

**The Freedom of the  
Human Person:**  
Connection or Disconnection?  
Elizabeth Fox-Genovese

# THE FREEDOM OF THE HUMAN PERSON: CONNECTION OR DISCONNECTION?

---

ELIZABETH FOX-GENOVESE

The concept of the person and the concept of freedom each has a long and complex history with roots in Classical culture, Judaism, and early of Christianity. Both concepts underwent a radical transformation in conjunction with the emergence of modern individualism, which, although deeply indebted to (and arguably inconceivable without) both, has ultimately succeeded in appropriating both to its own purposes. Indeed, today the radical individualism of our postmodern culture has so fully colonized both as to erase their older and independent meanings. The broad contours of this trajectory merit attention, but since no brief account could capture the complexity, please grant me your indulgence for what must, perforce, be a crude simplification.

The main import of the early invocations of person and freedom lay in the attention they drew to the claims---and responsibilities---of a singular consciousness within the context of a discursive or imaginative universe that preeminently emphasized the claims and responsibilities of the collectivity. In such a system, specific persons figured as articulations of the whole, without which their existence would have had no meaning and---under most conditions---without which they could not have existed at all. These were systems in which

our modern conception of the individual as the center and origin of consciousness and sovereignty was literally unthinkable.<sup>1</sup> In this context, the related notions of personhood and freedom preeminently evoked the ability of the individual consciousness to resist or withstand the (illegitimate) dominance of the collectivity. For Christians specifically, they legitimated and sanctified resistance to persecution, sanctifying that resistance as fidelity to Christ. Even for Christians, however, personhood and freedom primarily signified the person's commitment to live in accordance with Christian precepts and to bear witness to that faith. The freedom of the Christian that they defended did not represent a political challenge to the authority of the secular order ("Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's..."), but a spiritual challenge to secular authorities that presumed to dictate religious conviction.

With the spread of Christianity throughout Europe, the assumption emerged that ruler and subjects would share one faith, initially that French and British kings like the Holy Roman Emperors, would share and support the Catholic faith of their subjects, and subsequently, following the Protestant Reformation, that the faith of subjects would follow that of their monarch. The inescapable intertwining of religion and politics fortified the idea that the freedom of the Christian might require resistance to illegitimate authority, and Protestant theology restated in more radical form idea that the conscience---and the consciousness---of the person constituted the primary locus of faith. But neither of these

---

<sup>1</sup> One version of such an argument for the unthinkable has been developed by Lucien Febvre in Le problème de l'incroyance aux XVIème siècle (Paris, 19 ). Some historians have argued that signs of modern individualism did emerge during the Middle Ages, but, in my judgment, these arguments present serious problems, and I will not engage them here. See, for example, Colin Morris, The Birth of Individualism in the Twelfth Century. For a convincing version of the argument that the notion of self remained subordinate or hostage to the claims of family or community, see Natalie Zemon Davis, "Ghosts, Kin, and Progeny: Some Features of Family Life in Early Modern France," Daedalus 106, no. 2 (Spring 1977): 87-114.

developments directly endorsed a modern secular view of the person as an independent political and social agent, nor even as the ultimate repository of sovereignty. At most, they may, retrospectively, be seen to have contributed to the gradual disembedding of the individual from the collectivity.

That disembedding portentously rode the crest of the political and economic developments generally known as the rise of capitalism and political liberalism. At an accelerating pace during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, prevailing attitudes toward the interdependence of persons within social, political, and spiritual webs gave way to early versions of the modern notion of the political, economic, and cognitive independence of the individual, whose consciousness was increasingly regarded as the locus of self-sovereignty. At the core of this conception of the individual lay the conviction that, by definition, the individual should acknowledge no man as master, for the absence of a master constituted the essence of his freedom, which itself constituted the essence of his status as an individual. Under these conditions, freedom came preeminently to mean freedom from restraint. In the early stages, the shackles from which the individual sought freedom were mainly the formal political and economic structures that impeded the free circulation of goods, the free disposition of private property, and the free expression of political opinion. These objective goals were, nonetheless, accompanied by an epistemological, metaphysical, and ideological revolution that tended to view much previous knowledge as nothing but an accumulation of prejudice and superstition. And, for the pioneers of this secular quest for enlightenment, Christianity assumed growing importance as the custodian of imposed ignorance and bigotry.

In retrospect, it is difficult to separate the revolt against absolute monarchs and corporatist restrictions upon property from the brewing revolt first against established Christian churches and eventually against God Himself. Not that a revolt against God was intended at the outset. But the terms in which the claims of the individual were framed virtually guaranteed its eventual appearance. In the initial phases, the prophets of freedom and individualism did not repudiate all interdependence among persons; they simply repudiated the acknowledged dependence of the individual upon any other person. Willy-nilly, the individual thus became the man upon whom others depended: wife, children, servants, and, in some cases, slaves.<sup>2</sup> By this logic, the freedom of the individual depended upon his denial of his own dependence upon others, including those whose dependence upon him underwrote his individualism.<sup>3</sup> After two or three centuries, the ultimate consequences of this reification of freedom as the antithesis of dependence has resulted in a disastrous radicalization of individualism and what I am tempted to call the public execution of personhood.

We must, therefore, distinguish between the notion of the individual and that of the person. And a proper understanding of the notion of freedom helps to clarify the distinction. At an accelerating rate since the late eighteenth century, freedom has gained ideological pride of place as the justification for the repudiation of all binding interdependencies, which is to say all authority external to the individual, including religious and moral authority. The progress of feminism, especially in its more radical and ideological

---

<sup>2</sup> The case of slaves is especially complicated since economically they were viewed as property, but ideologically they were frequently represented as dependents.

<sup>3</sup> Hegel provided the classic analysis of these relations in his "Dialogue of the Master and the Slave."

guises, provides a clear example of this process. In the hope of forestalling misunderstanding, permit me to insist: 1) that many women throughout history have indeed suffered injustice, oppression, and even abuse at the hands of men; 2) that the progress of modernity has only made those injustices more palpable and galling; and 3) that the improvement of women's situation indisputably became imperative. Here, however, I am not so much concerned with the substance of women's legitimate claims as with the ideological justification for meeting those claims. From modern feminism's origins in the eighteenth and nineteenth-centuries, it has relied heavily upon the rhetoric of freedom and rights that had so effectively advanced the cause of individualism.<sup>4</sup> In effect, the cutting edge of the women's movement has especially fought to secure the full status of individualism for women, even when it was most hostile to individualism as embodied in and practiced by men.<sup>5</sup>

Initially, feminist struggles for women's full status as individuals coexisted with more traditional views of women's distinct nature and social roles. Acquisition of the right to vote, for example, did not necessarily lead women to repudiate their roles and responsibilities as wife and mother. Nor did a married woman's right to hold property in her own name, divorce an abusive husband, gain custody of her children in the wake of divorce, establish credit in her own name, or earn equal pay for equal work. Each step towards

---

<sup>4</sup> The words "feminism" and "feminist" did not come into general use until the end of the nineteenth century, but here, for purposes of clarity, I am using the anachronistically.

<sup>5</sup> For a full development of these arguments, see my *Feminism Without Illusions: A Critique of Individualism* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1991).

women's independence did subtly transform women's relations with others, including the members of their immediate families, primarily by giving women the legal and economic independence to defend their conception of those relations or, at the extreme, to leave. But it was neither necessary nor inevitable that the growing equality of spouses result in the undermining of marriage as a binding covenant or as a foundational social institution. Reigning understandings of freedom and individualism nonetheless resulted in a growing proclivity to view marriage as a (temporary) contract between sovereign individuals rather than as a (sacred) covenant that imposed distinct responsibilities upon both parties while it transcended individual claims and recognized the obligation of both parties to society.<sup>6</sup>

The emphasis upon self-sovereignty further led the women's movement to insist upon abortion as a woman's fundamental right, namely a woman's right to be free from the unintended consequences of the individual pursuit of sexual pleasure. And the defense of abortion, perhaps more sharply than any other feminist position, exposes the impoverishment of individualism as a substitute for the person or as a conception of the self. For the defense of a woman's right to abortion carries the vision of the masterless individual to its logical nihilistic extreme: Not merely must the individual be free from the domination of the strong, she must also be free from the claims of the weak. Seen at this extreme, the individual may be recognized as the ideological abstraction it always has been---as a unit of sovereignty or of consciousness rather than a person enmeshed in variegated and shifting relations with others. The suggestion that the defense of abortion embodies the ultimate selfishness enrages pro-choice advocates, who insist that women should have a choice of

---

<sup>6</sup> For an illuminating discussion of the evolution of marriage with a slightly different emphasis than mine here, see John Witte, From Sacrament to Contract.

when to bear a child in order that each child may be loved. Unfortunately this logic, which many find comfortably seductive, makes mockery of the understanding that it is not our subjective choice or convenience that enjoins love but the existence of the other. The reduction of love, which should represent the essence of mutual recognition and engagement, to personal choice amounts to the virtual sanctification of narcissism, for it effectively erases the consciousness---and, in the case of abortion, the very being---of the other.

The sexual revolution of the last thirty plus years bears heavy responsibility for the declension of individualism from the (always elusive) ideal of the responsible, autonomous political and economic agent---the citizen in the full sense of that word---into the rampant personalism of our times. For unleashed sexuality, promoted and justified by important tendencies within postmodernism, led to the canonization of desire as the irreducible essence of the individual and to the reinterpretation of freedom as the license of desire. In postmodern thought, desire figures simultaneously as infinitely mobile and plastic and as the authentic determinant of individual action. The freedom of sexuality had been brewing in Western culture at least since Freud, but only during the waning decades of the twentieth century did it secure its claims to define the meaning of human life and, hence, the nature of true freedom. It does not require much imagination to grasp that this canonization of desire necessarily signaled the demise of conventional restraints upon desire's pursuit of its objects. In this regard, the "objects of desire" merit special attention, for they confirm the reductionism inherent in desire's pursuit of its pleasure: In an economy of desire, persons figure only as objects, possible means to the end of satisfaction, never as subjects.

The triumph of desire thus confirms the proliferation of the disturbing sociopathy, which, in other circumstances characterizes the children who shoot other children to secure one or another commodity or to exact "respect." Among more affluent people, its evidence may be found in such disquieting stances as the defense of pedophilia as another of freedom's "rights." The examples could be multiplied, but for present purposes these should suffice to introduce the related arguments: 1) that the sanctification of desire represents the ultimate disembedding of the individual from all social and moral restraints; 2) that the triumph of this narcissistic and sociopathic individualism exposes the underlying contradiction between the construct of the individual and the substance of the person; and, 3) that the celebration of unqualified freedom as an individual right must inevitably result in the denial of the existence of others. None of these arguments necessarily deny the positive value of individualism as an objective category, especially in the political realm. But they should compel us to exercise caution in mindlessly expecting the objective category to provide an adequate model for subjective experience or for the bonds of mutuality without which no society may hope to survive.

For at least the past century, countless theorists have, in various ways, pressed the claims of individual fulfillment. In many instances these apostles of fulfillment have been reacting against what they perceived as the outmoded and illegitimate prescriptions for individual self-sacrifice or repression in the service of one or another purported larger good.

Considered in this light, the campaign for individual fulfillment may be recognized as a campaign against the ideal of any larger good: In the measure that the individual---ultimately, individual desire---assumes primary importance, the restrictions upon the freedom of the individual lose validity. To be blunt, the unqualified celebration of the individual necessarily

triumphs at the expense of other people, of all forms of legitimate authority, and, ultimately, of God. This logic has fueled the claims of radical feminism, the gay rights lobby, and all other groups that protest any attempt to discipline the ambitions individual desire. Initially, these campaigns tended to focus upon the genuine injustices that social and moral conventions had inflicted upon the specific group. But they have rapidly discovered that the more effective strategy consists in the discrediting of social and moral convention *per se*. For once one establishes that no “received” knowledge or authority is binding or legitimate, the group is free to pursue whatever goal it chooses. Dostoevsky, in *The Brothers Karamazov*, posed the question, “If God is dead, is not everything lawful?” Today’s postmodern radicals, followed by the culture at large, have simply translated the insight into ideological policy: For everything to be lawful, God must be killed.

In epistemology, ontology, and metaphysics, these assumptions reemerge in the guise of standpoint and social construction theories that locate valid knowledge in the perceptions and experience of the individual and reduce all purported authority to an artifact of language or a product of unspecified social forces. Both strategies aim to discredit various forms of logocentrism and objective knowledge, including religion and the scientific secularism of the Enlightenment. The full claims of postmodernism exceed this core, but for present purposes the core will have to suffice. Here, we need only note that in eliding “traditional” religion and the Enlightenment critique of it under the rubric of authority, the postmodernists tend to neglect the inherent conflict between the two. Those who remain committed to the quest to understand the nature and legitimate claims of authority, whether divine or human, may nonetheless resist that confusion and recognize that the

postmodernist critique of the Enlightenment opens important new intellectual and theological paths that have fruitful implications for our understanding of the person's relation to freedom.

None has more forcefully seized upon these new openings than Karol Wojtyła, now Pope John Paul II. Throughout his philosophical writing and, since his ascension to the Papacy in his encyclicals and letters, he has explored the idea and substance of the person as necessarily a product of subjective perception and objective position. In particular, he has countered the inherent abstraction of the concept of the individual with an insistence upon the centrality of action and choice to the development of the person. In these elaborating these arguments, Wojtyła drew heavily upon existentialism, albeit in a theological rather than a secular spirit.<sup>7</sup> He thus consistently argues that “an existential metaphysics of actual being (*esse actu*) is required to situate the moral agent in the actual context in which one acts.”<sup>8</sup> The twin emphasis upon action and its context underscores Wojtyła's understanding of the embodiment of the person and his or her moral and social connection to others. In this respect, the person must be understood not as pure idea or intent---or by extension, desire---but as idea or intent (or desire) in action. The focus upon the person as manifest in action tellingly underscores the myriad ways in which each person remains hostage to the interdependency and mutual responsibility of all person's and, accordingly, highlights the limitations upon individual freedom that adhere to the very notion of person. But if the identification of the person with action constrains absolute freedom, the in-the-world

---

<sup>7</sup> For a thoughtful introduction to Karol Wojtyła/John Paul II's thought, see Kenneth L. Schmitz, *At the Center of the Human Drama: The Philosophical Anthropology of Karol Wojtyła/John Paul II* (Washington, DC, 1993).

<sup>8</sup> Schmitz, *At the Center of the Human Drama*, 126.

consequences of action release us from the autistic prison of megalomaniac fantasy in which self is confused with desire. Above all, it offers a new standard for the understanding of freedom, namely the inherent respect for human dignity that dictates that each person be viewed as an end not a means.

Wojtyla draws upon traditional Catholic concern with the significance of embodied being to elaborate a complex understanding of moral authority, and although during the main philosophical stage of his career he was not specifically arguing with the extreme postmodernist claims of our immediate times, he offers a series of principles with which to counter those claims. For one may plausibly argue that the most deadly implications of postmodernism lie in its implicit and explicit denial of reality, or rather of any reality extrinsic to the individual. Permit me to suggest that the extreme expressions of postmodernist demands for freedom or license depend upon a denial of the reality of other persons. Even when postmodernists insist upon the individual's "right" to the freedom to kill a baby in the womb, to terminate a "flawed" or painful life, or to subject a child to sexual exploitation, they are focusing upon the freedom of the subject (the individual) rather than upon the actions to which exercise of that freedom would lead. And, in denying the reality of the consequences of the subject's action, they are denying the reality not merely of the persons whom the actions would affect but the reality of the subject as person.

The moment one grasps that the essence of the human person conjoins action to intent--makes subjective consciousness palpable in embodied action--one must acknowledge that the reality of the person depends upon and cannot be understood or lived without the

limitations upon individual freedom imposed by the co-existence of other persons. Thus does a proper understanding of the human person's relation to freedom return us to the realm of moral authority or, to borrow from John Finnis, "moral absolutes."<sup>9</sup> In this perspective, one must conclude that the human person is constituted by moral imperatives---by the independent reality of others upon which the very existence of the person depends.

---

<sup>9</sup> John Finnis, Moral Absolutes: Tradition, Revision, and Truth (Washington, DC, 1991).