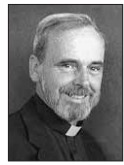


Ethics Notebook



Autonomous Individualism

‘With the will unconstrained, there comes a blowback.’

TIME MAGAZINE’S person of the year was a mirror: Behold YOU. Yourself. You can do it. You did it. Be all you can be. YouTube. You are the star. It is a proclamation of pure, absolute narcissism. The world ends at my face. Me. My space. My autonomy. I rule my world.

Perhaps the deepest moral challenge to the United States, not only for this year but for years to come, is the ethical form of radical narcissism. This are the condition when human judgment cannot see beyond its own exercise of freedom and exercises that freedom in isolation from “the other.” Two hidden dangers in that wonderful gift of autonomy (a terribly complex notion that involves self-ownership, or rule over one’s self) are that it can degenerate into a conviction that there is no rule higher than one’s self and that there is no other source than oneself to consult. Its full-blown form is the myth of the self-made man. Although sublimely “libertarian” and individualistic, this myth ignores the inescapable reality that no human is ever self-made, neither in the fabric of our being nor in our actions and judgments concerning the world. Unaware of our interdependence, ignorant of the countless ways that cultural dogmas influence our self-construction, we presume we are atomically alone in the choices we make. We imagine ourselves individual monads, our window on the world, a mirror.

For autonomous individualism, there is no objective truth or value before which one’s will, one’s liberty, must yield in obe-

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dience. I want it; therefore I will it; therefore I choose it and must have it. In this illusion of perfect liberty, our world is as we construct and control it. There is resistance to any data from other people, other worlds, other nations and other times.

And yet the cost is great. With every triumph of the will unconstrained by people, principle or God, there comes a blowback, the unleashing of forces that not only confound the will in its drive to control, but also assault the one who wills. We can see this happening in at least three arenas of our lives.

1. The disaster of a war of choice. The project grew out of a desire to control the world and impose our will despite the wishes of the international community and the ethical demands of a just war. A reckless intervention has not only tragically caused the loss of life and the waste of a mountain of treasure; it has also set a new standard for pre-emptive wars that will come to haunt us. Only recently has our resistance to data weakened. Not quite a year ago (March 13) Fred Barnes on Fox News with Bret Hume uttered a dictum unassailable before any data: “The chances of a civil war are nil. It’s simply not going to happen.” Now even Donald Rumsfeld has had to face facts. Oh, but if only our willing it could have made it otherwise. That’s the illusion waiting to seduce us all, not just in political matters, but in the most personal as well.

2. The perils of reproductive autonomy. Undoubtedly, there can be great benefit in applying rationality and informed choice to our sexual behavior. But recent years have seen such unfettered freedom in matters of reproduction that the “control” of birth is spinning out of control. Children of anonymous sperm-sellers wonder who was the male and whether

they have countless half-brothers and sisters walking around. Women in Britain complain that they receive a mere 500 Euros for their eggs, when they can travel to the United States and make \$10,000. A Johns Hopkins survey has revealed that 3 percent of clinics offering preimplantation genetic diagnosis have selected embryos for the presence of disability—the parents want only a child who has their disability. The BBC reports that Ukraine, “the self-styled stem cell capital of the world,” has a trade not only in the stem cells of aborted fetuses, but also from snatched and dispatched newborns. It may strike us now as appalling, but we will soon hear the same rhetoric about wasting the stem cells of embryos applied to all those wasted fetuses aborted at 8 or 18 weeks. Since there are absolutely no legal or commonly held ethical restraints on reproduction, there is no argument to offer against removing a 15-week fetus to see what it does as it dies, or to harvest its organs, or to exploit its reproductive or stem cells.

3. Greed that destroys itself. How ironic is it that the “democratic capitalism” some are breaking their backs and their consciences to celebrate is the very force eroding their beliefs, culture and children? The absence of legal or moral constraints on profit-making has already led to trillion-dollar scandals, imprisonment for some and misery for many others. Money, like sex and war, if reduced to a matter of personal or national self-interest, has its own unintended blowback. We may continue to pretend that lavishing millions on mediocre entertainers and athletes is inevitable and laudable. We may ignore the obscene inequities of golden parachutes for executives and \$30 million Christmas bonuses for stock traders. But we will not be able to ignore the damage to the earth, the displacement of populations and the erosion of our national infrastructure and institutions of education and health care, once they are thrust upon us.

Now, perhaps more than ever, it is time to reaffirm the tradition of the common good in our moral and political life. But this will not occur if the only trump cards we hold are called individualism and autonomy. *John F. Kavanaugh*

