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CONTOURS
OF A
WORLD VIEW

by

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CHAPTER 6
PERSONS IN CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVE

The first and overarching theme of a Christian world view is the God-creation distinction and relationship: we think about everything within that framework and live in every sphere of life in relation to the God who acts. The second major theme has to do with human persons, what we distinctively are and what meaning human existence has. The fact that it is second to the overall God-creation theme immediately distinguishes Christianity from naturalistic humanism, where human beings come first and everything else follows, and where both God and man are engulfed by impersonal processes and events. But we need to pursue the contrast further than that if we are to see what a Christian view of persons really offers us today. This chapter therefore looks at two key aspects of naturalistic humanism’s thinking on the subject, human freedom and human failure, examining some historical models it has adopted in order to see what, from a Christian perspective, is missing. The following chapter will then develop a Christian view more fully.

HUMAN FREEDOM

To the modern mind, freedom is an enigma, even a sadistic lie. We find ourselves in the grip of forces beyond our control, biological and historical forces that seemingly make us what we are, then sweep us along and engulf us in their impersonal path. Genetics, depth psychology, behavioral conditioning, and socioeconomic conditions can be neither avoided in life nor ignored in thought.

Like powerless observers bound to the screen of life, we watch the relentless rise and fall of political leaders, the irresistible surge of social forces, the exploding emotions of the repressed and under-privileged, and inevitable reactions from the left and from the right. In the face of all this, are we free? In what sense? To what degree? To what end? Or is freedom, along with all the hopes we tie to it, an illusion?

(1) The rationalist model. Naturalistic humanism, we have noted, takes a number of forms, some of which draw from the Greeks an emphasis on reason’s liberating power. In the Aristotelian model, humans are distinguished from other species as rational animals, and so we alone in nature can be free. I say “can be,” because the potential for rationality is not always actualized, and unless it is actualized freedom is not possible.

Aristotle in effect defines freedom as deliberation plus decision.1 by nature we seek good ends, but we deliberate about possible means to those ends, then choose whichever means are most practicable. That we choose the means we employ implies that actions can be voluntary and that we can voluntarily develop habits: virtue and vice are within our power. But this depends on our rationality, and three kinds of people are insufficiently rational to be free: young children, women, and some men who by their nature should be slaves. All these must be ruled by others rather than being treated as free.

Undoubtedly ignorance is a cruel master, and some degree of understanding is essential to freedom in any meaningful sense; otherwise we function by caprice or chance and are carried along by emotions or whim or past conditioning. While Aristotle’s identification of who is sufficiently rational is blatantly aristocratic and chauvinistic, two more basic assumptions quickly surface. In the first place, he thinks that people naturally seek the good. They may of course be mistaken as to what ends in fact are best, but this is a matter of ignorance, which reason might correct. If the good is always what they really desire, however, no place is left for moral perversity and radical evil, as Kant called it, which ignores the right in its desire for other ends. People in fact often ignore moral questions because of their self-interest, and even become enslaved to their passions and habituated away from what they recognize to be

1. Nicomachean Ethics, Ill. 1-5.
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good. Aristotle might say this is contrary to nature, a moral weakness or an abnormal condition, but freedom from moral perversity does not come just by rational deliberation over means. Deliberation can be a mask, self-deceptive, and decisions can be self-serving, when emotions are tied to bad ends, not good.

In the second place, then, Aristotle further assumes that reason can overrule irrational desires and emotions. He does not unmask the self-deceptions of reason, to which a Christian understanding of human depravity alerts us, and which Hegel later described. Nor is he sufficiently realistic about the moral struggle we all experience between what we know and what we want regardless. He recognizes a difference between moral weakness and moral strength, and the need to cultivate the latter; but he assigns that task to reason, thinking it can overrule emotional distractions. The conflict is simply one of reason versus emotion: we are rationally ruled animals, so reason can always win. It is this conception of persons, and the too easy optimism that goes with it, that Christian theology and human experience alike question; as Augustine pointed out, we are ruled more strongly by what we most love than by what we know.

The rule of reason in relation to human freedom was upheld by the Stoics, it reappeared in Enlightenment political and ethical theories, and today it feeds the hopes of scientific humanism for the human race and its future. But a further problem arises with a contemporary naturalistic metaphysics. Aristotle believed that reason can rule because it is the distinctive function of the human soul, which is itself qualitatively different from body and bodily functions. The Stoics believed that reason rules because it rules the entire cosmos. Enlightenment thinkers believed it on a similar basis: the laws of nature and nature's God reflect God's reason and are reflected in our own reason, which is the distinctive function of the human soul, not just of the body. But naturalism allows us no such luxury as a soul. Rather, we are entirely a part and product of the physical world, with no immaterial part to us and no ingredient essentially different from what other physical things have. Yet if reason is not an independently powerful force, able itself to initiate action and control behavior, but is instead a function of brain processes that we cannot fully control, then can reason ever be a sufficient cause of freedom?

The rationalistic model for understanding freedom, despite its long and influential role in Western thought, does not seem a suffi-

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ficient explanation. True, in reasoning we do objectify situations, somewhat freeing ourselves from irrational and unconscious involvements. True, reasoning can persuade and guide. It appears necessary to human freedom, but is it sufficient? And what influences rule reason? It can hardly be wholly independent and autonomous, in the light of what is known about the sociology of knowledge, the cultural conditioning of thought, and other historical and personal influences on our thinking. And the causal mechanisms of behavioral science pose additional problems, both for the rule of reason in particular and for freedom in general.

(2) The mechanistic model. Casual explanations of human behavior, including verbal and cognitive behaviors, have become the stock-in-trade of behavioral science. Strictly speaking, it is recognized that we only describe regularly observable sequences of events rather than actual causal connections between successive events. But regularity still suggests causal necessity, and some naturalists conclude that human behaviors are strictly determined in a mechanical fashion rather than being freely adopted and freely developed. By implication at least, this is the position of B. F. Skinner and the radical behaviorists.

Mechanistic determinism is not new. In antiquity, materialists, like Democritus, held that view, as did the seventeenth-century British thinker Thomas Hobbes and the Frenchman d'Holbach with his so-called "hard determinism." While contemporary behaviorism is much more subtle and complex than such antecedents and appeals to far more impressive empirical evidence, the conceptual model involved is essentially the same: cause-effect mechanisms rule human thought, values, and behavior.

Freedom is thus thrown into question. Some in effect deny it any actuality at all; note Skinner's title, Beyond Freedom and Dignity. Those who do find a place may regard freedom as indeterminism, and a free decision or action as one wholly uncaused. Appeals have been made, for example, to the Heisenberg principle of indeterminacy, suggesting that the problem in predicting both the direction and the velocity of submolecular particles is due to actual indeterminacy rather than to causal interferences we cannot altogether control. Again, modern physics is sometimes said to allow for human freedom during quantum leaps. These considerations may indeed indicate that the case for mechanistic determinism at the micro-level is incomplete, but it is plainly insufficient as an account
of freedom. Human choices and actions operate at the macro-level, affecting bodies and ordinary events where physical indeterminacy and quantum leaps are not in evidence. But more than that, freedom is not simply indeterminism, a lack of any causal connectedness, and unconscious cause-effect mechanisms are not the only influences at work. It is a kind of self-determination, in which personal factors of a nonmechanical sort are at work, too: the influence of other persons we respect and love, interpersonal dynamics, ideals that attract, ends we adopt, and the like. Within any materialistic view, the term “cause” has to stretch beyond the mechanical to embrace all of these.

One alternative, I suggest, is to think of freedom on a more personalistic and teleological model in which the purposes and values we deliberately embrace play the crucial part. Teleology means that a process or activity is end-oriented rather than just antecedent-oriented, so that intentions and ideals also shape what we do. Human action starts with the freedom to consider pursuing some project, and then the nature of that project defines what is actually possible in the light of the limitations that various causal mechanisms impose. Thus causes operate too, creating both the situations in which freedom acts and the possibility and limits of action. Physical circumstance, genetic inheritance, and so forth are causally given; they define the limits of what is possible, and perhaps incline us more in one direction than another. But at times the values we see in another direction become attractive and alluring, and that direction takes precedence over what would eventuate if we did nothing at all. We then break away from the prior process and rise above the “otherwise” course of events in pursuit of our ends. In retrospect, we say that we could have done otherwise than we did, that we had the power of contrary choice. What decides things here is often the values we have interiorized for ourselves and have made our own in the projects we pursue. In some cases it takes a major effort of will to counter habits and, as C. A. Campbell points out, to resist the temptations of our own nature. This is not a teleology, then, that is altogether immanent in nature; it is a teleology that is free at times to transcend immanent processes.

This is often true of the way we influence one another. In an I-Thou relationship that makes the other person an end-in-herself, the value for her own sake and considered in all one does, the other person is not manipulated or forced in mechanical fashion. Rather, she is liberated from both outer constraints and inner restraints, to think and act freely for herself. The relationship offers values she freely embraces. On this model, freedom is the capacity to transcend what causal mechanisms alone would produce, the capacity to act for the sake of ends with inner self-determination. This “libertarian” alternative is neither complete indeterminism, nor is it a matter of causal necessity.

The mechanist’s problem is that he sees the person as a natural object in relation to nature alone, rather than as a person in relation to persons. Such a monistic outlook reduces persons to something less than persons, and in the process either makes freedom hardly possible at all, or else leaves it an undefined something that operates in the gaps between causes.

(3) The romanticist model. For some, this is an appealing alternative to those lifeless mechanisms and to the rationalist model. Freedom is not a gap in the deterministic chain, a gap that allows whatever may be to be, nor is it a product of reason alone. Rather, freedom is native to the human spirit, to the vitality of an inner creative force that runs throughout all nature. While some earlier Romantics, Coleridge for example, were philosophical idealists who traced this vitality to an all-encompassing Spirit, others were naturalists who traced both natural and human creativity to the vitality of nature itself. Biological vitalism, the view that life is a force distinct from inert matter or mechanical causes, was its typical basis, and human freedom is its most highly developed manifestation. Freedom, then, is a biologically based spontaneity that surprises us with novel ideas and actions.

Again, however, I question whether spontaneous novelty or a creative drive are all that human freedom is, different only in degree from unpredictable events in nature, whether novel species or novel animal behaviors. Biological vitalism, moreover, was a hypothesis introduced to explain life functions before the rise of modern genetics and biochemistry. Today’s naturalist is more likely to reject vitalism and to ascribe life’s novelties to complex chemical pro-

cesses rather than to a distinct life force. For many modern scientists, life is not a separate force at all, but a function of certain organic compounds. Human freedom, then, if a product of biological energies, is not qualitatively different from other physical effects except in the complexity of its causes.

Freedom, for the Romanticists, amounts to the exercise of creative energy. But as a biological phenomenon, it can no more be deliberately directed and ordered than can other psychological drives. It is spontaneous and impulsive, often in defiance of reason and form, seeking novelty for novelty's sake compulsively in what it does. Freud traced it to sexual energies, Nietzsche glorified it as a will to power that cannot be restrained. Reinhold Niebuhr understandably chides Romanticism for giving rein to the demonic; when vitality usurps all form and rules untamed, the result can be even worse than when form usurps vitality, as in the rationalist's case. Freedom, he claims, requires both form and vitality in balance; responsible freedom gives order and direction to human choice and the pursuit of one's ends. But responsibility is hard to define if freedom reduces to biological drives.

(4) The dialectical model. Both existential humanists and Marxist humanists develop a dialectical picture of freedom. It goes back to Hegel, for whom every process in both nature and thought moves through conflicting opposites into an emergent synthesis. Hegel himself saw freedom emerging in this way, in the evolution of man and the development of family and state.

Jean-Paul Sartre also sees all of life and its every relationship in dialectical terms, what is already in itself (‘en-soit’), confrontrong the one who struggles to become what he will (le pour-soit). Freedom consists in negating the world as it is, in mastering that “other,” in shaping even my passions by my deeds, and becoming authentically my own. The Marxist, meantime, sees history evolving through the clash of opposing socioeconomic forces to liberate the working class in an eventually classless society. Conflict and confrontation are the path to freedom; confrontation accordingly became the tactic of the radicals of the 1960s, as it is in Marxist geopolitics still.

Again, problems arise. Sartre is ultimately pessimistic because freedom is absolute, transcending every kind of structure and limita-


world of which we are a part. A more personalistic understanding is called for, one that conceives of persons more positively rather than reducing us to something else.

This was the very conclusion we reached earlier in thinking about models for creation: a distinctively personalistic model is needed. Regarding freedom, it has been attempted since Kant by existential thinkers, like Soren Kierkegaard, and by idealists, like Peter Bertocci.\(^5\) In Christian perspective the key is that persons are made not in the image of nature but in the image of a personal God; both the person and his freedom must be seen first in relation to God, and only secondarily in relation to nature. That will be the starting point for a more Christian view proposed in the next chapter.

Biblically, human freedom is neither absolute nor illusionary, but is dependent on God and on the particular form the relationship to God takes. Freedom starts there, and so do its limitations and failures.

HUMAN FAILURE

The same conceptual models have shaped naturalistic accounts of human failure as shaped human freedom.

(1) The rationalistic model talks of moral weakness. Aristotle, for instance, locates it in the tendency of emotion to distract reason from its task, a tendency that moral education can overcome by shaping rational habits. Education addresses not only the cognitive but also the affective life, however, and the arts serve to purge the emotions of fear and pity, which would otherwise upset reason's rule. Moral strength can only be acquired by ensuring the rule of reason in its struggle with the emotions.

This analysis of the human problem is characteristic of the rationalist tradition in humanism. Stoicism followed the same line in describing the tension between reason and passion that humans experience. Nature's order is what it is regardless of how we feel; it is rationally ordered without reference to our desires. Rather than fighting what is and yearning for what is not, then, or writhing with pain or fear, it is only rational to accept the way things are and to discipline oneself accordingly. Evil arises when passion rules, but virtue with the rule of reason.

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The response is often pragmatic, not theoretical; the rule of reason depends on reason's ability to anticipate the consequences of what we do, and so to guide our actions. This may well be true in cases where we know enough, and where we are willing to act on what we know, but in many areas we know far less than we need: in recombinant DNA, for example, or in economic forecasting and control, or merely in predicting individual human behavior. In some cases, moreover, we simply are not willing to act on what we know, and the weight of knowledge does not make us change our values: in environmental matters, in the needless waste of irreplaceable resources, and in the amassing of nuclear weaponry. What we know may well conflict with what we want, but the human perversity involved runs deeper than a temporary weakness of will. Kant spoke of radical evil; others call it demonic; G. K. Chesterton asserted that original sin is the one Christian doctrine that can really be proved. The rationalistic view of human failure appears too superficial and simple in this regard. Yet it is also too pessimistic, for by tracing evil to the very nature of reality it has pulled out the rug of hope from under its own feet.

(2) The mechanistic model ascribes human failure to psychological and environmental influences so that the individual cannot be held responsible for how he acts. Where the rationalist tells us to educate the wrongdoer, the mechanist tells us to recondition him. Characteristic of this approach are recent attempts to replace punishment with therapy. B. F. Skinner, for example, rejects any notion of guilt or responsibility. Drawing on studies of animal behavior, he claims that punishment only represses behaviors that will later reappear, for it removes what offenders desire and adds things they have aversion to. But those desires and aversions will remain. Instead, we can reinforce the behaviors we want by providing the stimuli people desire and removing those they react against. In Britain, Baroness Wootton abandons the legal notion of mens rea, which means an offender was in his right mind, a voluntary agent, responsible and guilty. The language of responsibility, reproof, and shame has no value. Wootton prefers to treat criminals like patients, to practice psycholoty like medicine, and to organize a penal insti-

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tution like a hospital. Criminality is a mental or social disease requiring treatment, not blame.

Thomas Szasz, on the other hand, himself a naturalist and a humanist, attacks this "myth of mental illness" as an all-inclusive rubric that could justify incarcerating individualists and social critics, and subjecting them to behavior modification techniques aimed at eliminating nonconformity. When the line between criminality and other kinds of deviance is removed and moral responsibility is denied, then what happens to freedom and what kind of brave new world results? What would have happened to Vietnam protestors in a society of hawks, to a Martin Luther King in a segregationist world, to an Amos or John the Baptist, or even to Jesus? The denial of individual responsibility for moral failure opens the door to monstrous repression, to preventing reform, and to silencing the prophets.

Undoubtedly a penal system should be interested in reforming offenders or at least deterring repeats; but it should more fundamentally be a way of holding offenders personally responsible for their actions. Without this, attempts at reform can only address social conditions and patterns of behavior and perhaps work at genetic modification. The utility of "therapy" will be sadly limited if persons remain free to act out of what they are and what they choose for themselves.

C. S Lewis rightly condemns the "humanitarian theory" about therapy as dehumanizing, because it treats an offender as less than a person responsible for his deeds. Others have spoken of "the right to be punished," for that right is a corollary of the right to be treated as a person rather than used as means to others' ends. Forced therapy for social rehabilitation violates individual rights, destroys personal freedom, and tells the offender he is not really to blame. It pours everyone into the same mold of existing mores in an already twisted society. The naturalistic humanist again fails to do justice to being human, this time by first making man in the image of

nature and then remaking him into the twisted image of society itself.

(3) The romanticist model, reacting against the mechanistic extreme, focuses on the free and creative spirit as a manifestation of nature’s vitality. Since nature bursts out with novelty in promiscuous ways, human vitality cannot be restrained by appeals to reason or the imposition of society’s laws and standards. Failure is due to aborted vitality, to stagnation, to unimaginative and uncreative ways, whereas the free spirit “lets it all hang out.” Creativity for creativity’s sake tends to be applauded, a kind of aestheticism in which the unconventional and novel is valued for itself.

Underlying this view, we have seen, is the kind of evolutionary theory in which novelty is essential and creativity is the highest value. The old order ever gives place to the new. Failure, then, is remaining static, insisting on the structures and values of the past. But change and creativity can be both beneficial and demonic. The problem is that no unchanging moral norms for either success or failure are possible when creativity takes priority over standards, nor are fixed values to guide life’s path and human progress. Progress of some kind becomes inevitable, yet progress that reduces simply to change loses meaning. Change and creativity for their own sake too readily bring chaos. The logic of this was evident in the life of the poet Oscar Wilde, and in the thought of the philosopher Nietzsche with his will to power asserted over all else. It allows the demonic possibilities of a Hitler and leads to a hell on earth, a Nazi holocaust with creative power bereft. The benign pragmatist, however, will discipline creativity with reason and order, for he finds that failure in practice arises from more than inertia and success from more than creativity.

Creativity, of course, is a necessary condition for many kinds of things, but it is not sufficient. Alone, it can lead to good or evil, to failure or success. Creativity must be exercised responsibly, but the Romanticist whose highest value is to be creative and free has no higher values to which to hold his freedom responsible. The naturalist in particular is in this quandary: if nature is all there is and man is part of nature, if creative freedom is nature’s highest end, then no higher obligation exists than to be creative and free, and all else should serve that end. Such is the nature of a highest end, and Nietzsche was consistent about it. For the Christian theist, however, since nature is not all there is, higher values have basis and our creativity is accordingly held responsible, first to God, and then to persons he made and values.

(4) The dialectical model of Marxist and existentialist humanism interprets human failure differently again. For the Marxist, failure is reactionary and counterrevolutionary behavior; it is being on the wrong side in the dialectic process. As such, it is a crime against the people rather than against any lasting moral law, for the morals of a society result from its place in the class struggle that has shaped it. No reference is possible to other than the material conditions of life, for man is still made in the image of nature.

In the dialectic of existentialism, too, failure is being on the wrong side of the dialectic in progress. For Sartre, the dialectic is between myself and the world that I must negate and make my own. But to fail to act freely, to lapse back and simply accept what life throws my way, is to fail prey to bad faith (mauvais foi). It is inauthenticity, for I fail to be the free self I might be. Yet in the final analysis, inauthenticity and inauthenticity make no real difference, for the world will negate me in the end and I will be part of the other, my freedom extinguished in the relentless dialectic that sweeps us all away. Other people cannot help, for they are what they are themselves (l’ennui), part of the world that negates. Being in the image of nature thus deprives human failure of lasting significance, because success and failure both come to the same end.

Not all humanistic existentialists seem that pessimistic. But even Albert Camus gives little further meaning to human failure and hope. In The Plague, for instance, people find themselves by fighting the pestilence ravaging Oran. The criminal, the wastrel, the physician—this is their finest hour. But once that dialectical opposition ends they go to pieces, and suicide, derejection and empty routine rule instead. Because no better synthesis results, their authenticity fails.

The reason for ultimate failure in both Sartre and Camus, of course, is that the dialectic of thesis and antithesis leads nowhere, not to a synthesis, not to a good end. Realistically they see that while an idealist like Hegel could move the process to a triumphant end through the freedom of his Absolute Spirit, the naturalist cannot. God is dead and anything is now possible. There is no guarantee that the dialectic of opposites can fulfill our dreams. Conflict exists, without further promise: life’s little successes are transitory,
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as are its failures. For when we exist only in relation to nature, then nature triumphs finally and extinguishes our flickering hopes.

. . . All our yesterdays have lighted fools
The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
And then is heard no more. It is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.11

Failure is both cosmic and inevitable. There is no highest end, no good that will reign. For Camus and Sartre, that is the truth of the matter...

The problem common to these forms of humanism should now be plain. Persons seen as naturalists see them, in relation to nature alone, often find little if any meaning in either freedom or failure. To be truly responsible requires that we be more than a part and product of nature. In the next chapter we shall see the difference it makes when persons are considered in relation to God. A personalistic model for freedom develops, and God holds us responsible for our dealings with others, not least with him, and with nature as well.