

What God Has Joined Together Let No Man Separate:
Truth and Freedom in Contemporary Moral Discourse

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Alasdair McIntyre was among the first to argue that in contemporary ethical discourse, the “language and the appearances of morality persist even though the integral substance of morality has to a large degree been fragmented and then in part destroyed.”¹ Twelve years later, Pope John Paul II, in his encyclical *Veritatis splendor*, recognized that this degradation had occurred not only in the field of moral philosophy but also in the realm of moral theology. Terms which, for centuries, had carried specific meanings and connotations in theological thought had taken on new meanings which were quite often antithetical to their traditional definitions. The term which serves as a paradigm for this subtle shift of meaning is ‘freedom,’ whose presence has remained constant in moral theology but whose meaning has been altered radically. The difference between the traditional understanding of freedom and its more modern meaning hinges on the relationship of freedom to truth.

The French Dominican moralist Servais Pinckaers distinguishes between these two competing notions of freedom, calling them “freedom for excellence” and “freedom of indifference.”² Freedom for excellence, Pinckaers argues, harkens to the classical conception of freedom, which traces its roots back to St. Thomas Aquinas and Peter Lombard, who understand freedom as a power proceeding from both the intellect and the will. Man’s capacity for free choice is a power that derives from his will, which is naturally attracted to the good, but it is man’s reason which presents objects to the will as good. Thus, man’s choices are executed by the will only after receiving the counsel of reason. Moreover, such choices are not isolated incidents but rather are made in view of the goal of pursuing man’s ultimate good. Thus, freedom for excellence works in tandem with man’s natural inclinations toward truth and goodness. Freedom of indifference, on the other hand, finds its origins in the voluntarism of William of Ockham and

¹ Alasdair McIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 5.

² See Servais Pinckaers, *The Sources of Christian Ethics* (Washington, DC: CUA Press, 1995), 327-378.

is understood as an assertion of the will that is unfettered by the dictates of reason or the inclinations of human nature, according to Pinackers.³ Consequently, proponents of freedom of indifference maintain that the most perfect freedom consists in the power to choose arbitrarily between two contraries without any influence from without or from within.⁴

With the dawn of the Enlightenment, this notion of freedom of indifference overwhelmed the notion of freedom for excellence. The political thought of Jean-Jacques Rousseau enshrined this understanding of freedom as radical autonomy of the will.⁵ Such autonomy, he maintains, is undermined by man's association in society with laws and norms governing behavior.⁶ This line of thought has given birth to the uniquely modern notion that because man must adhere to specific moral norms, his freedom is limited, for he cannot choose disinterestedly between good and evil. This is the conception of freedom which has persisted into our own age as individuals seek to affirm an unqualified freedom which would be inhibited by forcing them to submit their will to a certain external code of rational precepts, namely the natural moral law. The modern understanding of freedom of indifference considers truth, whether the rational dictates of law or the natural inclinations of human nature, to be nothing more than an obstacle to freedom.

It was within this contemporary context that Pope John Paul II issued *Veritatis splendor* with the intention of redressing the modern misconceptions about the nature of freedom and its relationship to truth. According to the classical notion of freedom for excellence, the union of intellect and will is absolutely essential for the existence of authentic freedom, and their divorce

³ See Ibid., 244-245.

⁴ See Ibid., 241-245.

⁵ See Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *On the Social Contract*, trans. G.D.H. Cole, (Mineola, NY: Courier Dover Publications, 2003), 37: "Every free action is produced by the concurrence of two causes; one moral, i.e., the will which determines the act; the other physical, i.e., the power which executes it." Rousseau, like many other Enlightenment thinkers, does not even consider the intellect to be a power relevant to the exercise of freedom.

⁶ See Ibid., 2: "...all, being born free and equal, alienate their liberty only for their own advantage." This theme runs throughout the understanding of freedom enumerated in John Locke's political philosophy as well in stark contrast to the understanding of freedom in the political thought of Aristotle and St. Thomas Aquinas.

in freedom of indifference struck John Paul II as deeply problematic. He notes, with some measure of distress, that there have arisen “currents of thought in ethics which center upon an alleged conflict between freedom and law. These doctrines would grant to individuals or social groups the right to determine what is good or evil. Human freedom would thus be able to ‘create values’ and would enjoy a primacy over truth.”⁷ The pontiff observes that the opposition between truth and freedom is symptomatic of the “distressing perplexity of a man who often no longer knows who he is, whence he comes and where he is going.”⁸

Man is a creature made for a specific purpose and endowed with particular inclinations and powers. Among these gifts are his natural desire for God, his rational participation in divine providence through the natural law, and his power to govern himself in freedom. Yet, these endowments are not absolute but are entrusted to man as resources to a steward. Of the gift of freedom, in particular, John Paul II writes:

Human freedom belongs to us as creatures; it is a freedom which is given as a gift, one to be received like a seed and to be cultivated responsibly. It is an essential part of that creaturely image which is the basis of the dignity of the person. Within that freedom there is an echo of the primordial vocation whereby the Creator calls man to the true Good, and even more, through Christ's Revelation, to become his friend and to share his own divine life...Freedom then is rooted in the truth about man.⁹

Thus, the creaturely endowments which God has bequeathed to the human race ought to be harnessed in service of man’s highest good, which his intellect naturally apprehends as good and his will naturally desires. Man’s ability to strive toward this ultimate end – an end for which he naturally yearns – is the essence of freedom. John Paul II proceeds to argue that, in man’s quest for self-fulfillment, the moral law is the aid which clarifies the means by which man can best

⁷ John Paul II, *Veritatis splendor*, 35.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 84.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 86.

attain his final goal, rather than an imposition which fetters him by inhibiting his freedom and forestalling his happiness.¹⁰

While authentic human freedom is deeply dependent upon the truth about man's nature, his origin, and his destiny, it may also be asked whether truth relies upon freedom in a similar fashion. The Second Vatican Council's declaration on religious liberty, *Dignitatis humanae*, acknowledges man's inherent desire for truth and states that the truth "is to be sought after in a manner proper to the dignity of the human person and his social nature. The inquiry is to be free."¹¹ External coercion does not befit the dignity of the human person who has been endowed with reason and is capable of discerning truth from falsehood. In fact, St. Thomas Aquinas observes that those who accept the truth only after coercion are likely to simply lapse back into unbelief because no real intellectual assent has been given.¹² The truth can only be accepted in freedom, for it "cannot impose itself except by virtue of its own truth."¹³ The truth is not a coercive force which foists itself upon man against his will, but rather, its natural attractiveness leads man to desire the truth and to accept it freely "as it makes its entrance into the mind at once quietly and with power."¹⁴ Thus, the relationship between truth and freedom is twofold; man must accept the truth freely, and he must know the truth to act freely. This formulation does imply contradiction, but rather, it affirms the deep and symbiotic relationship between truth and freedom for man.

The crisis of freedom which John Paul II enumerates in *Veritatis splendor* is an internal crisis for every man; it is a competition between his intellect and his will, between knowledge and desire. The words of Cardinal Newman ring true regarding the harmony of the intellect and

¹⁰ See *Ibid.*, 42-45.

¹¹ Second Vatican Council, *Dignitatis humanae*, 3.

¹² See St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, IIIa, q.68, a.10.

¹³ Second Vatican Council, *Dignitatis humanae*, 1.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

the will: “there *is* a separation, though I deny its necessity.”¹⁵ For the Christian tradition, such a separation is not natural. Man was created with his passions and will fully aligned with his reason. The disintegration of these faculties is the result of his fallen state, and it is the work of grace to repair and heal what man has rent apart within himself. Many modern moralists, however, embrace this divorce and understand freedom as autonomy or license in the pursuit of some self-determined end, and they maintain the need to protect the will from the influence of reason. For the classical ethical tradition, on the other hand, the integration of these two powers – man’s knowing the good and his desiring it – is the mark of the virtuous man, and it asserts that, by God’s grace, such a man will be able to attain his ultimate end.¹⁶ Such a conception of the moral life is firmly grounded in man’s nature, his origin, and his destiny. A return to the study of moral theology as an inquiry into ends and means is needed in order to fully explore the relationship between reason and will, between law and conscience, and, ultimately, between truth and freedom.

¹⁵ John Henry Newman, “Intellect, the Instrument of Religious Training,” in *Sermons Preached on Various Occasions*, (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame Press, 2008), 8 [emphasis original].

¹⁶ See St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I-IIae, q.59, a.2 for a discussion of the proper integration of reason and emotion in the virtuous man.