the estrangement, conflict, and tragedy that feature so frequently in human relationships.⁷ Therefore, I am concerned here to champion the former view of freedom that grounds, rather than abolishes, human responsibility. Without the right view of freedom, moral foundations are more easily shaken, and those virtues, including the martial ones, that prompt a neighbor to stand with neighbor against injustice, are hobbled. One means of reconnecting freedom with virtue runs through an encounter with human evil.

REPUGNANCE AS A WAY OF KNOWING

The Augustinian realist's connection of freedom with virtue is rooted in their corresponding *moral* realism. Rejecting ethereal subjectivism, Elshtain, for her part, always insisted there is a *there* there: objective moral truths to be discovered, honored, and encoded.⁸ But she also understood the human condition is hamstrung by epistemological uncertainty, for "a rupture has been effected between reality and our capacity to know that reality."⁹ Yet evidence remains, among them

human passions. From Augustine, Elshtain asserted that emotions are a mode of thought, *embodied* thought, and she insisted we must remain cognizant of what the body is telling us because "the body is epistemologically significant."¹⁰

This calls to mind what was really the first great moral shock of my life. I was four or five years old and had descended the steps in our family home to find my father watching a telecast of *Les Misérables*. Depicted on-screen was a drawn and haggard prisoner, wild-eyed and chain-clad, employed with other prisoners in some harsh, backbreaking labor. He seemed a beast. Frightened, I conjectured aloud: "He's a bad man!" But my father turned and considered me, as if sizing me up. He then told me the prisoner, it was Jean Valjean of course, was, prior to his arrest, utterly destitute. Unsuccessful in his attempts to find work, and despairing over his failure to care for his starving family, he stole bread to end his family's hunger. He had been imprisoned for stealing food after no one would give him any, or allow him the

means to earn it. Staggered by the injustice, I was, all at once, distressed, bewildered, threatened, and enraged. I did what a child *can* do in such moments: I made a noise like a muffled howl and fled away in tears.

I knew, but could not then articulate, that all is not right in our world. Age has only confirmed the fitness of my youthful impressions. The inculpatory witness of history attests that the cultivation of hells on earth by some human beings over others is simply one aspect of the human condition made manifest; neighbor has preyed upon neighbor time out of mind.

Following from her belief that the emotions are epistemologically significant, Elshtain warned against the excision of what her friend and fellow ethicist Leon Kass called "the wisdom of repugnance." She affirmed Kass' desire for us to pay attention to what we find "offensive," "repulsive," "and distasteful" for it might alert us to deeper realities. Like Augustine, "Kass," Elshtain writes, "is arguing *for* the potential epistemic value of strong reactions, like horror at the sight of torture scenes, or revulsion when we see self-mutilation."¹¹ We must not discount such reactions. In a culture increasingly allergic to moral judgment, Elshtain feared our capacity for repugnance is fast dwindling, a fear supported by those who criticized Kass for trying to make something theoretically substantive out of what they took to be mere aesthetic reaction. To the contrary, Elshtain insists, "The critique runs much deeper than that." Repugnance points to that which offends something very deep within us; "Something really...fundamental has been violated." We need to interrogate the value of these impressions, of course, but it might well be that they prove accurate, that certain things simply ought *not*-be, that we sometimes ought to shudder.

To the Augustinian mind, all evil is shudder-worthy. Evil is privation,¹² the loss of some essential goodness necessary for a particular object to remain whole, in retention of its created nature. As the absence of essential goodness, evil, in a sense, does not exist. In this, it is much like darkness, silence, and

cold, which are the absence of visible light, sound energy, and thermal movement respectively. Evil is the break in the bones of a once-functional arm or blindness in eyes that have lost vision. It's essential to grasp the derivative quality of evil. Evil needs something to be nothing—it cannot be nothing on its own. More to our purpose, *moral* evil is the result of the absence of the proper use of the will, which is to direct our freedom toward God. God created human beings to be freely rational, to not only be capable of evaluating choices between good and evil and right and wrong, but to freely choose the good.

The wisdom of repugnance instructs us that we are not to be indifferent to such choices. Albert Camus, one of Elshtain's great heroes, concurred. Living in a century in which the totalitarian will swallowed tens of millions of souls in death camps and lime-pits, he paid close attention to the revulsion he felt. He could not be indifferent:

If nothing has any meaning and if we can affirm no values whatsoever, then everything is possible and nothing has any importance. There is no pro or con: the murderer is neither right nor wrong. We are free to stoke the crematory fires or to devote ourselves to the care of lepers. Evil and virtue are mere chance or caprice.¹³

But this was not to be believed. Camus recognized that his own deep feelings of revulsion, his *repugnance*, always meant more than they were conscious of saying.¹⁴ Such a sentiment was behind Elshtain's insistence that not even childhood impressions are to be jettisoned without cause, for they may well be key ingredients of our nature. Rather, we are to "form...and shape...our passions in light of certain understandings about human beings, about human willing, and about our faltering steps to act rightly."¹⁵ For the Augustinian realist, the human compulsion to stand against injustice—whether expressed in the provision of bread to a desperate man or in the martial impulse to "stiffen the sinews and summon up the blood" against political malevolence—is intended as a statement of moral fact, not simply a solipsistic pronouncement of personal preference. Description



and evaluation are distinct but inseparable, and “moral evaluation is embedded in our descriptions; how we describe is itself a moral act.”¹⁶ The distinction between right and wrong, good and evil is crucial not simply to avoid hells on earth, but because we were made to know these distinctions. They help to make us happy. Shallow are the souls that have forgotten how to shudder.¹⁷

FREEDOM FOR EXCELLENCE

The human experience of evil, both external to us and that with which we are complicated, has helped shape the history of moral thought. This history can be divided into two epochs: The first ranges from Antiquity into the Middle Ages and, as has already been noted, was organized around the question of human flourishing. This school is organized around the formation of character according to the principal virtues that refine human action without neglecting to examine opposing faults, vices, and sins.¹⁸ Such a view acknowledges both the existence and accessibility of moral facts, as well as a hardwired inclination toward moral goods. Therefore law, for example, is seen as a work of wisdom rather than a constraint on one’s freedom.

This is now all rather old school. It has largely given way to the view for which self-assertion, as a radically self-creating “self,” is seen as the means to real freedom.¹⁹ Václav Havel, the former Czech dissident turned former Czech President, lamented the calamitous outcomes of this self-deification:

The relativization of all moral norms, the crisis of authority, the reduction of life to the pursuit of immediate material gain without regard for its general consequences—the very things Western democracy is most criticized for—do not originate in democracy but in that which modern man has lost: his transcendental anchor, and along with it the only genuine source of his responsibility and self-respect... Given its fatal incorrigibility, humanity probably will have to go through many more Rwandas... before it understands how unbelievably shortsighted a human being can be who has forgotten that he is not God.²⁰

Elshtain agreed: “One way that we have contrived to forget that we are not God is to forget we have human natures.”²¹ Looking at the present scene, Elshtain pointed to those who tell us we are nothing more than bundles of impulses and random combinations of DNA:

One standard complaint goes: any talk of a specifically human nature that is not reducible to biological and genetic predicates is so much balderdash, fashioned historically in order to curb human freedom, to deny the free expression of our polymorphously perverse sexuality, and to hand over to rigid moralists the power to control human expression.²²

She understood, however, that none of this emerged scratch-made from the genetic revolution or, further back, the Enlightenment. As did her likeminded intellectual colleague George Weigel, Elshtain saw this identification of freedom with the will as a product of a great intellectual chasm opened up in our history’s second epoch, during the High Middle Ages.²³

In the opening pages of her book *Sovereignty*, Elshtain interrogates William of Ockham, the chief exponent of nominalism, and the influence his view of divine freedom had on earthbound notions of political rule and individual self-sufficiency. With Ockham, the question of happiness is set aside. On issues of sovereignty, “The will...moves to center stage” and a new conception of “free choice applies univocally to God and to man.”²⁴ This results in a freedom that tailors norms to the moment: “It means considering all the options before choosing a course of action, because the process of choosing is itself the overriding good. It means being faithful to who you really are, because in that fidelity lies a salutary honesty. And it means rejecting every fixed standard of right and wrong, every norm, rule, law, and belief that is external to yourself.”²⁵

Catholic theologian Servais Pinckaers underlines what Elshtain has her sights on: With Ockham, Augustine’s emphasis on a freedom of the will guided by a naturalistic morality written on the heart will be overturned, and

free choice will be redefined as “the power to choose *indifferently* between contraries, between yes and no, good and evil.”²⁶

The theory underlying the freedom of indifference emerges from the Franciscan critique of Thomas Aquinas. Thomas had already carried Augustinian thought forward, arguing that free choice proceeds from our spiritual faculties of reason and will. This power to choose is then quickened by “inclinations to truth, goodness, and happiness that animate these faculties.”²⁷ Against this, Ockham inaugurates a revolution that “begins by breaking away from spiritual nature and its inclinations.”²⁸ Nominalism, in denying universal concepts or principles exist in reality, reduces human nature to merely a description given to common features shared among human beings. Weigel writes, “If...there is no ‘human nature,’ then there are no universal moral principles that can be ‘read’ from human nature.”²⁹ The effect this has on political theory is substantial. “Morality, on a nominalist view, is simply law and obligation, and that law is always external to the human person. Law, in other words, is always coercion—divine law and human law, God’s coercion of us and our coercion of each other.”³⁰

Elshtain was aware this leaves human beings either “stewing in a kind of permanent impotence as their agency is swamped by God’s arbitrary power or, alternatively, human free willing and capacity to ‘do’ shrinks the realm of divine agency as sovereign selves go to work.”³¹ In either case, she lamented, the moral realist’s perception of an intelligible world or order in nature discernable to human inquiry increasingly gives way before a notion of law derived from will and command.³² Consequently, Pinckaers avers, “Nature...is henceforth subordinated to choice [and] the ideal becomes the domination and enslavement of nature.”³³ Freedom becomes nothing more than the freedom of indifference. The human will is left unbound.

Set this against the Thomistic view of freedom with which we have already become briefly introduced. Freedom, for Thomas, “is a means to human excellence, to human happiness,

to the fulfillment of human destiny.”³⁴ Thus, Aquinas’ view is best captured in the phrase “freedom for excellence, or perfection.”³⁵ As “perfection,” it signals teleological completion—freedom is ordered to our created purpose. Contra Ockham, freedom is “the means by which...we act on the natural longing...built into us as human beings.”³⁶ It is the power to engage in excellence, in virtuous actions that are true and good.³⁷ As such, good law cannot be a heteronomous imposition, but rather it intertwines with freedom to facilitate “our achievement of the human goods that we instinctively seek because of who we are and what we are meant to be as human beings.”³⁸ Freedom for excellence suggests our repugnance toward evil, and our characteristic resolve for remedy are part and parcel of our capacity to be free.

This is not, of course, instantaneous: “Freedom is the method by which we *become* the kind of people our noblest instincts incline us to be.”³⁹ Freedom “engenders a moral science that directly takes up the question...of the absolute good... This science is organized according to the principle virtues that strengthen freedom and refine human action.”⁴⁰ We are trained to “choose wisely and to act well as a matter of habit...as an outgrowth of *virtue*.”⁴¹

Continuing the pedagogical image, Pinckaers writes: “From our birth we have received moral freedom as a talent to be developed.”⁴² This talent is latent, pregnant with the possibility of knowing truth, and inclined toward goodness and happiness. “At the beginning of our lives,” he says, “these capacities are weak, as is the case for a child or an apprentice. Like our personalities, we must form our freedom through an education appropriate to our level of development.”⁴³ He extrapolates:

This...process appears to pass through three stages analogous to the stages of human life. Corresponding to childhood, there is the apprenticeship of rules and laws of action...Next there is the adolescence of the moral life, characterized by increasing independence and growing personal initiative, guided by one’s taste for the true and the good and strengthened by experience. It is here that virtue begins

to emerge as an excellence or capacity for personal action. Then there arrives the age of maturity where virtue blossoms like a talent in the arts: It is a daring, intelligent and generous force, the capacity to bring to good completion works of long duration that bear fruit for many; it secures ease and joy in action.⁴⁴

Freedom for Excellence, then, is a process of growing in virtue, in the capacity to love and to choose what we ought—for our own happiness and for that of our neighbors—both near and far off. Naturally enough, Thomistic freedom must rest in a right conception of what it means to be a human being. The Thomistic stance advances an anthropology that requires solidarity, empathy, and mutually shared responsibilities in defense of inalienable rights and human dignity. Thomas realigns freedom away from autonomy, and back toward natural inclinations such as our native longing to give ourselves away in acts of other-centered self-donation. These are natural because we are crafted in the image of a God who does just that.

Individual freedom carries with it the capacity to cultivate a society in which persuasion through exhortation and counsel is preferred over coercion; in which happiness is reestablished as a “diffusion of the good;”⁴⁵ and in which society is made more secure by preserving the distinction between good and evil. Thus, freedom is responsibility. Free men and women bear the responsibility to become “the kind of people who can, among other possibilities, build free and virtuous societies in which the rights of all are acknowledged, respected, and protected in law.”⁴⁶

On this last point, for our present study enough can never be said. While there is much more to the human story, evil remains a constant. Ockhamite nominalism, with the deterioration of the idea of freedom to willfulness, the detachment of freedom from moral truth, and its obsession with choice, desiccates the human capacity to make even “the most elementary moral conclusions about the imperative to resist evil”⁴⁷ or to explain “why some things that *can* be done should *not* be done.”⁴⁸ The freedom of indifference cannot

sustain a free society. Tyranny thrives in a world in which freedom of choice is nothing but a matter of self-assertion and power and means over ends.⁴⁹ There can be no “common good” if there are only particular goods of particular men and women, each acting out their own particular willfulness.⁵⁰

The Augustinian realist, morally formed by the patrimony of Greek and Roman wisdom, the biblical religion, and living with eyes wide open, knows well the extent of evil to which humanity is capable. But to be a realist is not to be without hope. “Freedom for excellence,” concludes Weigel, “is the freedom that will satisfy the deepest yearnings of the human heart to be free. It is more than that, though. The idea of freedom for excellence, and the disciplines of self-command it implies, are essential for democracy and for the defense of freedom.”⁵¹

Such a freedom yields martial benefit. Our efforts to more perfectly reflect the image of God, as individuals and as a society, need not be scuttled as we stand idly by and do nothing while another image of God is annihilated by the conditions of life or willful malice. The story of the Good Samaritan is universally beloved as a testimony to our responsibility to our suffering neighbor. But neighbor-love needs to extend to concern for the conditions of his neighborhood as well. The ethicist Paul Ramsey wondered aloud what the Samaritan ought to have done had he happened upon the scene when the robbers were still committing their terrible deed. Or, to extend the inquiry, what if *every* time the Samaritan passed down that road he found yet another waylaid victim?⁵² Returning to the just war reflections with which I started, it is a fundamental assumption of that tradition that human evil must be resisted, in proportion to the crime and the enemy’s intransigence, when and where there is the wherewithal to do so. To not do so is not only to be indirectly complicit in that evil, it is to directly fail to love our neighbor.

Perhaps one thing more remains. We have already established, overruling Ockham, that law is not arbitrary; no command is its own

justification.⁵³ But why, then, are we to love our neighbors, especially when it carries risk and involves us in the imperfections of this world? Here, Oxford theologian Nigel Biggar stands in agreement with Thomas’ freedom as excellence in describing Christian ethics as basically eudaemonist. Writes Biggar, “Therefore, the rationale of the normative authority of Jesus’s love command needs to refer to the flourishing of the one who is commanded.”⁵⁴ He explains:

We should love our neighbors because it is good for us to do so—because it profits us. The relevant profit, however, is not extrinsic but intrinsic, and its currency is not money but virtue. It is good that we should grow in the virtues of benevolence and justice; it belongs to our own good or flourishing that we should become benevolent and just. And that will remain true, even if it should cost us our very lives.⁵⁵

Human freedom, rightly conceived, is neither indifferent nor impotent. It perceives that even in the midst of great darkness, the virtues can be formed and humanity can develop the latent seeds within us to strive toward and achieve a measure of shared and individual good and genuine happiness. Moreover, we can do this well, even excellently. **P**

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(Endnotes)

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- 2 Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Augustine and the Limits of Politics*, 1st edition (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998), 39.
- 3 Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Sovereignty: God, State, and Self* (New York: Basic Books, 2008), 163.
- 4 Elshtain, *Augustine and the Limits of Politics*, 36.
- 5 According to Aristotle, the fundamental role of morality is the promotion of *eudaemonia*, that is “happiness” or “flourishing.”
- 6 Elshtain, *Who Are We?*, 44.
- 7 Jean Bethke Elshtain, “The Third Annual Grotius Lecture: Just War and Humanitarian Intervention,” *American University International Law Review* 17, no. 1 (2001): 22.
- 8 Jean Bethke Elshtain, “The Just War Tradition and Natural Law,” *Fordham International Law Journal* 28, no. 3 (2004): 743, n.8.
- 9 Elshtain, *Who Are We?*, 25.
- 10 Elshtain, *Sovereignty*, 162–164.
- 11 Elshtain, *Who Are We?*, 106.

12 Augustine, *The City of God*, trans. Henry Bettenson (London; New York: Penguin Books, 2003), XI.22.454. See also, Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I.48.3

13 Albert Camus, *The Rebel: An Essay on Man in Revolt* (New York: Vintage Books, 1956), 5.

14 Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus & Other Essays* (New York: Vintage Books, 1955), 8.

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16 Jean Bethke Elshtain, “What’s Morality Got to Do with It? Making the Right Distinctions,” *Social Philosophy and Policy* 21, no. 1 (Winter 2004): 1.

17 Leon Kass, “The Wisdom of Repugnance,” *The New Republic*, June 1997, 20.

18 Servais O. P. Pinckaers, *Morality: The Catholic View*, trans. Michael Sherwin (South Bend, Ind.: St. Augustines Press, 2003), 65, 70.

19 George Weigel, “A Better Concept of Freedom,” *First Things*, no. 121 (March 2002): 17.

20 Václav Havel, “Forgetting We Are Not God,” *First Things*, no. 51 (March 1995): 49, 50; quoted in: Elshtain, “The Just War Tradition and Natural Law,” 744.

21 Elshtain, “The Just War Tradition and Natural Law,” 744.

22 Ibid.

23 Weigel, “A Better Concept of Freedom,” 15.

24 Elshtain, *Sovereignty*, 26.

25 Jean Bethke Elshtain, “The New Morality,” *The Wilson Quarterly* 25, no. 3 (Summer 2001): 112.

26 Pinckaers, *Morality*, 68. My emphasis.

27 Ibid.

28 Ibid., 69.

29 Weigel, “A Better Concept of Freedom,” 16.

30 Ibid.

31 Elshtain, *Sovereignty*, 27.

32 Ibid., 36.

33 Pinckaers, *Morality*, 69.

34 Weigel, “A Better Concept of Freedom,” 15.

35 Pinckaers, *Morality*, 68.

36 Weigel, “A Better Concept of Freedom,” 15.

37 Pinckaers, *Morality*, 68.

38 Weigel, “A Better Concept of Freedom,” 16.

39 Ibid. My emphasis.

40 Pinckaers, *Morality*, 70.

41 Weigel, “A Better Concept of Freedom,” 15.

42 Ibid., 69.

43 Ibid., 69–70.

44 Ibid., 70.

45 Ibid., 75.

46 Weigel, “A Better Concept of Freedom,” 16.

47 Ibid., 19.

48 Ibid., 20.

49 Ibid., 18.

50 Ibid., 16, 17.

51 Weigel, “A Better Concept of Freedom,” 20.

52 I do not know whether Paul Ramsey ever caught a showing of John Ford’s *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*. An extended version of the Parable of the Good Samaritan, the film asks these same questions—and offers a view of freedom as excellence. More on this anon.

53 Nigel Biggar, “Natural Flourishing as the Normative Ground of Just War: A Christian View,” in *Just War: Authority, Tradition, and Practice*, ed. Anthony F. Lang Jr, Cian O’Driscoll, and John Williams (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2013), 51.

54 Ibid.

55 Ibid.