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HUMAN FLOURISHING AND THE MYTH OF RELIGIOUS NEUTRALITY

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SYNOPSIS

There are many different views of the “good life”: the kind of life that enables human beings to achieve their full potential. As Thomas Sowell has noticed, these views fall broadly into two main categories, those that recognize objective limitations on our desires (the constrained vision) and those that do not (the unconstrained vision). Examples of the constrained vision include Hobbes’s social contract theory, stoicism, and Christian anthropology. Examples of the unconstrained vision include Rousseau’s social contract theory, John Stuart Mill’s view of liberty, atheistic existentialism, secular humanism, and postmodernism. How does a secular state, one committed to religious neutrality, properly respond to this situation, in which so many accounts of the good life compete for dominance? I argue that the state cannot simply endorse one of the particular views (or broader visions) because they are all inherently religious. They are religious in the sense defined by Martin Luther and Paul Tillich, because they take a stand on what has ultimate significance for orienting our life; and they are religious in the sense defined by Roy Clouser, because they presuppose a view of bedrock reality. So if the state endorsed any of the views, it would be guilty of establishing a religious perspective.

But does that mean that Christians are debarred from contending for the merits of the Christian view of life in the public square? I argue that it does not, provided

Christians are careful to employ a religiously neutral empirical methodology that fairly adjudicates the competition between religiously committed positions. For example, Christians can show that their understanding of vocation, sacrifice, and charity is good both for those who practice it and for society.

A key idea of ancient Greek moral philosophy was *eudaimonia*, often translated “human flourishing,” or “the good life.” This is not the same as the modern idea of happiness, which is subjective. It is more like health—an objectively good state. The ancients assumed that everything had an excellence depending on its nature, that human beings are rational and social creatures, and that they could best achieve their potential in a just society.

Today, there are many competing accounts of the good life. Are they all inherently religious, so that none can be endorsed by a secular state? I defend an affirmative answer. But does this mean that Christians cannot contend for the superiority of their vision of the good life in the public square? I defend a negative answer.

VISIONS OF THE GOOD LIFE

Analyzing their defining characteristics can show that accounts of the good life are inherently religious. Space precludes a detailed analysis of each account, but it suffices to observe that they all fall into one of two visions distinguished by Thomas Sowell: the “constrained vision” and the “unconstrained vision.”¹ Advocates of the constrained vision argue that human beings can only fulfill their potential if they recognize certain objective limitations. These include internal limitations (such as our finitude, ignorance, self-destructive desires, and self-deception) and external limitations (such as the family and other social structures maintained by sacrifice and commitment). The Delphic admonition “Know thyself” is taken to imply that only by recognizing their limitations can humans hope to flourish. By contrast, advocates of the unconstrained vision prize self-realization. There is a greater tendency to think that our desires are “natural,” that our internal limitations can be remedied by education, and that external limitations are largely conventional. In this vision, to “know thyself” is to get in touch with one’s deepest desires and to fulfill them.

THE UNCONSTRAINED VISION

Sowell traces the modern understanding of the unconstrained vision to Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778), for whom “the fundamental problem is not nature or man but institutions.”² Rousseau held that in an ideal state of nature, humans were basically happy, but that, thanks to civilization, we are now enslaved by social conventions. In place of these conventions, Rousseau proposed the free associations of individuals based on mutually acceptable contracts. In this way, the individual remains free both to enter into social relations and to leave them behind, just as he pleases. Likewise, John Stuart Mill held that an individual will “do well by himself and others if only he is left free of paternalistic and moral constraints to engage in experiments in living from which he, corporately and individually, will learn what conduces to happiness and what does not....Freed from the old moralisms and religious and other superstitions—liberated to be the progressive being that, by nature, he is—he will flourish.”³

Atheistic existentialism, secular humanism, and postmodernism also illustrate the unconstrained vision. For Sartre (an atheist existentialist), since man has no objective, pre-existing essence, he must simply choose a life, an image, of what he would like all men to be. Secular humanists hold that nature is all there is and that using his reason and scientific discovery, man can flourish by maximizing his happiness.⁴ Postmodernists treat cultural institutions (e.g. marriage and the family) as oppressive and revisable. Having rejected the idea that there are normative structures built into reality, the only source of such institutions must be our own construction: “If no meaning can be found in the objective scheme of things, then it must be sought in the experiencing subject.”⁵

THE CONSTRAINED VISION

Sowell suggests that the modern conception of the constrained vision traces to Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679), for whom man’s natural state is a war of all against all; but out of fear of being a victim, each individual gives up his right to victimize others, transferring power to the sovereign. This is a constrained view because it recognizes that humans cannot flourish simply following their natural desires: this will only make their lives “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short.”⁶

Two obvious examples of the constrained vision are stoicism and Christian anthropology. The Stoics believed we could flourish only by recognizing internal and external limitations. If we want a life of tranquility, we must avoid attachment to those things beyond our control. So, Epictetus tells us, we should not love a pot, in case we break it, or even love another person, in case they leave or die.⁷ Most people feel that this vision is *too* constrained: it gives up on the possibility of a loving commitment

simply to avoid pain. One indication that the Stoics' program was not really effective is their frequent suggestion that if things get too bad, we can always commit suicide. We just do not have the ability to prevent certain kinds of pain and misfortune from getting to us: a more promising account would accept these hardships but help us to find a peace and joy that transcends them (Phil. 4:12).

This is what we find in Christian teaching. It does not see suffering as simply a negative to be avoided, and it prizes love as a way in which we flourish by forgetting ourselves. The problem with so many programs of personal improvement is precisely that they are fundamentally preoccupied with the self. We do not flourish simply by affirming our desires as the existentialist suggests. "Choose!" cries the existentialist, but every choice is an act of self-limitation, and since one has multiple, conflicting desires, every choice to affirm one desire necessarily frustrates others with (according to existentialism) an equally strong claim. But neither are we made happy simply by denying our desires as stoicism suggests, for it is to live only half a life not to have true friends and loves.

The Christian alternative to blank affirmation or denial of our desires is that we learn to forget ourselves. We are baptized into the death and resurrection of Christ (Rom. 6:3-4), and through a life of daily repentance, our old, sinful nature is put to death so that the new person in Christ appears. Contrary to the unconstrained vision, we have sinful, selfish desires on the basis of which we *cannot* flourish: these must be put to death, so that we can put God first and love our neighbor as ourselves. This happens in our daily life as Christians who simultaneously inhabit two kingdoms: the earthly government ruled by God's law and the spiritual government ruled by the gospel. As Gustaf Wingren explains, "The Christian is crucified by the law in his vocation, under the earthly government; and he arises through the gospel, in the church under the spiritual government."⁸

The Christian alternative will not remove all impediments to self-realization, as they may help to curb our sinful desires (e.g., the legal system). But neither does it recommend that we become cold and unfeeling by emasculating our desires, as if they have no proper object. Instead, the more radical answer is *transformation*: death of what is misdirected so that our desires are renewed and reoriented to their proper objects, and we can love God and our neighbor in lives of self-forgetful service.

Jesus tells us that "whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it" (Matt. 16:25), and this means, I think, that any attempt to hang on to and control our life as it is, without submitting to the lordship of Christ, will fail. We will not flourish because we will lose our identity; for Christ is the vine, we are the branches, and without Him, we can do nothing (John 15:5). To the contrary, through Christ alone can we flourish by becoming the person God intends us to be.

THE MYTH OF RELIGIOUS NEUTRALITY

Many believe that a full-orbed biblical account of human flourishing has no place in public discourse because it is obviously “religious” and could not be supported by public evidence. The trouble is that all accounts of human flourishing are unavoidably religious, and being religious does not preclude having supporting evidence.

Every account of human flourishing takes a position on what is most authoritative in determining the meaning of life. Thus advocates of the unconstrained vision privilege *autonomy* (a self-given “law” that confirms our desires), while advocates of the constrained vision privilege *heteronomy* (obedience to some external law that may require change in our desires). In either case, there is an ultimate authority that defines the basis for human flourishing.

Arguably, such an authority functions as a person’s “god,” even if that person is not a theist. As Martin Luther explains in his commentary on the First Commandment, “A god means that from which we are to expect all good and in which we are to take refuge in all distress...to ‘have a god’ is to have something in which the heart entirely trusts.”⁹ Thus atheistic existentialism puts its final trust in individual choice, secular humanists see human reason as our best hope, and postmodernists take refuge in language communities. Likewise, the Stoics looked to a kind of harmony as the ultimate good of the individual soul and society.

Paul Tillich echoed Luther in his emphasis that religion involves a person’s “ultimate concern”: “If religion is defined as a state of ‘being grasped by an ultimate concern’...then we must distinguish this as a universal or large concept from our usual smaller concept of religion which supposes an organized group with its clergy, scriptures, and dogma....In the light of the larger concept we can understand that ultimate concern is also present in what we usually call the secular or profane.”¹⁰

Tillich agrees with Luther that a person’s view qualifies as religious if it takes a position on the ultimate authority for orienting one’s life. It is clear that all of the positions that we have described do that.

Behind any claim of final authority is a prior metaphysical assumption about the ultimate basis of reality. In Clouser’s view, “A religious belief is a belief in something as divine per se...where ‘divine per se’ means having unconditionally non-dependent reality.”¹¹ And it is fairly obvious that religious beliefs about what is unconditionally nondependent reality strongly affect religious beliefs about the meaning of life. Thus Sartre sees human decision as the ultimate authority *because* he thinks there is no transcendent God and that an unintended universe is bedrock reality. The secular

humanist agrees with this bedrock but thinks that human reason and science can discover general principles that will help humans as a whole to flourish. Even the postmodernist cannot deny some foundation (despite his profession of anti-foundationalism), since he is committed to the existence of texts, interpreters, and interpretations, so reality must support these things. And to sign up for the Stoics' programs for human flourishing, you first must hold that bedrock reality includes some basis (such as a *logos*, a principle of universal rationality, and virtues that can help align one with the *logos*) that makes it possible for our souls to exist in a tranquil or harmonious state.

If this is right, then all accounts of human flourishing are religious both in the Luther-Tillich sense of evincing trust in a final authority and in Clouser's sense of being committed to some unconditionally nondependent reality.

Contending for the Christian Vision of Life

An important ideal of the secular state is religious neutrality. In the First Amendment to the United States constitution, this is understood to mean that the state is neither to endorse any religion (the establishment clause) nor to abridge religious freedom (the free exercise clause). If our previous argument is on track, then the state cannot uphold the First Amendment by privileging any of the competing accounts of human flourishing, because each of them is inherently religious.

Does this therefore mean that all accounts of human flourishing should be *banished* from the public square? No. As Hugh Gauch has argued, the fact that competing *theories* are not neutral does not preclude a neutral *method* for deciding between them.¹² Gauch describes the "PEL" model, consisting of three elements: (1) basic Presuppositions of empirical investigation (e.g., there is a real world, we can learn about it through our senses), (2) the publicly available Evidence, and (3) standard Logic. The PEL model is neutral between a variety of competing religions and naturalistic hypotheses (it does not tacitly assume the truth of one of the hypotheses), allowing a fair competition to discover the best explanation of the evidence.

Using the PEL model, Christianity can appeal to an exceptionally broad base of data to support its major claims about human flourishing. Consider just two examples.

First, we are not made happy by simply pursuing our desires for self-realization but in lives of self-forgetful service to others. As against the idea that people flourish by removing obstacles to the fulfillment of their desires, Paul Vitz notes the growing problem of personally and socially destructive sexual addictions: "That in satisfying our biological hungers we often devour ourselves and others receives little or no emphasis

from self-theorists, despite the well-documented psychological principle that the adaptation level for pleasure...constantly moves up with experience."¹³ This leaves people enslaved by insatiable desires, never happy, and leaving a trail of misery behind them that could include STDs, violated people, broken relationships, abused and neglected children, and/or poor work performance. More generally, an emphasis on self-realization has undoubtedly harmed the millennial or "Me Me Me" generation¹⁴ who exhibit a high incidence of narcissism, overconfidence, entitlement, laziness, and a lack of empathy and understanding of viewpoints contrary to their own.¹⁵

Christianity's gift to secular society is the idea of vocation: individuals flourish when they forget themselves and focus on serving the needs of the other. Arthur Brooks has shown that, in the United States, religious conservatives (mostly Christians) are the most generous with their time and money and find happiness in helping others. When other relevant factors are constant, "the volunteer will enjoy greater happiness and better health than the nonvolunteer."¹⁶ Even when both are healthy and able to give blood, "the donor will be 9 percentage points more likely to say that he or she is very happy than the nondonor."¹⁷ This effect has been corroborated by several studies of the effects of giving behavior, which found that it increases confidence, reduces depression, and generally improves mental health.¹⁸

Second, Christ's concern for the least of these has promoted charity that assists the needy and builds social cohesion. Alvin Schmidt argues that the ancient Greco-Roman world was severely lacking in charity (*caritas*); it only recognized the value of giving to those who could offer some reciprocal benefit (*liberalitas*).¹⁹ By contrast, Christ announced that He came into the world not—like the pagan gods—in order to be served, but so that *He* could serve and give His life as a ransom for many (Matt. 20:28). Christ came to those whose sin made them powerless to be right with God (Rom. 5:6–8), and He sacrificed Himself for those who could give Him nothing in return. As a free response of gratitude, Christ then called His disciples to pursue lives of self-sacrifice, showing love to the "least of these" (Matt. 25:40), including those who could not repay (Luke 14:12–14). This was reflected in Christian charitable giving from the very beginning: "The early Christians had a common fund to which they gave voluntarily, without any compulsion...[which] supported widows, the physically disabled, needy orphans, the sick, prisoners incarcerated for their Christian faith, and teachers requiring help; it provided burials for poor people and sometimes funds for the release of slaves....Every Christian was expected to give one-tenth of his income to charity."²⁰ This pattern is still to be seen today, with mostly Christian religious conservatives leading religious liberals and secularists in charitable giving.

While some think that government programs are a better means of remedying poverty, the evidence is that welfare leads to long-term dependence and loss of job

skills,²¹ encourages people not to look for jobs,²² and undermines people's sense of dignity.²³ The problem is that welfare comes from an anonymous source and easily creates an illusion of entitlement. By contrast, private charity modeled on *caritas* provides recipients a closer connection to their donors so that the former appreciate the generosity and sacrifice of the latter. Local private charity shows that people in one's own community care, and it leads people naturally to want to give back when they have a chance. Thus, it is commonplace to find beneficiaries of a food pantry volunteering their time there to serve others. And charity helps to support those vital social structures that mediate government and the people, so that we learn to depend on one another rather than on the anonymous bureaucrats of an omniscient government, thereby building social cohesion.

Many other examples of Christian contributions to human flourishing could be given, but this should illustrate the general approach. Christians have no reason to hide their vision of the good life under a bushel. They are not "imposing" their biases on the non-Christian, but can support their vision by appeal to a neutral empirical method.

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NOTES

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- 12 Hugh Gauch, Jr., "Public Presuppositions for Christian Apologetics," *Philosophia Christi* 17, 1 (2015): 189–98.

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- 18 *Ibid.*, 152.
- 19 Alvin Schmidt, *Under the Influence: How Christianity Transformed Civilization* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 126.
- 20 *Ibid.*, 125–26.
- 21 Brooks, *Who Really Cares*, 85.
- 22 *Ibid.*, 89.
- 23 George Gilder, *Wealth and Poverty: A New Edition for the Twenty-First Century* (Washington, D.C.: Regnery Publishing, 2012), 39.