Individualism & Radical Freedom Examined

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There is a seductive attraction in the current language of *radical freedom*; it is a peculiarly late modern Western hermeneutic of emancipation and the details are important. It is often appealed to with respect to the discourse of democracy and empowerment. This passion for freedom is emerging in non-Western parts of the world as well, for instance in the historic protests across North Africa and the Middle East in the early 2011, the so-called *Arab Spring*. Dictators are called to step down and make room for freedom; power and wealth must be shared; governments have to be more accountable to the people. Freedom and individual rights runs deep with us and has much to do with our identity. Intellectual Christoph Schwöbel (1995, pp. 57-81) suggests that it is a concept that takes up a central position for self-understanding. He detects even a *hyper-inflation* in the rhetoric of freedom. Influential mid-twentieth century French intellectual Michel Foucault, on whose later work I wrote my PhD dissertation, saw freedom not as something *given or rights based*, but rather something that has to be struggled for, wrested from opponents, tyrants or from societal institutions or governments. Freedom, in Foucauldian language, is an ontological ground of ethics; freedom becomes the starting point, the norm and framework, the very goal of ethics, its *alpha* and *omega*. Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor, with whom I place Foucault in critical dialogue, offers a critique of this radical notion of freedom; the two premier philosophers make excellent interlocutors.

I want to examine the *mythos* of *Radical Individualism,* a powerful ideology that is embedded in radicalized views of freedom; it dominates Western consciousness in both early and late modernity. We demand the right to explore our own values, meet our own needs and to fulfill our own desires, to self-determine, construct self, to be master controller of our own destiny. Author Ayn Rand (Capitalist heroine to the Students for Objectivism) typifies the sentiment in her book *The Virtue of Selfishness*.

> Man must choose his actions, values and goals by the standard of that which is proper to man in order to achieve, maintain, fulfill and enjoy the ultimate value, that end in itself, which is his own life. (A. Rand, 1964, p. 25)

The *male* emphasis is not insignificant. The ultimate ethical rule of individualism is that individuals should be free to maximize their individual potential in order to pursue whatever they find most rewarding (details not included). Its mantra is: *I am who I am; I will become who I choose to become; no one else will choose for me; I interpret myself, speak for myself and justify my behaviour.* Note that this use of freedom as *self-determination* also entails a process of self-legislation and self-justification. One often hears the high-sounding proviso that my freedom should know no bounds except to avoid interference with the values or freedom of others. The kind of individualism we are discussing calculates in principle as an infinite, unlimited freedom for *homo autonomous. "*Nothing should be forbidden" according to a famous French mantra from the late 60s.

Where do we locate individualism culturally? It must be grounded in how we see ourselves and how we live. Some of our cultural icons—the lone cowboy, the marginalized detective, the western frontier pioneer in Canada and America, the avant-garde artist or self-inventing Hollywood or music star—exemplify well this myth. But no one is held in such jaded awe as the self-sufficient Wall Sreet or Bay Street entrepreneur, where élite money and power make an intoxicating mix in radical individualism. This person is tough, competitive and strongly self-assertive. Cruising through life in a gleaming Porche, this *transcendent being* resides in the tallest tower with the corner office and a fantastic view of the corporate universe. Sometimes with his own elevator or private jet, he draws excessive bonuses, ownes several expensive houses and lives above most people's reality. In the post-2008 recession movie "*Wall Street: Money Never Sleeps*", Gordon Geko captures the image of this edgy financial gamer, a utilitarian willing to manipulate even his own daughter, who argues that "greed is still good"; this vice is now taken on as a *virtue* among successful players.

The movies "*Enron: the Smartest Guys in the Room*" and "*Inside Job*" document the excessive lifestyles, risky behaviour, and addiction to greed of top CEOs, bankers and financiers round the world. This deregulated behaviour led to near collapse of the entire international financial system in 2008. Just how close we were is frightening; we peered long and hard into the abyss. Financial leaders fought hard for this unfettered freedom from government regulation; corporate lobbyists have gained a massive influence on government, shackling their ability to regulate. Far too much wealth is concentrated in too few hands. The book, *Contagion: the financial epidemic that is sweeping the global economy* by John R. Talbott,[1] reveals the depths of the corruption at all levels due to relaxed government restrictions on corporate behaviour, leading to poor governance and poor corporate and public accountability. Society and Main Street have paid a terrible price for this kind of freedom: high risk behaviour and hubris.

We should not forget that university life, and especially graduate school, often provides the crucible for these values of self-assertion and hubris. Graduate school is clearly a chosen route to self-development and better career opportunity, but students tend to develop over time an isolated self; they are taught to watch out for number one, signaled that, "It is up to you; carve out your niche." Pressure to develop that all-important attractive job resumé can be intense, but no doubt a high priority in an increasingly complex, global village and competitive job market. Tragically, too often the pursuit of high marks and future career opportunities means that students succumb to cheating and plagiarism of entire papers in order to make the grade; there are some shocking statistics about how many participate; ethics is marginalized in the quest for status and monetary success. Some of our societal corruption clearly begins during postsecondary education. It is a time when parents and traditional authority figures are held at a distance, sometimes deconstructed and called into question; many students feel the competition

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[1] See also Harvard professor Niall Ferguson, *The Ascent of Money: a financial history of the world*. Penguin Books

and resonate with the philosophy of rugged individualism. It is all around them every day. New increasingly individualistic, power-oriented values shape students for the *real world*. They feel that they must transcend the masses in order to succeed. PhD students seeking to carve out their academic niche, and pursue a tenure track teaching position have to work extremely hard to build their credibility and publication record; stakes are high for high achievers. In some careers, job prospects are grim. The challenge to be brilliant and to push out the frontiers of knowledge is both creative and deeply stressful; it can be a tremendous stressor to marriages; many are extremely tired by the end of this terminal degree and yet are expected to hit the ground running in the job world right after the defence.

Historically and intellectually, radical individualism and self-determining freedom is a product of modernity that has come to dominate Western thought since the 18th century known as the Enlightenment (early modernity). One thinks of Rene Descartes' *cogito ergo sum* (I think; therefore I am), a summons to the individual to a *will-to-power* posture. The autonomous individual is released from the moral strictures of religion, past history and tradition (social parenting). The key values are self-reliance, freedom of choice, entailed by a weak sense of obligation to others (except for mutually agreed self-interest). Conquest, command and control are the goals of this self. In late modernity, as represented by Michel Foucault, aesthetics comes into play, personal feelings and individual choice are a top priority as one stylizes one's life; radical individualism is intensified in late modernity. The only obligation is to make oneself in accordance with one's own ambition, or as Foucault might say to "invent oneself as a work of art". This self-constructed freedom implies that one's very moral character has become a subject of one's own creative self-interpretation.

Christoph Schwöbel (1995, pp. 58-60) notes that culture in the West has moved through three conceptual stages of freedom: (a) the quest for release from coercion, often referred to as liberation from oppression, (b) the quest for release from internal or cultural blockages to free expression (breaking out of stereotypes or identities that bind—also strong in Foucault's thought), but most significantly to (c) self-constitutive freedom as an ideal of self-definition and self-interpretation, the *radical* sense of freedom, which emerges in Foucault's attempt to recover self and subjectivity in his late *oeuvre*. Freedom, in this sense, takes up the central controlling position in self-understanding and ethics. Self-mastery and self-love are critical to this third move. Foucault is an exemplary of the identity of the self in late modernity. Freedom shapes the fundamental principle of understanding what it means to be human (Schwöbel, 1995, pp. 57 & 60) and involves a *re-enchantment* with self, composing an identity that pulls back inside the bunker of self for protection from the manipulators (*governmentality*).

> In deciding for policies of action which incorporate choices concerning the interpretation of our possibilities of action, of our goals of action and of the norms of action we attempt to observe, we decide the fundamental orientation of our lives. Such decisions are examples of self-determination. Self-determination is contrasted to determination by external authorities. (Schwöbel, 1995, pp. 62-3)

One's very identity is shaped by rebellion (*agonisme*), against other views of one's destiny, against authority.

We find the philosophical godparents of this type of individualism among German philosopher Friedriche Nietzsche, psychologist Sigmund Freud, political theorists John Locke and Thomas Hobbes, and economist Adam Smith. John Rawls is a current well-known political theorist who holds this view: the individual comes first and self-interest is automatically assumed. Locke in England and Rousseau in France promote the idea that the individual is prior to society; social and political relations are a *social contract*, an agreement by mutual consent of individuals. Nietzsche gave legitimacy to the morally autonomous individual who buys into the *transvaluation of all values* (a call to reinvent morality and release it from normative structures), the rebel who defies society's norms, and deconstructs past, especially Christian, moral fabric. Freud focused attention on the individual self and its neuroses and the desire to be happy or fulfilled, replacing the soul with the conflicted self as a key human concern. Adam Smith, the father of Capitalism, encouraged the strong pursuit of self-interest in business and economics, believing this would unleash untold creativity and wealth for all. Hobbes is a major influence in the encouragement of contentiousness (*agonisme*) and selfishness, the death of virtue and the sense that life is in essence a battle of *all against all*. All of these intellectuals are *myth-makers* of radical individualism. One can also detect the influence of Charles Darwin's *survival of the fittest* as it is transmuted into socio-biology of certain aggressive capitalist economic theories (with little concern for the poor, the weak, the *unfit*). New Age philosophy adds a religious justification to the idea of self-stylization, self-justification and narcissism (*a conversion to self* to use Foucault's language) of self-interest and narcissism. Of course, this is a cursory overview but it offers some markers for how we moderns became the kind of animals that we are today, concerned so much about our own *self-flourishing* within our *immanent frame* (C. Taylor, 2007, pp. 540-93, *A Secular Age*, Chapter 15 "The Immanent Frame"). Taylor (1989) also gives an important and thorough overview of what has shaped us morally and given us identity in his tome *Sources of the Self*.

Radical Individualism & Freedom Under the Microscope

Radical Individualism holds a strong allure at first blush, especially for the young, strong and bright, or people who want to reinvent themselves, or make a name for themselves in a new business or Hollywood. Why would we want to question it? We need these imaginative, entrepreneurial people to innovate and create jobs and wealth, to pave the way forward, mark out the technological, social and economic geography of the future. Everyone is trying to maximize her freedom and autonomy, *n'est-ce pa*? Is this not part of growing up and maturing, taking charge of one's life? There is also, however, much to give us pause and to draw forth critical thinking about our rugged individual identity. Individualism includes a dangerous mythology at its heart; taken to an extreme, it can reap destruction for individual persons, families, institutions and society. Something essential to our humanity, especially the values and virtues of the communal, is at high risk in this pursuit; it can lead to social failure and personal loss, cynicism

and even despair. As a way of life, it constitutes an abstraction that hollows out the self, emptying life of some of its balance and richness. One's identity can actually become quite brittle and fragile in this attempt to escape accountability and *soar with the eagles*. There can be a serious form of escape amidst the brilliance and creativity, and even a move towards a *soulless* existence.

Many perspicacious thinkers would argue that we in fact need *liberation* from this myth of radical individualism and self-determined freedom or to be *saved from freedom* as an end in itself, or a release from all moral obligation. At the very least, freedom needs to be seen in context, and be examined for its content, lest it become a dangerous and destructive *mythos*—a social and relational weapon of mass destruction. Charles Taylor is one of those key intellectuals who offers a deep examination of our liberal heritage (*Hegel and Modern Society, 1979)*); he shows how the same language of freedom has been used to promote terror in France and Russia and anarchy (see the anarchy of Vancouver on June 15 after the final NHL game of 2011) and to give the political prisoner release. Healthy independence and individuation is one thing, but it is often assumed that if we are only more free to self-determine, we will discover our fullest selves, *fulfilled*, *happy* and *good*. Taylor draws us up short and interrogates this culture re: how our idea of freedom is related to the good, and to truth and the transcendent Other. I spend much time on this in my doctoral thesis on the postmodern self.

But much of the vigorous pursuit of individual freedom and self-control has led, not to the strengthening of the self and improving the good of society, but rather to insecurity, poverty, social fragmentation, despair or self loss. Charles Taylor points out that Foucault's controversial attempt to offer an *aesthetic-freedom* creates an open field in relationship to the Other and therefore the possibility of justifying cruelty and well as benevolence. He sees the darker draw towards violence in the self-determined freedom (1991, pp. 65-68). One can see that this can create a crisis in moral normativity, as it disallows nothing and dangerously heroizes the self and its creative self-expression, a *heady wine* that can lead to hubris, narcissism and even violence. Accountability and healthy interdependence of persons is missing in this paradigm; it leaves a gap of responsibility taken for the Other and a serious lack of commitment to the common good. See Chapter Four, Part II, Section C. of my thesis on Aesthetics of Violence.

> The fascination with violence in the twentieth century has been a love affair with power ... even in milder forms neo-Nietzschean theories generate a sense of radical freedom ... this connects up in alliance with self-determining freedom ... The notion of self-determining freedom pushed to its limit, doesn't recognize any boundaries, anything given that I *have* to respect in my exercise of self-determining choice. It can easily tip over into the most extreme forms of anthropocentrism. (Taylor 1991, pp. 67, 68)[2]

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[2] René Girard has much to say about this violence at the heart of culture in I See Satan Fall Like Lightning (New York: Orbis, 2002)

Many a greedy exploitation can be self-justified in terms of socially redemptive categories: for example, fraud and lies about accounting irregularities as "protecting the interests of stock holders, preserving the share price and the good of the corporation".

Executives often find themselves quite alone after climbing the corporate ladder; their ruthless pursuits have caused trust to break down with colleagues, who remain fearful, envious and ultimately bitter. The Other (human or natural creation) is taken as either a barrier to self-growth or someone/something to be manipulated for the purpose of self-growth and higher achievement; this acts as a form of denial of the human reality of nuanced interdependencies. Integrity is sacrificed to greed under weak accountability. The successful entrepreneur can rise to the top in power and wealth, but at the same time such ambition easily corrupts the soul: for example, the outright systematic hiding of debt in Enron by creating several fake corporations. Moral hazard eventuates for the investors who lose their pension, and employees who lose their jobs when the scam unravels and becomes public knowledge. Many élites are feared but not loved or respected, often riddled by self-hatred while cutting ethical corners, or adding up their excessive net worth and extreme bonuses. Enough is never enough. Frustration sets in as one feels increasingly isolated, alone and vilified for taking down the company while walking away a multi-millionaire. The inside story of many of the top bankers in the West has revealed shocking and questionable behaviour, as well as a tendency toward excessive gambling with other people's money. They are out of touch with reality.

Theomania, the desire to be like a god, is real (or *surreal*) and has worked its ruin. Schwöbel notes that there is an interesting historical-cultural co-incidence between the birth of radical concept of freedom and the denial of God in Western philosophy (1995, pp. 72-75). He suggests that it results from humans attempting the kind of freedom one normally attributes to God—omniscient, omnipotent, infinite. This perspective on freedom tends to imply that the self must occupy or usurp the space once given to God in Western consciousness—human and divine freedom in a strange way are set up in a direct conflict and competition. This has dire consequences; the quest for immanent radical freedom can sacrifice unnecessarily much that is good in life, and many other people's well-being.

> [There emerges] a dislocation in the relational order: when they aspire to be more than human, they actually become less than human….We often find the radical conception of freedom as absolute and unlimited lies at the heart of many of the most dehumanizing tendencies…in modern history. Where freedom is seen as radically self-constituted, responsibility is restricted to the responsibility of agents to themselves, and it is at this point that the claim of radical autonomy cannot be distinguished from the escape into unaccountability. (Schwöbel, 1995, pp. 73-74)

These radical individuals as they gain power and influence, grow in narcissistic tendencies and ultimately become a *law unto themselves*; the scope of perceived moral responsibility ends with one's self, one's perceived needs, desires and creativity. Everything else must be eliminated or laid waste. The reigning *ethos* claims that I alone must reach my full potential and even create my own moral and intellectual universe. Many hard-core individualists have become empty, predictably selfish, egoistic and boring, the *hollow men* as T.S. Elliot calls them.

This posture constitutes a failure or crisis of freedom in a game of self-deception and illusion. A. McFadyen (1995) reflects on such deceptions of radical freedom, with a concern that it can lead to negative private self-interest.

> The free pursuit of private self-interest has a naturally conflicting form, since the otherness of the individual means their interests must be opposed. One needs freedom from what is other in order to be oneself. Personal centeredness is essential, for autonomy is a private place that has to be protected by fencing it off from the sphere of relation and therefore from the otherness of God and one's neighbours…. Autonomy is something one has in self-possession, apart from relation to God and others in an exclusive and private orientation on an asocial personal center…. Freedom and autonomy are had apart from relationship: they inhere within oneself. (p. 35)

This reveals a kind of Hobbesian *anti-social* ethics as competitive marketplace amidst scarcity, and this is the world in which Foucault believes we live today, the violent *all against all* mentality. In fact, if human beings claim this sovereign infinite freedom, they can end cynically in a form of extreme aloneness, asociality and amorality, condemned to exploit or be exploited (tyrannize or be tyrannized). Unfortunately, many of the top perpetrators of corporate fraud have not gone to jail; they are just too powerful. These narcissistic individuals irresponsibly miss out on the importance of trust, on creative partnership, interdependencies and reciprocities of mutual enabling and assisting in being. This constitutes a major self-loss and is in real danger of imploding into nihilism. Iris Murdoch (1997) in her famous article 'God and the Good' (Hauerwas & MacIntyre (Eds.), p. 69) speaks profoundly to the point:

> Our picture of ourselves has become too grand, we have isolated and identified ourselves with an unrealistic conception of the will, we have lost the vision of reality separate from ourselves, and we have no adequate conception of original sin.

Christopher Lasch, in *Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations*, speaks of the expensive cultural and personal costs of narcissism as a normalized phenomenon in America. Foucault's ethics talks about a *self-reflexive* relationship with self and a *care of self* which involves ultimately a *conversion to one's self* as part of his radical aesthetic-freedom, a deeply narcissistic stance. Psychiatrist Scott Peck defines the hardened character of such a personality in his book, *People of the Lie*:

> a. consistent destructive, scapegoating behaviour, which may often be quite subtle—projecting one's problems on others.

> b. excessive, albeit usually covert, intolerance to criticism and other forms of narcissistic injury.

> c. pronounced concern with public image and self-image of respectability, contributing to a stability of life-style but also to pretentiousness and denial of hateful feelings or vengeful motives.

> d. intellectual deviousness, with an increased likelihood of a mild schizophrenic disturbance of thinking at times of stress. (S. Peck, 1983, p. 129)

Peck is willing to go as far as to call this an *evil personality* psychologically; he sees it as a sickness, an addiction to self-image. In fact, the radical individualist is often obsessed with self-image, centrally concerned with his personal welfare. Bernie Madoff, creator of the largest Ponsi

scheme in history, is a perfect example of this kind of radical self-interest. How many others are still under the radar?

The whole quest for self-esteem in children (legitimate in itself) can be twisted or taken to an extreme into a form of narcissistic self-constructivism that tyrannizes parents and teachers. It becomes a sense of entitlement. The committed pursuit of self-worth ironically does not necessarily produce genuine good feelings about one's self, and the pursuit of happiness often eludes one. Self-esteem actually grows through real, difficult accomplishment and honest, genuine trust built over time with others, not through *smoke and mirrors* image doctoring. Unfortunately, ego-strength psychologists have promoted this preoccupation with self-image, self-acceptance, self-love and it results in a refusal to admit failure or limitations, to take responsibility and be vulnerable to respectable accountability.

The pursuit of moral integrity and accountability, responsibility for the Other is a more realistic, character-driven goal. When we treat others with fairness, compassion and justice, it will affect the way we feel about ourselves; we can expect good things from them as well. Honesty about our own selfishness and shortcomings will produce greater good in the long run. David Adams Richards (2010) in his bestselling book, *God Is: my search for faith in a secular world*, writes that it is actually *self-righteousness* in various disguises that gets in our way of knowing God (blocks faith) and accessing healthy freedom, and justifies much human abuse: bullying, refusal of truth and love, ingratitude, conning and coercion in various permutations. Individualism can easily implode into hedonistic self-assertiveness in the name of freedom. He writes:

> Liberty and Power are acquired by vastly different routes and a person can only seek one or the other; sin limits freedom and demands power; power promotes fear which promotes sin; freedom is turning away from evil…. There is no liberty in fear; there is only power. (D.A. Richards, 2010, pp. 88, 93)

This attitude has always been at the centre of the human predicament, and the source of much human suffering, sorrow and heartache. Egoism allows the ruthless individual to step on weaker backs on the way to the top, promoting yet more cynicism, distrust, and instability in relationships.

On reflection, is radical individualism not indeed a *failure of freedom*, even while it fights for the right to self-determination; it lacks discernment as to the context and the content of freedom, as Charles Taylor articulates so well.

> There is a sense in which one cannot be a self on one's own. I am a self only in relation to certain interlocutors: in one way in relation to those conversation partners who are essential to my achieving self-definition; in another in relation to those who are now crucial to my continuing grasp of language of self-understanding ... a self exists only within ...'webs of interlocution'. (C. Taylor, 1989, p. 36)

It denies the importance of the Other and the communal and narrative character of the self. The traditional link between freedom and truth, freedom and the good is broken; that is, the idea that we are liberated by coming to know the truth, or by how we relate to the good is held in question

or even contempt.[3] If, as Taylor suggests, moral identity has an important communal and narrative shape, then there will be self-loss or personal and societal harm in this self-determining freedom. It is critical that we include the relation to the Other in order that our map of the self avoids an artificial *abstraction of being*. Taylor's *communal* self contrasts starkly with the Foucault's radically *individualistic* self. Community, however, does not necessarily entail uniformity, or dull conformity and conventionalism, but rather a dynamic economy of *being-with-others*. Community can be robust even where there is disagreement. But one cannot have healthy community without some sort of *normativity*, in order to secure common expectations and common commitment to the good, and some sense of one's interdependence with other selves; there is no value-neutral state of affairs. The alternative results in moral confusion (*anomie*) or the emergence of will to power coercion. This communal emphasis involves honesty with where one is in one's narrative journey, part of the deep structure of the self. He contests that:

> I define who I am by defining where I speak from, in the family tree, in social space, in the geography of social statuses and functions, in my intimate relations to the ones I love, and also crucially in the space of moral and spiritual orientation within which my most important defining relations are lived out. (C. Taylor, 1989, p. 35)

Foucault's moral self-constitution, on the other hand, entails that one defines oneself over against the social matrix (*escape the communal*), while Taylor drawing on French intellectual Paul Ricoeur sees the benefits of a self that is integrated within a social matrix in a continuity with past. One philosopher sees the need for disruption; the other pursues integration and cooperation.

Freedom and individualism both need boundaries. Workaholism (twelve to sixteen hour days, or unlimited commitment to *success*) has been identified as a medical disease by the experts: stress disease, depression, anxiety, emotional deadness are all symptoms, the results of a driven lifestyle of self-inventing *homo sapiens sapiens*. Often this remains undetected because of the numerous accolades and prizes the person is receiving until that first heart attack.[4] Ambition to become a millionaire by thirty can take its toll on health and family. Such extreme and unrealistic views of self will certainly feed chronic fatigue syndrome and lead to emotional burnout. Many lone wolves and warriors dig their own early relational graves by living under the illusion; it can be exhausting to act like a demi-god if you are only human. Henry Cloud a business coach often asks CEOs, "Are you God?"; we need to start there. Such a posture produces a win/lose approach to life.

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[3] In my PhD thesis, Chapter 5, Section D. Communal and Narrative Character as the Shape of the Self (pp. 168f.), I examine this issue in detail. I will deal more extensively with Taylor's recovery of the good in moral identity in a separate essay on Moral Relativism.

[4] A recent Gobe & Mail article by Susan Pinker " Working long hours? Better buy a defribulator." Monday June 20, 2011, p B7. shows strong correlation between extra hours (11 hours plus) at work and heart attacks.

Career driven individualism creates a fragile foundation for the nurturing of a family. Healthy relations require trust, openness and commitment, self-sacrifice, even when it is inefficient and inconvenient. But individualism chafes against commitment to others for fear of their exploitation; other people compete with *my* ego, *my* needs and *my* ambitions. Freedom as self-dependence rejects the realism of human complementarity, and therefore potential for partnership and mutual empowerment. The Alpha Male can be a hero at work but tedious to live with at home. John Professional can feel strong and competent in the corporate boardroom, the pulpit, lecture hall, engineering firm, law courts or the political arena, but inadequate in family life, fearing the vulnerability of home life, and decrying the vicissitudes of raising children. Children do not respond well to command-control management; bureaucratic tactics are not helpful in dealing with the nuances and complexities of family concerns. Tragic though it is, divorce is casually assumed as a normal part of the CEO or legal partnership career track (a mark of success). But the tears are real as are the broken hearts, crushed dreams and psychological heavy burden in children who are struggling with the consequences of a split home.

Family and social covenants are inevitably undermined by the prideful deification of self that occurs in radical individualism. If everyone forms her own moral universe (*le malaise du jour*), what develops is a breakdown in moral and social ecology, leading to relational toxicity. Fundamental distrust of other persons, leadership, and bureaucratic coercion seems inevitable. Trust is replaced by bullying, fear, confusion and alienation, sometimes even violence. The move in Foucault is towards self-protection, atomism and isolation, versus reconciliation, healing and right relationship; he is more certain of what he wants to be free *from* than what he is *free for*. In Taylor's view, one flourishes in freedom when one pursues the good, is transformed by the good, within a context of community and a coherent narrative identity. This contextualization of freedom allows the self to engage the social situation in a fruitful way; indeed there must be a space where liberty can be secured and positive relational potential emerges, in an atmosphere of mutual trust. Taylor welcomes the full complexity of moral self-constitution, and does not want to omit anything that is actually operative in a healthy moral agency, or in a richer horizon of morality.[5]   The interpretation of self in terms of its relation to the good can only proceed in recognition of self's interdependence with other selves. Taylor (1989, p. 37) presses: "The drive to original vision will be hampered, will ultimately be lost in inner confusion, unless it can be placed in some way in relation to the language and vision of others." Foucault's *thin* self, because of a concern to break out of various kinds of domination by others or institutions, is mistakenly abstracted out of community and narrative continuity; it is blind to certain significant dimensions of the self.

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[5] This is a key resolution and contribution in the dissertation, not the rejection of Foucault's wisdom but a balance to its extreme by revealing the importance of the larger context of the self, including the horizon of the good, including divine goodness. Poststructuralist Nietzscheans are known as the *philosophers of the extreme*.

Conclusion

Freedom is one of the central ideas by which the modern notion of the subject has been defined, and it is quite evident that freedom is one of the values most appealed to in Western identity. But Taylor wants to caution us, to call this into question and ask us to move away from a radical freedom as self-determination or self-sufficiency and toward a *situated* freedom of interdependence where he believes we can recover a healthier understanding of self in a larger and richer context. Complete freedom is absurd; it seeks to escape all historical-cultural situation and narrative. Pure freedom without limits is nothing; it has no context; it is chaos, destructive; it is no place, a void in which nothing would be worth doing.[6] It is often abused. Foucault's view of freedom, although attractive for its pioneering spirit and some of its tools for creative self-articulation, is quite vulnerable to manipulation (a precarious autonomy); it is both exhilarating and dangerous. This *empty* freedom hollows out the self and can be filled with almost any moral trajectory or motive, whether constructive or destructive: community development or pure self-indulgence, compassionate healing or violence, character development or self-trivialization, militarism or peace-making, philanthropy or a Ponsi scheme. The news is full of both kinds of examples. We must remember that both Doctors Without Borders and the Taliban see themselves as *freedom fighters*. Radical freedom and the greed and hubris that often accompanies radical individualism plays well into the hands of the con artists and people of violence. All of these can be forms of *self-disciplined* exercise of freedom; anti-humanist expressions are not ruled out.

Taylor, in laying out the problematic of this sort of autonomy, wisely notes that the identity shift of radical freedom proceeds in four stages: a. breaking free of the larger matrix of cosmic and societal order, and then b. reinventing self or reshaping human nature, c. celebrating the Dionysian expressive release of instinctual depths in an uncensored way, and d. finally the death of all traditional values and the admission that ethics is grounded in will to power (*transvaluation of values*); all obstacles and constrictions to personal freedom are set aside.

Further, Taylor sees four dangers with this stance: a. self-trivialization and lack of depth, b. the Dionysian danger:

> If free activity cannot be defined in opposition to our nature and situation, on pain of vacuity, it cannot simply be identified with following our strongest, or most persistent, or most all-embracing desire either. That would make it impossible to say that our freedom was ever thwarted by our own compulsions, fears, or obsessions. One needs to be able to separate compulsions, fears, addictions from higher more authentic aspirations…. We have to be

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[6] M. Volf (1996, p. 63) in commenting on Foucault's disdain for boundaries and his quest for indeterminacy, writes in parallel concern to Taylor: 'Without boundaries we will be able to know only what we are fighting against but not what we are fighting for. Intelligent struggle against exclusion demands categories and normative criteria that enable us to distinguish between repressive identities and practices that should be subverted and nonrepressive ones that should be affirmed. Second, "no boundaries" means not only "no intelligent agency" but in the end "no life" itself ... The absence of boundaries creates nonorder, and nonorder is not the end of exclusion but the end of life.'

able to distinguish between compulsions, fears, addictions from those aspirations which we endorse with our whole soul. (Taylor, 1979, p. 157, 158)[7]

c. problem of despair: this type of freedom can be a ruse to trap one inside one's self, as Kierkegaard wrote—with the risk of nihilism and the death of meaning, d. lost potential in relationships: it rejects the possibility of human complementarity through a quest for an *uncolonized*, suspicious self. It is a key insight that absolute freedom misses the point about the distortions of inauthentic (suspect) and malevolent desires, and how they can lead to a life of mediocrity, self-indulgence, or even self-destruction. We see here the contrast of freedom as an *escape* from responsibility to community (Foucault) and freedom as *calling* within community (Taylor) grounded in the acceptance of one's defining situation, together with its opportunities and responsibilities. Freedom that limits itself to discussion of new possibilities of thinking and action, but heroically and ironically refuses to provide any evaluative orientation as to which possibilities and changes are desirable, is in danger of becoming empty or worse, predatory and malevolent. This is the darker side of radical freedom, rendering it a dangerous first principle. We need a more *full-blooded* conception of freedom and individuality.

> It is clear that, for Plato, the very definition of justice requires a higher and a lower and distinguishes our love of one from our love of the other. Christian faith could take this idea over while giving it a different content, and so Augustine speaks explicitly of "two loves". Recognition that there is a difference in us between higher and lower, straight and crooked, or loving and self-absorbed desires opens an intellectual space in which philosophy has a crucial role—as the attempt to articulate and define the deepest and most general features of some subject matter—here moral being. (Taylor, 1999, pp. 120-21)

Thus, we are arguing that radical freedom and individualism needs to be *redeemed* or recovered. One wants to win through to a freedom that includes limitations, admission of finitude and responsibility for the Other. Schwöbel defines the trajectory.

> The redemption of freedom is liberation from freedom for freedom, from the destructive consequences of absolute self-constituted freedom and for the exercise of redeemed and created human freedom which is called to find fulfilment in communion with God … Redeemed freedom is … essentially finite, relative freedom, freedom which is dependent on finding its orientation in the disclosure of the truth of the gospel … freedom as created, as the freedom of creatures whose freedom is not constituted *by* them but *for* them. (C. Schwöbel, 1995, p. 78)

Sociologist Robert Bellah in his landmark book, *Habits of the Heart,* exposes the myth. Bellah's team of researchers interviewed hundreds of Americans in various careers on the topic; the results revealed a struggle with a number of contradictions consequent to the philosophy of radical individualism. These contradictions were both emotional and cognitive. It seems that there is something deeply *problematic* with radical individualism. Bellah writes:

> It is a powerful cultural fiction that we not only can, but must make up our deepest beliefs in the isolation of our private selves ... There are truths we do not see when we adopt the language of radical individualism…. The major problem in individualism is its disregard for the social dimension of life, and the importance of that dimension in shaping the self. According to German sociologist Emile Durkheim the

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[7] In Chapter Six of the thesis, I discuss Taylor's important recovery of the *quality of the will* which relates to higher and lower desires which are a key part of ethics.

group (i.e. social solidarity) is a prerequisite for the identity of the individual. George Herbert Mead, another turn of the century sociologist, notes that meaning is a relational or interpersonal matter, not a mere individual phenomenon. The self is socially produced. (R. Bellah, 1985, pp. 65, 85 & 123)[8]

One can often imagine that the best growth occurs on one's own, even during one's greatest rebellion, but in fact one can only grow as a *person* while in direct and significant relationships, complementary partnerships with others. A person finds one's true and soulful being in mutual love and communion. Some intellectuals believe that love is more basic to our identity than reason, although not against reason. One can attempt to be an *individual* alone but will fail to become a *person* on one's own.

Redeemed freedom by definition takes on a distinctively communal character; it is contextualized within a conversation, within relationships between fellow interlocutors, against the backdrop of larger narrative that makes sense of self. This is the deep structure of self. Individual freedom gives up sovereignty ground to community and makes space for the Other in order to avoid some of the pitfalls and deficits of radical autonomy. As one gains a stronger identity as a social being, one reaps the benefits. The move is towards a deeper, more complex, communal character of self, a *thick* self. Foucault articulates freedom as *flight* from one's neighbour; the aesthetic self is part fugitive, part manipulator; its context is reduced to a life of *contest* with the Other (*agonisme*), manipulating power relations and truth games to one's own advantage. There is a certain validity to these concerns, but from the perspective of Taylor's comments (and those of other key thinkers), they lack vision for relationships that are other than a manipulative contest of wills, that is, relations informed by love, compassion and cooperation. Prominent social thinker J. Habermas, in response to Foucault's *ethics as aesthetics* argues that the preoccupation with the autonomy or self-mastery is simply a moment in the process of social interaction, which has been artificially isolated or privileged:

> Both cognitive-instrumental mastery of an objective nature (and society) and a narcissistically overinflated autonomy (in the sense of purposively rational self-assertion) are derivative moments that have been rendered independent from the communicative structures of the lifeworld, that is, from the intersubjectivity of relationships of mutual understanding and relationships of reciprocal recognition. (Habermas, 1987, p. 315)

In the light of this critical investigation, it is suggested that there is a need to *rethink* individuality in terms of a *reconciliation* between self and the Other, self and society, to put it metaphorically, in terms of *self and one's neighbour*. This is strongly affirmed by the profound Jean Vanier who has helped heal many a lost and broken soul in his L'Arche Communities as revealed in his #1 National Bestseller *Becoming Human*. The direction of reformulation is the recovery of a social horizon, including a stronger concept of the social body, and the common good; one needs the courage and determination to face the neighbour as a *good*. A radical pursuit of private self-interest, to the exclusion of the presence and the needs of the Other, is rendered untenable and dysfunctional after this critical dialogue.

Foucault, among many other radical individualists who have shaped the soul of Western identity, holds to a faulty assumption of *chronic distrust*, that is, that the Other will always try to

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[8] Emile Durkheim, *The Division of Labour in Society*. New York: Macmillan, 1964.; George Herbert Mead, *Mind, Self & Society*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1934.

control and manipulate my behaviour for his own purposes, or try to impose her agenda on me. Although such manipulation occurs, this is a jaded and cynical Hobbesian (all against all) perspective on human sociality. The *autonomy that modernity cannot do without* (a famous Foucauldian phrase) needs a *dialectical* relationship with community as a balance to one's self-reflexive relationship to oneself. The nature of autonomy cannot be confined to a radical self-determination but must involve the possibility of recognition by and dependence upon other people within a larger horizon of significance. *Flight* is by far the easier (although sometimes necessary for safety) and least complex default option; it is always easier to cease speaking with a difficult neighbour or to opt out of a relationship that is painful; it is more challenging and painful to take other selves seriously in terms of the good that they are, and the good that they can offer, or to work towards reconciliation. We suggest that redeemed freedom can emerge through a wiser discernment and exploration of the communal dimensions of subjectivity, as freedom to cooperate with, and freedom to serve the Other. Trust building is a tentative but necessary exercise for the moral health of the self.

We can learn from Foucault how to get out of a bad power relationship or spot a corrupt or ingenuous truth claim, to wake up to social evil through applying the hermeneutic of suspicion. But his help is seriously incomplete. Without community, humans cannot find full emotional and psychological health. Within community, they can live out of their truest selves, not apart from other people but in the midst of them: at work, in love, during learning. Psychiatrists confirm that there is tremendous personal health to be discovered in long term commitment to other people, shaping the foundation of any genuinely loving relationship. Jesus of Nazareth affirmed this insight that when we lose self (sacrifice self) in serving the Other, we actually find a deeper, more durable self. (Matthew 10: 39). Thus the kind of freedom promoted here at the end of this discussion involves working at relationships and rebuilding trust.

This newly discovered type of freedom and accountable individuality is destined to find its fulfilment, not in a self-justifying control, but in seeking out a communion of love, similar to the relations within the Christian Trinity. Here lives a healthy vulnerability, interdependency and mutuality (*complementarity*), with an ear tuned in to the voice and needs of the Other. It promotes the relocation of the dislocated self into a new narrative, a new drama that involves *us,* within the relational order of creation. Others can help discern the self, in order for it to find its own space for freedom and calling *with responsibility.* One of the basic tenets of ecology, as articulated so well by Stephen Bouma-Prediger in his book *For the Beauty of the Earth,*[9] is the need to look at the larger and richer context of where we are, rather than the current myopia or compartmentalization. He encourages us to assess and discern our home amidst the whole of human and non-human creation. Individualism is in denial of that larger, richer picture in the quest for individual fulfilment and *enlightened* self-interest.

Foucault highly values individual creativity but he lacks appreciation for how this relates to communal creativity of interdependencies and complementarity. B. Han (2002, p. 158) captures it in her comment: "Morality must be defined not through the conformity of the action with the codes, but in reference to the intention and freedom of the subject, and thus, ultimately,

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[9] Steven Bouma-Prediger, *For the Beauty of the Earth: a Christian vision of creation care*. IVP, 2002

to the way in which the will determines itself." His ethics is choice-focused and will-focused just like Descartes. Fulfilment in the right kind of community prevents the self from the most extreme forms of self-interest, narcissism, solipsism and even violence (R. Wolin, 1986); too many lone wolf stories, such as the Norway tragedy (summer 2011), show a distorted perception of reality. We are due for some fresh philosophical examinations. Today's language of freedom has a *mythological* flavour that offers a *mask* for a disguised self-interest, the *freedom to be, attain and do whatever I want*. Élitism is also implicated in neo-Nietzchean views of freedom like Foucault's. Redeemed freedom reveals this outlook as a distorted reality-construction. M. Volf in *Exclusion and Embrace* (1996) shows how this reconciliation or redemption of sociality can occur even amidst the most abusive and oppressive of situations including places where racism and ethnic cleansing have take place: Bosnia and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission tribunals at the end of Apartheid in South Africa.

In this anatomy of community, involving a *recontextualized* freedom with a sense of responsibility for the Other, the good can be both mediated and carried more robustly. One's individual relationship to the good can be strongly enhanced by involvement with a group that allows the good to shape identity; the right community environment can provide a positive *school of the good*.[10] Mirrored through others, the good can offer both accountability and real empowerment of the self. Group covenant and commitment to one another sustains the self in its agency; the younger self especially is released from the burden to invent his whole moral universe, and to be the *complete* person with all the strengths that he needs to flourish. Moreover, communal discernment advocates for the weak and challenges the strong and wealthy with the moral strength and maturity to give back to society, reducing societal injustice and reigning in excessive greed. Many very wealthy citizens pay no taxes. Moral self-constitution of this *thicker*, weightier, and more complex sort exceeds the capacity of the individual self; it requires a robust sense of community. The good news is that this is available; successful experiments have flourished among campus communities and elsewhere.

According to Christian biblical teaching, individuals are created by God with the purpose of serving other human beings (Genesis 1: 26, 27). Humans are not self-created or created for self *alone* or for maximal autonomy. Psalm 139 gives insight into how intimately God knows and cares about them. In fact, the two greatest principles in the entire Bible are: First discern the love of God with the true and complete self. The second is to love the Other (human and animal) deeply: to watch out for and be there for the Other, to treat with respect and dignity. This is the foundation for community where individuality is respected, and where trust, honour and virtue are emphasized. Motivated by stepping into God's love (*agape*), individuals thereby recover freedom to do good in the world (I John 4:7). Taylor has captured the true dimensionality of this possibility.

> Our being in the image of God is also our standing among others in the stream of love, which is that facet of God's life we try to grasp, very inadequately, in speaking of the Trinity. Now it makes a whole lot of difference whether you think this kind of love is a possibility for us humans. I think it is, but only to the extent that we open ourselves up to God, which means in fact, overstepping the limits set by Nietzsche and Foucault. (Taylor, 1999, p. 35)

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[10] I will deal with the language of the good in another essay on Relativism in much more detail.

Robert Bellah offers us a good definition. "A community is a group of people who are socially interdependent, who participate together in discussion and decision-making, and who share certain practices ... that define the community and are nurtured by it." (R. Bellah, p. 72) Community is not a therapy group or lifestyle enclave; these can also be shallow and narcissistic at a corporate level. It attempts to be an inclusive whole, covering the whole of one's life not just one compartment. There is a natural mutual accountability and support in a healthy community because these persons are directly related by love, and in the truthfulness and integrity of this community there is freedom and creativity. It offers us a chance to move out of the void of alienation into a context for self-discovery concerning beliefs, values and personal convictions, a group of interlocutors where one can test one's thoughts and convictions and develop character. It is the *home* we all long for. We are virtually incomprehensible to ourselves otherwise. Eugene Peterson articulates this vision in a robust and creative manner in his book, *Practice Resurrection.*[11]

> A young man who was recently baptized at a Vancouver church, gave testimony to exactly this type of realization and change of posture, a transformation of outlook from radical individualism to redeemed freedom in community:

> I once lived a selfish life with an awful attitude. I acted as if everyone owed me something; it was a miserable way to exist. The love of Jesus eventually softened my heart. I began to change the way I valued relationships; I started listening to others rather than just waiting for my turn to speak, and I realized that the world does not revolve around me. My eyes were opened to my amazing family, plus good friends who constantly challenge me, and a gorgeous wife who is there to support me, even when I don't deserve it.

Community offers a context in which to develop character. Character, integrity, and virtue seem to be marginalized in our fast-paced, mobile society. But real character can only be developed in a supportive community where a person is both accepted and challenged toward nobility and personal excellence, where there is good mentorship and natural accountability. At the same time, negative attitudes such an arrogance, bitterness and vengeance can be recycled within community; there can be healing from a false self or a *broken* emotional-relational background. Taylor extends that thought.

> The original Christian notion of *agape* love is of a love that God has for humans which is connected with their goodness as creatures (though we don't have to decide whether they are loved because good or good because loved). Human beings participate through grace in this love. There is a divine affirmation of the creature, which is captured in the repeated phrase in Genesis 1 about each stage of the creation, "and God saw that it was good". Agape is inseparable from such "seeing-good". (Taylor, 1989, p. 516)

Community offers a context for long-term, mutual relational commitments (a *win/win* scenario). Utilitarian individualism encourages us to use other people for our own prestige, wealth or progress. The Christian faith, by contrast, challenges us to make other people an end in themselves, to nurture and care for them. Such commitments have an enriching effect. Bonds develop and affirm the worth, identity and potential of individuals. Genuine community is a space to contribute, to invest spiritually, and to find both security and significance.

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[11] Eugene Peterson, *Practice Resurrection: a conversation on growing up in Christ*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010)

Community can also be a tremendous place of healing for empty, wounded individuals. Jean Vanier's L' Arche communities are a good example of this healing power of love where handicapped people find a place of dignity, worth and celebration. Christof Schwöbel captures it in its true intensity and productivity:

> The true measure of freedom is love as the relationship which makes the flourishing of the other the condition of self-fulfilment. Human freedom becomes the icon of divine freedom where the freedom of divine grace constitutes the grace of human freedom … That most poignant image of hope, the Kingdom of God, expresses the relation of free divine love and loving human freedom together in depicting the ultimate purpose of God's action as the perfected community of love with his creation. The fulfilment of God's reign and the salvation of creation are actualized together in the community of the love of God. (Schwöbel, "Imago Libertatis: Human and Divine Freedom" (C. Schwobel, 1995, pp. 80-81)

Western culture has paid a high price for its championship of radical individualism. There is a profound sense in realizing that "we did not know what we were doing." This has produced deficit, ignorance, and extremism of character and lifestyle. We dare not ignore the potential of this critical evaluation. Perhaps we can begin to deal with the crisis of self in our world, and the homelessness that plagues modern society. Durham Bishop Tom Wright concludes well the call of this essay to move to a higher ground and travel the wise ancient paths.

> Made for spirituality we wallow in introspection. Made for joy, we settle for pleasure. Made for justice, we clamor for vengeance. Made for relationship, we insist on our own way. Made for beauty, we are satisfied with sentiment. But new creation has already begun. The sun has begun to rise. Christians are called to leave behind in the tomb of Jesus Christ, all that belongs to the brokenness and incompleteness of the present world. It is time, in the power of the Spirit, to take up our proper role, our full human role as agents, heralds, and stewards of the new day that is dawning. That, quite simply, is what is means to be Christian: to follow Jesus Christ into the new world, God's new world, which he has thrown open before us. (N.T. Wright, *Simply Christian*)

La Fin

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