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Do We Own Ourselves?

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"You made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you." (Augustine, The Confessions, Bk. I)

"At the heart of liberty is the right to define one's own concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe, and of the mystery of human life." (Planned Parenthood v. Casey, 505 U.S. 833, 851 (1992))

At least when considered in the abstract, nearly everyone would join in Pope's assessment that pride, as the wanton overestimation of oneself or the inordinate desire of one's own excellence, is "the never-failing vice of fools." The Book of Proverbs warns us that this sort of pride prepares the way for our great falls, and Ecclesiasticus teaches that it is the beginning of all wrongs. Similarly, in his careful analysis of it, Thomas Aquinas confirms his predecessors' view that of the seven "deadly" or "capital" sins, pride in this disordered sense constitutes the most grievous, since it involves the rejection of and aversion to truth, and thereby, the election of death over life. To borrow a term from Eric Voegelin, pride disorients us by inviting us to create a "second reality" in which we end-up becoming the autonomous source of our own meaning and perfection. Consequently, pride as the *libido domanandi* serves as the definition of original sin, and the Myth of the Fall instructs us about the disastrous results of this all-to-human (not to mention, angelic) form of presumption. Condemnations of this sort of deranged pride hardly are confined to the Judeo-Christian tradition, however. The *kenosis*, or death to the self of the Pauline Gospels is anticipated by the self-denial that classical political philosophy insists is requisite to an individual's ascent to knowing and authentic liberty. Even Nietzsche, who had plenty of interesting things to say about pride, regularly and tartly accused his intellectual opponents and the "common herd" alike of being blinded and misled by it.

We probably do well to keep these admonitions about pride in mind when discussing whether we own ourselves, for this question hits us right where we live. Few topics more starkly require us to ask who we are, what our lives are for, how we support our claims, and what our

responses imply about the character of our relationships with and obligations to others. Because it involves themes of autonomy and self-sovereignty, discussion of this matter probes us in our most vulnerable places. Consequently, it is both a volatile as well as a comprehensive topic, since it engages the whole of our being. My own (rightly-ordered, of course) sense of pride compels me to mention that what follows represents no more than a few observations concerning this complicated but crucial subject.

At one level, nearly everyone at least vaguely realizes that we do not really "own" ourselves. As humans, we live only in communities and work only in traditions, which give us both our orientations and our identities. The very languages we speak shape and condition our self-understandings. Likewise, our assertions of self-sovereignty notwithstanding, and despite any degree of self-possession we may (however fitfully) have achieved, unbidden passions and fears inflict themselves on us, and we persevere in our struggles with them only through the help and example that different individuals provide. Sartre may have imagined hell as other people, but in actuality, it obtains in precisely the reverse state. As David Blankenhorn likes to observe, we are spoken into speaking, and loved into loving. No living creature is self-sufficient, least of all humans. Briefly put, even our experience of ourselves is mediated through the understandings and interpretations of others.

The above-quoted language from Casey, and the sort of Romantic-expressive individualism that informs it, engender substantially different notions about the character of our personhood. The pervasiveness of these notions attests to their success in appealing to our vanity, but the meanings they imply lead to some perhaps unexpected problems. For example, the Casey Court describes liberty with rather surpassing breadth. Its characterization of the self as the source of its own meaning undermines any sort of authority, including the Court's, since among other things it suggests that nothing can impinge on one's sovereignty absent one's agreement. Were they truly serious about this bit of *dicta* and everything that flows from it, the Court would be reduced to being something like an arbitration panel, whose rulings bind

only those who have contracted for them. Like Zeus, the Court occasionally would be called on to settle disputes between the gods.

This point about contract has a more general application. If we truly are sovereign, "auto-teleological" selves, then, as Plato observes in Book II of the *Republic*, the entire moral and social order is strictly conventional, reducible to contract. This implies that the character of our relationships are intelligible simply in terms of our lusts and desires. We do not participate in a being that transcends our individuality and that represents a good common to all, but exist instead in what modern corporate theorists refer to as a web of (self-negotiated) contracts. The impoverished understanding of personhood that this viewpoint assumes pushes us to regard human association in terms of a tremendously restricted set of possibilities. We typically conceive it as representing an artificial and instrumental alliance among discrete, monadic, and otherwise unassociated individuals, or we reify the community as the single, sole individual. Either way, we end up denying something crucial about ourselves. We abjure our character as intrinsically social beings, or we dissolve our distinct and unique individuality into the group's.

Both these approaches suggest that solidarity among humans is merely a means for survival in what O.W. Holmes, Jr. evocatively called "the free struggle for life", where power constitutes the key term and the sole intelligibility. In stark contrast to classical or Judeo-Christian understandings, which ground stable and thriving human association in some form of friendship and commitment that genuine self-transcendence enables, our prevailing language associates solidarity with strife, dominance, and control. At its deepest level, it implies that the character of all our relationships--both with others as well as that which we have with ourselves--essentially are conflictual. Indeed, much of our contemporary thinking about solidarity reflects the enormous influence of Hegel's dialectic of master and slave, the echoes of which reverberate through the work of the three "masters of suspicion": Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud.

Given the images our language suggests, and the terms and relations it establishes, it is hardly surprising that we encounter such difficulties in the way we understand our relationship to ourselves, to

others, and the character of reality generally. For example, the point the Court apparently is attempting to make in that portion of the opinion from which the above-quoted language comes is that the state cannot compel the holding of any particular beliefs. The slim resources the Justices have at hand, however, push them into suggesting far more than they intend, and their notion of the person ensures that this sort of overstatement will recur continually. This tendency hardly stops with judges. It reveals itself both in the enormous sort of ambivalence Americans demonstrate toward association of whatever character, and in the increasing instability experienced by social and mediating institutions of all descriptions.

A few illustrations may help to illuminate this point. G.K. Chesterton described the United States as "a nation with the soul of a church", and in some substantial and centrally significant respects, that characterization remains true. We remain, formally at least, among the most religious people on the face of the earth. Over nine in ten Americans claim that they believe in God, and an overwhelming proportion state that religion either is "very important" or "fairly important" in their lives. Nevertheless, as George Gallup and Jim Castelli report, "while Americans attach great importance to religion, they do not equate religion with church membership or attendance." They also found that a vast majority of Americans believe that one can be a good Christian or Jew without being affiliated with a religious congregation. A study of baby boomers who left mainline Protestantism similarly demonstrates the spreading view that one can be a good Christian without the mediation of or traditional forms of involvement in the church. As one of its author's points out, the study does not show "the rejection of religion or even of the major Christian creeds, but a pulling away from the institutional church." According to one recently published projection, if present trends continue, the eleven mainline Protestant denominations will represent zero percent of the American population by the year 2032.

The waning of commitment to religious institutions repeats itself across associations of nearly every description, from the family to civic and fraternal groups, to political organizations. Not surprisingly, these trends are demonstrating themselves in our economic relationships as well. Job tenure is declining and the use of

contingent workers in nearly all sectors of the economy is spreading. Likewise, survey data shows that younger workers, and particularly men, no longer expect employment to be a long-term or life-time arrangement. We should not be surprised if employment, like marriage, and at least for men, parenthood, along with life's other relationships takes on the character of a serial "event." Our habits of thought and act have prepared us to accept "installment" or periodic affiliations as the norm in every aspect of our lives.

This observation brings us to the crux of the problem. In part, modernity represents a reaction to deformations in expressions of authority, particularly religious authority. By transforming earlier understandings, the modern project attempts to liberate the individual by equating authority with power. This reduces authority to the notion of command backed by the power to sanction. The intelligibility of power is simply its force; consequently, authority to some degree always suggests oppression and caprice. Because power ultimately is inscrutable, it cannot justify itself on some transcendently rational basis. The question about power is not its "goodness", but its legitimacy, which rests upon individual consent. The voluntarist notions of the person which inform this viewpoint ultimately makes the individual the locus of authority, and conditions all obedience, as well as any ties or obligations to others, on assent. We may form alliances, or choose to identify ourselves with others based on similarities in tastes, experiences, or characteristics, but in a real sense, we never get beyond ourselves. Our participation in the life of others and in the world around us is limited to some sort of "re-creation" within ourselves of the sentiments that others feel, and of the scenes and images that all somehow exist in the "out there" beyond the corporeal limits of our own bodies. In the long-run, the defective notions of personhood that inform it have tended to undermine the noble goals that modernity set-out to achieve.

The line from Augustine quoted at the start of this essay suggests an entirely different view of personhood, of community, of human understanding, and of the character of reality generally. Briefly stated, this account portrays the person as incarnated consciousness, oriented by and moved to wonder, whose basic desire it is to know. As

human beings, our consciousness and our corporeality fully suffuse and condition one another. Hence, we are not disembodied spirits, perfect reasoners mysteriously trapped in clay vessels, nor are we simply "bodies", understandable only through our physical drives and lusts. Similarly, we are not the source of our own meaning and perfection. Our consciousness is given to us in our experience. Our understanding presupposes concrete images and events about which, potentially at least, we may inquire. Questions, however, occur to us; we do not will them. We can dispose ourselves by being attentive to make it more likely that we will have questions, but in a certain sense we "suffer" them in the way we "suffer" emotions. If the spontaneous tension that the question creates within us is to take us anywhere, we must cooperate with it. We are drawn to understand, but not forced to it.

As the line from Augustine suggests, our questioning has a direction: we want to understand what is true. To the extent that anything is true, it is radically "public", and constitutes something in which everyone has the potential to share. Because truth is independent of any particular person, sharing in it requires going beyond the world of private imaginings, suppositions, and feelings, to something completely different, to what is. Consequently, our existence is not a fact, not simply a corporeal "event" that is intrinsically limited by space and time. Instead, through appropriating ourselves as knowers, choosers, and lovers, we participate in a movement that, in its perfected moments, brings us to identity with being. Understanding is a movement that begins in time, but as T. S. Eliot's evocative imagery in the *Four Quartets* puts it, this movement brings us to "the point of intersection of the timeless with time"; hence, "to be conscious is not to be in time." Consequently, our acts of existence are spread across time, and these represent community in its fullest form. To the extent that human communities promote authentic self-appropriation they are normative; to the extent they obtrude or deform it, they are defective. In brief, we do not "own" ourselves, but through sheer gift, we share in God's image by being able to understand ourselves through our activities of knowing and loving.

The question of self-ownership may sound vague, but the way we approach it affects everything from our self-understandings to the

character of our social and political arrangements. It is, and should be, an unsettling question. And it is one that will continue to pursue us, whether we like it or not.