

Transcendence and Alienation

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“The capacity for transcendence brings with it a liability to alienation.”¹ That is, to try to see myself entirely from the outside, with the eye of the universe or the eye of God, so distances me from the person who lives *my* life that I may find it difficult to identify with that objectified self. Put theologically, acknowledging myself to be the person God sees may seem to require shedding many of the connections and beliefs that appear to characterize and identify me. Thomas Nagel calls this “the problem of the meaning of life,” and, though I agree, I aim to begin a little lower to the ground, while making my way toward a theological angle of vision.²

Detached and Connected

In *The Company of Critics* Michael Walzer examines the practice of a number of twentieth-century social critics in order to explore a problem that, for all its different ramifications in different lives, can be stated simply: If criticism of one’s society necessarily requires some detachment from it, how can the critic simultaneously remain connected to the society he loves even as he criticizes it? To criticize he must stand apart. But for those whom he addresses to have reason to listen he must remain united

with them. And so, the connected critic must be both apart and united--and must be both simultaneously.

The issue is depicted most sensitively, I think, in a chapter that stands near the center of Walzer's book: "Albert Camus's Algerian War." Camus was a man of the political left, but he was also a *pied noir* , a member of the community of French citizens who lived in (and dominated the life of) French Algeria before the country achieved its independence from France in 1962. The path to that independence led through bloody and (on both sides) cruel fighting marked by terrorism, torture, and guerilla warfare. Looking from the standpoint of a critic "who breaks loose from his particular loyalties and views his own society from the outside," looking, that is, from the universal perspective of one who transcends his own historical location, Camus could not justify the continued dominance of the *pieds noirs* in Algeria.³

But he not only stood apart from the *pieds noirs* , his own community; he also stood united with them. Hence, when receiving the Nobel Prize in 1957, he is reported to have said to a group of students in Stockholm: "I believe in justice, but I will defend my mother before justice."⁴ Critical distance without affective connection is simply cruel; moreover, it seems to imagine that we can be purely solitary individuals. Walzer argues that criticism can be effective--and, I would add, appropriate to the sort of creatures we are--only if it is "intimate." "Intimate criticism is a common feature of our private lives; it has its own (implicit) rules. We don't criticize our children, for example, in front of other people, but only when we are alone with them. The social critic has the same impulse, especially when his own people are confronted by hostile forces."⁵

When in 1954 the FLN (the National Liberation Front) began to revolt, demanding independence from France, Camus resisted that demand, “for he understood that independence under FLN leadership meant the destruction of the *pied noir* community,” a destruction in which he was unwilling to acquiesce even in the name of a vision of transcendent justice.⁶ Committed as he was to justice for all Algerians, he would not allow that commitment to obliterate the community to which he belonged, as if it were sufficient for a human being to live only apart and not also united--as if justice without friendship could suffice for human life.

Detachment without connection is inhuman, but we should not suppose that they can always be reconciled. “After 1958, Camus wrote no more about Algeria.”⁷ He could find no way to be both connected and a critic; hence, though he was criticized for his silence, that was the path he chose. The detached, transcendent view from nowhere seemed to require alienation from his own historical location. One can observe from such a detached perspective, but one cannot exercise agency there. Nevertheless, to refuse to transcend one’s location, to decline even to think of ourselves from the outside, is also a kind of moral failing--and, in any case, it misses the complexity of human nature.

A Strange Two-Sided Creature

An obvious fact about human life, so common that we might easily ignore it, is that we are members of various associations--familial, cultural, and civic--in which we never chose membership. We were simply born into them and find that our identity is partly (largely?) shaped by such nonvoluntary membership.⁸ Moreover, these associations shape us in significant ways, for very often we think that such “givens” of

our existence create moral obligations. But these associations, because they are unchosen, may also seem to undermine or oppress our dignity as individual persons; hence, we may strain against their limits and resent their constraints. Still, there is, I think, no real freedom apart from them, for we can only be formed and shaped into responsible individuals within such communities.

From what perspective shall we think about our membership in these associations? Almost inevitably, we will reflect from two different angles of vision, which, following Nagel, we might call personal and impersonal, internal and external, subjective and objective, agent-relative and agent-neutral. To capture the different “feel” of these two vantage points we might even describe them as centered and centerless. Nagel is right, I believe, to hold that there is no readily available standpoint within which we can unify these two vantage points.

Suppose I try to think of my world as centerless. The first thing to note about the attempt is that this very statement stands in tension with itself. If the world is centerless, it is not *my* world. To think of it as centerless is to (try to) step outside myself and look from the perspective of the universe--to see things as they are, and not simply as they are for me. Yet, strangely, the attempt to think of the world in this way brings home to me an aspect of my own identity that I might otherwise miss. Although I am located, attached to a particular perspective, it is also true that I can (to some extent) detach myself from that location and think of my world as having no particular, personal perspective--not even my own--at its center. Such an exercise “places us both inside and outside the world, and offers us possibilities of transcendence which in turn create problems of reintegration. The reconciliation of these two aspects of ourselves is a primary philosophical task of

human life.”⁹ It is also, we might add, a primary political task if we want to respect the equal dignity of individuals whose identity has been shaped by associations in which they never chose membership.

Observing from the perspective of a centerless world, we might, of course, regard such associations as entirely inimical to the dignity of free human persons; yet, the reality is, I think, more complicated. Different cases seem to call for different treatment. Much of American politics over the last half century has attempted to enhance the freedom of those who--whether for reasons of class, race, or sex--are relatively powerless. With respect to class, as Michael Walzer notes, our aim has been chiefly to enhance the freedom of *individuals*. Political liberals believed this could be achieved; political radicals thought the difficulties, more structural in nature, might be intractable.

The radical argument does, of course, have difficulty explaining why those who advance economically seem to have little reason to continue to think of themselves as belonging to a group or class. They want to escape it, and often they do.¹⁰ That radical argument, if pushed far enough, may also be hard pressed to explain why those whose identity is shaped by different groups should have reason to think of themselves as obligated to respect the dignity or rights of outsiders. That sort of respect seems to depend on some sense of shared human identity that transcends our more particular locations.

Clearly, however, there are groups whose members are not eager to escape their location--in particular, cultural groups marked by shared race or religion. They may, in fact, be characterized by a good bit of self-segregation. In such cases one's sense of oneself as an *individual* is more closely entangled with group membership. Unlike the

instance of economic class, “individuals do not become members of these groups because they are disadvantaged; they are disadvantaged because they are members.”¹¹ To think of themselves as solitary individuals, to seek to transcend in that way their cultural location, will not necessarily be experienced as the achievement of freedom. It may just as easily be experienced as a kind of profound self-alienation. That is, to think of ourselves as individuals before God and try to see ourselves from that perspective might seem to diminish rather than enhance us.

To take an instance that continues to generate controversy, the practice of Islamic veiling may be hard to interpret. Many Islamic women seem to practice it voluntarily and may themselves defend it as a mark of cultural membership. And on one perhaps too simple understanding of freedom--what Charles Taylor has called an “opportunity-concept”--we would have no reason to doubt them, at least in some instances.¹² To be free in this sense, free to wear or not wear the veil, simply means that there is no obstacle to a woman’s declining to veil, even if she never exercises the opportunity to do so.

We might wonder, however, whether this opportunity-concept of freedom is as applicable to women in Afghanistan as to women in the United States (if, indeed, it is applicable even here). What Taylor calls an “exercise-concept” of freedom may account better for the complexities of many cultural circumstances. For this view, we are free only if we can genuinely exercise control over the shape of our life. The ability to do so depends on more than the absence of external obstacles. We cannot be free in this sense if, for example, we are so paralyzed by fear, or so unaware of alternative possibilities, that we cannot imagine ourselves as very different persons. In such circumstances, Taylor writes, “the subject himself can’t be the final authority on the question whether he

is free.”¹³ And however difficult it may be to judge in many circumstances, at least in principle Taylor’s claim seems to be true.

When considering problems such as Islamic veiling, we find ourselves, therefore, in something of a puzzle. On the one hand, we have to transcend the particular perspective of Islamic women and consider them from a more objective, centerless, point of view. If, as Nagel puts it, “ethical thought is the process of bringing objectivity to bear on the will,” and if that centerless perspective is indeed one of the standpoints built into our nature, we cannot simply adopt their particular standpoint as if it were the whole truth.¹⁴ But, on the other hand, a centerless world cannot be allowed to obliterate the perspective of these women, for they have their own centered lives to live. To view themselves only from the outside would be to experience a kind of alienation and loss of self. Each angle of vision is needed; yet, we are hard pressed to find a standpoint within which to reconcile them.

The Personal Perspective and Human Flourishing

In *The Magician’s Nephew*, sixth in C.S. Lewis’ Chronicles of Narnia, the great lion Aslan creates the land of Narnia and its inhabitants. In the course of doing so, he sets apart some animals as Talking Beasts, the primary inhabitants of Narnia. “He was going to and fro among the animals. And every now and then he would go up to two of them (always two at a time) and touch their noses with his.” These animals “instantly left their own kinds and followed him,” while the others wandered away. Then Aslan breathes on the chosen ones, and in the “deepest, wildest voice” the children had ever

heard says: “Narnia, Narnia, Narnia, awake. Love. Think. Speak. . . . Be talking beasts.” That these are *talking* beasts points to something still more. “Creatures,” says Aslan, “I give you yourselves.”¹⁵ They are no longer simply instinctive creatures. They can be other than they are, distancing themselves from themselves; for that is what it means that they are given themselves.

Lewis here uses talking animals to depict imaginatively a distinctive feature of human life, a feature that has been deeply embedded in Christian vision, though, of course, not only there. Christians have learned to think of human beings as the sort of complex creatures Lewis and Nagel depict, located in time and place but simultaneously able to transcend that location at least in thought. “Man’s involvement in finiteness and his transcendence over it” is, Reinhold Niebuhr suggested, “the basic paradox of human existence.”¹⁶

Drop me from the top of a fifty-story building, and the law of gravity takes over, just as it does if we drop a stone. We are finite beings, located in space and time, subject to natural necessity. But we are also free, able to some extent to transcend the limits of nature and history. As I fall from that fifty-story building, there are truths about my experience that cannot be captured by an explanation in terms of mass and velocity. Something different happens in my fall than in the rock’s fall, for *this* falling object is also a subject characterized by self-awareness. I can know myself as a falling object, which means that I can to some degree “alienate” myself from that object. I cannot simply be equated with it, for somehow I both am that falling object and am free from it. I am that object but am distanced from it by my capacity to transcend it.

Likewise, I am the person constituted by the story of my life, a story marked in important ways by membership in nonvoluntary associations. I cannot simply be someone else with a different history, nor can I be simply a generic human being. Yet, I can also, at least to some extent, be any human being. I can step into another's story, see the world as it looks from his or her standpoint--and thus be free from the limits of my own history.

That self-transcending freedom is ultimately, Christians have believed, a sign that we are made to rest in God. Made for communion with God, we are both finite and free, centered in time and place but capable to some extent of conceiving a centerless world. Hence, we want to honor the communities that mark our identity and shape us in characteristic (but characteristically different) ways. And we also want to acknowledge their limits; for, whatever familial, civic, or cultural ties may form us, each person is equidistant from God and called to transcend such ties in order to rest in God. Therefore, however significant our cultural or religious associations are for our lives, the dignity of the person rests, in the end, not on them but on the relation to God.

The centered worlds in which we live mark us with qualities and characteristics that distinguish us from others and, indeed, make us unequal in countless ways. But in the centerless world we inhabit in self-transcending freedom, each of us is a single individual, equally near to or far from the God who sees us with the eye of the universe. And, of course, this may sometimes cause us to wonder: Is God good for us and for our communities? Does the God-relation enhance or undermine the dignity of human persons?

There is something to be said for a pluralistic world in which we neither desire nor attempt to transcend location within particular communities. The air we breathe may seem thicker and richer there than in the rarified atmosphere that ignores particularity in order to get equality. When we want to extol that thicker atmosphere, we speak the language of diversity and multiculturalism. But, of course, members of such communities may be only united and not also apart. For them the cause of one's mother may always come before the claims of justice. From within such a community it may be difficult to identify my cause with that of a stranger, as if we shared a story. And, of course, the focused and particular story that gives meaning and purpose to life for those who live within it may also authorize them to wrong others in relation to whom they think of themselves as only apart and not also united.

One of the great strengths of the political institutions of the United States is that, because they are structured in a way that treats persons primarily as individuals rather than as members of groups, this country has been able to make place for and even to welcome immigrants of many different sorts. It is chiefly an association of individuals, not of groups. Whatever the strains and stresses that immigration brings, they actually testify to an openness that could scarcely be present if identity were simply group identity. Too many of us would simply be strangers to others of us.

Of course, good politics is not the same as good ethics, but to judge ourselves to have wronged a "stranger" and to reject such wrongdoing does require an ability to be not only united with our community but also apart from it. Perhaps it requires monotheism. Writing about the world of late antiquity, Peter Brown noted that the idea of the Roman empire as a "commonwealth of cities" fit hand in glove with polytheism. "To be a

polytheist was to glory in the fact that the gods did not want unity. Rather, they expressed themselves through the infinite diversity of human customs, inherited from the distant past.”¹⁷ When under Constantine Christianity became the religion of the empire, it made possible a wide-reaching movement in which those who belonged to different particular associations--whether of class, sex, or even servitude--could share a story in which all were “subject to the same universal law of God and as equally capable of salvation through the conquest of sin.”¹⁸

The turn to monotheism is, in part, a turn to a standpoint that is (in Nagel’s terms) more impersonal, objective, and agent-neutral. Attempting to look with a God’s-eye view compels us to acknowledge the shortsightedness and perversity of our own particular perspectives and the associations that shape and sustain them. We are divided against ourselves, realizing that some of our deepest commitments may actually “run against the grain” of our still more “basic purposes.”¹⁹

We’re unlikely, of course, simply to cast aside those personal perspectives, nor should we. We are not wrong to resist--or, at least, hesitate in the face of--such self-alienation. I have described the attempt to transcend one’s particular angle of vision in two ways--as an attempt to think as if ours were a centerless world, and as an attempt to look from the perspective of (the one) God. These may not be quite the same. Were we really able to look with the eye of God, our vision would not be centerless. It is one thing to try to transcend *my* world, and it is a quite different thing--unattainable for us--really to see with the eye of the universe. Every attempt of mine to transcend my own standpoint may actually fail to get out of my own skin, may fail to attain a perspective that truly merits being called agent-neutral.

That is why a person who is told to prefer the dictates of justice to the cause of his mother is likely to suspect that the supposed dictates of justice are really some other agent's personal perspective, dressed up in agent-neutral language. So, for example, when in June of 2013 President Barack Obama visited Northern Ireland, he spoke with Irish youth at a town hall meeting in Belfast. Acknowledging Northern Ireland's long history of ethnic and religious conflict, he praised the progress that had been made toward a more peaceable society in the last decade-and-a-half. What was essential, he suggested, was the ability to move beyond "symbols of history that are a source of pride for some and pain for others." His example of such "symbols of history" that we need to leave behind produced--and rightly so--a good bit of critical commentary. "If towns remain divided--if Catholics have their schools and buildings, and Protestants have theirs--if we can't see ourselves in one another, if fear or resentment are allowed to harden, that encourages division. It discourages cooperation." Ultimately, he said, peace is "about breaking down the divisions that we create in our own minds and our own hearts that don't exist in any objective reality."²⁰

In short, he presented himself as observing from an objective, agent-neutral standpoint. Perhaps inevitably, it struck others as an attack on parochial (especially Roman Catholic) educational institutions and as a failure to see how such institutions are needed to produce individuals who are both united and apart, both attached and capable of detachment, both finite and free. For only such human beings are the genuine article--embodied beings, located in time and place, but made also to rest in God. The one God oppresses no one, but the same cannot always be said of our attempts to look and speak from that God's angle of vision. In other words, an attempt to think objectively and

impersonally, to eliminate individual perspectives, cannot by itself be adequate. For, after all, personal perspective is real. Eliminating it would not gain a more accurate vision of reality; it would lose part of what is really there.

The Narrative Quality of Experience

We need the one God to draw us out of ourselves, to protect against our inclination to wrong those who do not belong to the communities that have shaped our character and formed our beliefs. Nevertheless, the relation to that one God individualizes us, and in so doing it may seem to obliterate the particular ties and characteristics that make us the persons we are. We seem to be stuck--needing either just to accept the bedrock fact of "distinct and irreducible perspectives" or to attempt as best we can to look and think from a centerless perspective that produces deracinated individuals who are apart but not united. Can we say anything more? I would like to think we can, though here we must surely feel our way with a good bit of uncertainty.

Thomas Nagel, avowedly no religious believer, suggests in passing a starting point. "A being of total imaginative flexibility could project himself directly into every possible subjective point of view, and would not need such an objective method to think about the full range of possible inner lives."²¹ Such a being--whom I will call God!--could honor single individuals, in all their singularity, without abstracting from the associations that make them the persons they are. This would be especially true if God's own life were not that of a self-enclosed unit but something more like an orchestra in which the instruments so blend that a higher and more complex union appears.

Such a God would not draw others' perspectives into an objectified world (that would, in effect, mean that those perspectives were no longer *theirs*); instead, this God would enter into each of them, thereby drawing them in all their particularity into relation within the divine life, knowing each of them not as members of a universal class but as single individuals, as persons. "The point of a proper name," Ralph McInerny once noted,

is that it [is] not common to many, and yet many people do bear identical names. . . . But even when two persons have the same proper name it does not become a common noun, like 'man.' All the John Smiths that have been, are, and will be have nothing in common but the name; it does not name something common to them all. There is an inescapable nominalism here. God calls us all by our proper name, and He is unlikely to confuse one John Smith with another.²²

This is a kind of "objectivity" that does not require eliminating particular standpoints within the world. It makes room for perspectives, standpoints, and associations that belong to some and not to others (though each is individually present to God). In that sense what Nagel calls "the fundamental idea behind the objective impulse," namely, that "the world is not our world," would still be sound.²³ We cannot cordon off our associations in such a way that, united with those most like us, we remain apart from others. But we can seek to honor the thick particularity of each person's life, because God so honors it.

Of course, in this life we have not been drawn fully into the divine life, for that would be to step out of time as we experience it. Attachment and detachment, being united and being apart, must each have their place in our understanding of what it means here and now to flourish as human persons. We experience, therefore, the tension of one

caught in the midst of a story that grasps after a transcendent theme but can do so only through the relentlessly temporal, bodily structure of its plot.

In a perceptive essay titled “The Narrative Quality of Experience,” Stephen Crites (thinking along with Augustine) depicted each present moment of our experience as “tensed”--shaped by memory of the past and anticipation of the future.²⁴ We can try to articulate the general theme that gives meaning to human life, but we do so only from our particular vantage point as a character in the story. To transcend entirely our location within the story would alienate us from a genuinely human life, but to deny the possibility of such a transcendent standpoint would be to construct a false infinite, confusing our role in the story with that of its author.

In his autobiographical allegory, *The Pilgrim's Regress*, C.S. Lewis depicted the journey of a pilgrim John, who must attempt to keep to the main road, avoiding the pitfalls to either the North or the South.²⁵ Each false direction involves an attempt to live free of that narrative tension, to adopt a single standpoint. To the North John finds theories that seek to abstract from the body--from, that is, the connections and associations that form us into distinct, particular people. Such theories seek timelessness by denying the significance of location and personal perspective. To the South John finds not abstraction but constriction--a narrowing of life to the personal and particular, refusing the self-transcending freedom that seeks a more objective, less personal standpoint. This approach purchases timelessness by abandoning the quest for what is universal and objective. Neither to the North nor the South, but only on the main road, does the pilgrim simply endure the narrative quality of experience.

In his Preface to later editions of *Pilgrim's Regress* Lewis noted that the point of the allegory was not to suggest a theory that would reconcile us to the dueling standpoints from which we see the world. "We were made to be neither cerebral men nor visceral men, but Men. Not beasts nor angels but Men--things at once rational and animal."²⁶ Keeping to the main road is for the pilgrim John less a positive description than a matter of avoiding two equal and opposite errors, each of which undermines the possibility of human flourishing. Keeping to the main road involves learning to live within the tension that marks one who is a character within the story of life and not that story's author. To the degree we manage this we do not alienate ourselves from our location in nature and history, but neither do we deceive ourselves into thinking that *our* world is *the* world. Instead, we honor as best we can the time and the place each of us has been given--a time and place in which we can flourish if and only if we resist the temptation to make of it a false infinite. No one can say in advance which of our associations may have to be given up if we are to be drawn into the divine life.

This may be as much as can be said. Perhaps to say it is to say enough, at least if our aim is only to depict what human life is like and the false turns that may lead us astray. That is, more or less, where Nagel leaves us. "Watching the human drama is a bit like watching a Little League baseball game: the excitement of the participants is perfectly understandable but one can't really enter into it."²⁷ Still, to say that we must hold together both centered and centerless angles of vision, living the story of our life as personally meaningful while recognizing from a more impersonal perspective its relative insignificance, seems to suggest that no author exists who is skilled enough to bring together the threads of the story's plot in a way that will overcome the tension that marks

the narrative quality of experience. A being of “total imaginative flexibility” remains merely an interesting hypothesis.

Suppose, however, that, as Christians believe, the author has written himself into the story as a character like us. That character would be a single individual whose transcendence is not alienating and in relation to whom we could live as people who are both apart and united. We would, then, have to learn not to cherish our alienation.

¹ Thomas Nagel, *The View From Nowhere* (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 214.

² Nagel, p. 214.

³ Michael Walzer, *The Company of Critics* (New York: Basic Books, 1988), p. 149.

⁴ Walzer, p. 144.

⁵ Walzer, p. 151.

⁶ Walzer, p. 144.

⁷ Walzer, p. 148.

⁸ The same may be true of our membership in religious associations, though a theological *caveat* is in order here. Although it may *de facto* be true that children born to Christian parents are likely to be raised as Christians, membership in the Body of Christ is not given simply through nature or nurture. The church grows by baptism, not by procreation, whatever the *de facto* realities may seem to be.

⁹ Nagel, p. 66.

¹⁰ Michael Walzer, *Politics and Passion* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2004),

¹¹ Walzer, *Politics and Passion*, p. 30.

¹² Charles Taylor, “What’s Wrong with Negative Liberty,” in Alan Ryan (ed.), *The Idea of Freedom: Essays in Honour of Isaiah Berlin* (Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 177.

¹³ Taylor, p. 180.

¹⁴ Nagel, p. 139.

¹⁵ C. S. Lewis, *The Magician’s Nephew* (New York: Macmillan, 1955), chapters 9-10 *passim*.

¹⁶ Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man, Volume I. Human Nature* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1964), p. 175.

¹⁷ Peter Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom: Triumph and Diversity, A.D. 200-1000* (Blackwell Publishing, second edition, 2003), p. 58.

¹⁸ Brown, p. 65.

¹⁹ Taylor, p. 180.

²⁰ <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/06/17/remarks-president-obama-and-mrs-obama-town-hall-youth-northern-ireland>. Accessed 6/20/2013.

²¹ Nagel, p. 17.

²² Ralph McInerny, *I Alone Have Escaped to Tell You: My Life and Pastimes* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006), p. 162.

²³ Nagel, p. 18.

²⁴ Stephen Crites, "The Narrative Quality of Experience," *Journal of The American Academy of Religion*, 39 (1971), pp. 291-311.

²⁵ C.S. Lewis, *The Pilgrim's Regress* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958).

²⁶ Lewis, *Pilgrim's Regress*, p. 13.

²⁷ Nagel, pp. 217-18.