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Self-Fulfillment, Asceticism, and the Function of Authority

JEFFREY G. SOBOSAN, C.S.C.

The phenomenon of ascesis: a response to long-range goals

The question of the motivation of the individual's pursuit of mature self-fulfillment can best be analyzed in terms of the phenomenon that has traditionally been called *askesis*. We should be aware that this phenomenon is basic to human development and is not limited to religious applications. Thus Marshall McLuhan speaks of literacy as "an abstract asceticism that prepares the way for endless patterns of privation in the human community."¹ The idea of privation for the sake of attaining bodily excellence, prizes, or fame is, of course, the basis for the training program (*askesis*) of the athlete. More complex goals sometimes involve a collective asceticism. Thus our technical culture, like the monastic culture of the Middle Ages, presumes a vast heritage of behavioral conditioning in which punctuality, teamwork, postponement of rewards, mechanical aptitudes, and discipline are all essential parts.² Individual and collective ascesis both require that something that is itself relatively good *be sacrificed* for the sake of something considered more valuable. For example, the beauty of the creative work of the individual artist-craftsman, something quite definitely good in itself, has had to be sacrificed to a great extent in the course of the development of industrial society.³

The idea of ascetical practice is usually connected with projects of a long-term nature involving goals that are intended to give man a sense of having realized a higher form of human existence. The philosopher is defined by the goal in life that he has assigned to himself, namely, the pursuit of wisdom. The Greeks put great value on the attainment of *kalos kagathos*, the great and worthy man; Epictetus spoke of the "freedom of the sage who acts without hindrance in choice"; the Orphics and Pythagoreans chose ritual purification, while the Cynic-Stoic popular tradition opted for detachment in a search for a more human existence. Ascesis as a religious experience has been characterized by strict methodology and often minutely regulated practices involving much austerity, self-denial, and even self-infliction of pain.⁴

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What is responsible for a man's decision to submit a great portion of his life to such logically regulated action? The underlying presupposition of asceticism on the ethical or religious levels of action is that such practices will help to realize some universal ideal not immediately apparent in any given action. Religious asceticism is understood as a liberation process undertaken as a result of a sentiment of *irony* in one's life. The use of the notion of irony implies a sense of shame on the rational or emotional level of one's consciousness. The result is the stimulation of the individual toward acceptance of moral rules in an effort to replace the pseudoliberty of spontaneous acts of servitude with an effort to examine one's actions in the light of the goal in life one has set for himself as a result of this experience of irony.⁵

Kierkegaard speaks of *irony* in this somewhat technical sense as the confine between the aesthetic and ethical stages of life, because it tends to reinstate a sense of moral responsibility in a style of life that otherwise would remain on the aesthetic – that is, romantic and unrealistic – level of existence in the world. The origin of this sense of irony with regard to what is and what should be contained in one's orientation in life may lie outside one's critical lucidity or philosophical stance.⁶ Thus the regimen of the ascetic may be simply the caricature of an ideal thrust upon the individual by guilt feelings or other emotions of subconscious origin. The stimulus to ascetic activity can be regarded as an authority that will seem extrinsic to the self to the extent that its demands are obeyed mechanically and not as a result of conscious conviction. An authority that is entirely extrinsic to the individual may find some form of conscious acceptance by the individual in cases where some form of liberative activity can be associated with the claim to authority. This phenomenon may result in a master-disciple relationship or it may be a savior-saved relationship. In either case, but especially in the latter, the savior-image can be an unrealistic image, or a dream fabrication, or some form of a *deus ex machina* that may be resented later when some immediate danger or threat is no longer present or when the restraint imposed by assimilation with the authority-figure seems to have no creative results. The particular form of ultimate authority chosen by the individual or imposed upon him will be acceptable on the various levels of consciousness only to the extent that it provides an answer to the phenomenon that above all others casts doubt on the self-contained intelligibility of human life as a whole within this world, namely, death.⁷

The fact of human finality implied in death does not necessarily serve to draw a man out of his immediate concerns to the acceptance of an authority that will re-interpret his activity so as to give some meaning to his life-process. As the examples of Epicurus and Nietzsche perennially demonstrate, there is the ever-present temptation to weariness and the desire to concentrate one's energies on the immediately ascertainable goals of life. The attempt to remove the thought of death from man's consciousness is manifest in the implicit psychology involved in the making of "sick jokes" or in the development of certain "ritual attitudes" toward death. Although the mature man is characterized by his having taken a definite position in the face of his finality, such a positing of oneself is possible only if some authority, whether a person or a society, has

succeeded in showing him the necessity of a conscious grappling with the problem of death and the consequences of his finality with regard to the way he lives his life. The basis of the necessity for going outside of oneself in order to confront the implications of death can be found in the fact that the only death that I encounter right now is *death in general*, something that remains very abstract for me, something of which the bonds with my uniqueness are obscure because what is immediately experienced is not death itself but the suffering, anguish, and sense of dereliction that precede it.⁸

The willingness of a person to accept a religious interpretation of meaning in life will be great if the threat of death terrifies a person to the extent that his own critical faculties are relatively inoperative. But the person whose activity in this world entails a certain sense of *engagement* and a real, if limited, sense of creative involvement in building up the world will be more demanding of a religious vision of man's potential for self-realization. Such a person has found that the world offers some means of attaining a sense of fulfillment not possible to life isolated from the problems of the world. To accept any religion as an authority (that is, as a provider of meaning in life and death), the person must see in it not only advice on the art of dying, but also on the art of living in this world. And this, of course, is only to reiterate a constant theme throughout the best spirituality being written today: that a viable expression of Christian promise must use experience in the world as a mediator of, and not an antithesis to, Christ's eschatological revelation of the eventual fulfillment of man.

The art of living presented to the mature Christian must, therefore, avoid an encouragement of a style of life that seems to isolate transformation in Christ from the personal development taking place on other levels of his consciousness. On the other hand, the inadequacy of certain types of activity must be frankly admitted. There will be less of a problem in this regard if the redemption proclaimed in Christian preaching is seen not as a simple juridical pronouncement on moral activity, but as a triumph of man's human existence as a totality. Activity in this world that is viewed simply from the point of view of self-emptying will be no less sterile than traditional forms of self-annihilating asceticism. There is a certain equilibrium to be maintained with regard to the interrelation of an eschatological vision and the human desire for self-realization. Feuerbach and Marx, for example, reacted negatively (though for different reasons and with different results) to an apparently excessive emphasis on transcendence whereby God, being utterly other, seems to demand a complete or at least partial estrangement from the space and time context of those who would adore him. There is the concomitant desire to bring true religion back into the marketplace from the "places of worship" into which it has been forced to retreat. On the other hand, the methodic effort to attain self-realization, whether in the form of ascetical practices or involvement in worldly activity, can never be considered autonomous in a world where, despite the so-called myth of progress, much of a man's endeavor is characterized by extremes of determinism and contingency. The complex milieu of human activity and service usually provides sufficient risk, suffering, effacement, and failure to encourage a fruitful reflection on the human condition and its continued need for redemption.⁹

The Christian will feel no need to look for a personally concerned and intervening Savior if the experience of suffering and frustration, but especially the experience of liberating activity and service to others, seem unconnected with a theology of death and resurrection. The man whose entire person experiences an intense longing for freedom that is born of frustration will be responsive to a theology of redemption if its message of deliverance seems justified by his own experience or that of someone with whom he can identify. The extent of his response to the proclamation of redemption will be reflected in the manner in which his entire life activity is altered by the message. The tradition of Christian spirituality has looked upon asceticism in any form as a liberating process when it is realistically motivated by love of God, love of one's fellow men, and love of all creation. In the following section I shall discuss some of the aspects of freedom of which the contemporary Christian is all too conscious and which must, therefore, be considered in any presentation of the Christian message and the hope intrinsic to it.¹⁰

The function of authority: freedom to be free

In taking the notion of asceticism as expressing a fundamental method of human development, we have seen that this thesis entails a need to analyze the process whereby an individual is impelled from within and without to alter his self-conception and the concomitant world-view issuing from that view of his self. Although the process shares elements that are characteristic of all organic growth, human development, we noted, is the result of a conscious co-operation on the part of the individual with the wider realm of his culture. Asceticism is characterized as a conscious process, since it consists in a succession of choices made by the individual in an attempt to attain a more nearly perfect mode of organic existence. The mode of existence is organic because, as a theoretically final stage, it is not independent of previous stages, but in some way represents an incorporation of elements of the prior development. The particular perfection of human existence includes this idea of choice on the part of the individual organism itself. We have seen that the conscious thrust of the choices is an attempt to free oneself from those aspects of organic existence which hinder the attainment of more perfect modes of existence. Asceticism, as a methodical attempt to implement this pursuit of freedom, has the built-in danger of a man's ignoring the organic nature of development. When this happens, the goal offered by outside authority proves to be unrealistic according to the possibilities of appropriation resulting from the individual's own prior development. Thus, with this summary of the paper so far, we can now state the following thesis: Christianity finds itself in a state of crisis whenever the formulation of its goals appears incongruous with humanity's present state of consciousness. The area of discussion most needing re-evaluation is the idea of freedom—taken, as Hegel counsels, not only as a goal of human development, but as the ambit in which self-realization must find itself if it is to thrive.

Any attempt to analyze the impulse to freedom in a realistic way must take into consideration a fact that makes any appropriation process very precarious:

namely, that the pursuit of freedom is carried out *in* freedom. There is thus a radical determination in the process of appropriation itself. Since the appropriation process refers to acceptance of a vision offered by an outside authority, the faith of the individual must be accepted as being radically contingent. This contingency, if we are to believe theologians like Bultmann, Ebeling, and Metz, is a consequence of the fact that the believer has at no time existentially acquired his belief once and for all; it lies ever and again before him as a possibility of his existence, to be received as a gift freely coming anew from God.¹¹ This lack of determinism on the part of the role of *faith* in man's moral consciousness is such that the believer can never be certain of his fundamental option in faith because freedom is its formative element, and because the experience of free faith remains *before and for itself* essentially ambivalent. Faith is always and inevitably endangered by the possibility of unbelief; which is to say, the very ground of our existence down to its deepest level, our faith, is honeycombed with the hovering ambivalence of our freedom.¹²

The complexity of man's being permits an existential simultaneity of belief and unbelief as a result of a two-fold form of liberty that is operative in the faith-process. The first form of liberty is known from experience and corresponds to what is called free will. There are actions of which a man is capable in which he commits himself to one among a number of alternatives, some of which he considers more or less good, some of which he sees as evil. Scientific research in various fields has given new insight into previously unknown areas of determinism in an individual's psychic make-up. So too has technical progress expanded the quantity and import of social roles now open to the majority of men, despite the decline in social importance of certain other roles.¹³

The second form of liberty is concerned with the person's orientation toward God in a manner less reflective than the conscious option characterizing the first form of liberty. The Christian views this orientation as the ultimate determinant of the objective value of his actions, and therefore of his life as a response to the redemptive message of Christ. As such, it is a fundamental liberty of existential and totalizing option, in which I express myself wholly with all that I wish to be in this world and before God. It is a totalizing, profound, stable, and spontaneous orientation of myself before the totality of the reality that I either accept or refuse.¹⁴

On the conscious level, the Christian confronts various alternatives for action, all of which may be good. He must choose the one he considers to be the most valuable to him. The very consciousness of the fact of freedom of choice, however, confronts the person with the inadequacy of the freedom he possesses. Even when it is possible to realize a complex of values with a single action, as in Aquinas's example of eutrapelia, the person may feel frustrated in the awareness that he has thus probably limited the full realization of at least some of these values. When a value is desired, but cannot be fully or even partially realized, man is confronted with the fact that his attainment of the goals of his value-structures is to some extent limited by one of the many forms of determination that a realistic view of human life must take into consideration. As I have said, the discovery of this fact brings an element of frustration into man's

consciousness. But it is from this awareness of frustration that the consciousness of the full potential of human liberty is awakened. Man's vocation as a free entity is tested only at the moment when he is confronted with the limits of his activity as a consequence of a conflict with either some internal or external force that frustrates the attainment of some value he desires to possess. This experience is therefore the origin of the irony spoken of earlier whereby the individual is made to desire a more nearly perfect form of human freedom and is willing to submit to an authority he feels will aid him in his quest. To undertake discipleship under a master, to look upon another as a savior-figure, or to join a society promising some form of salvation, all of these choices will require the person to limit himself at any given moment in order to attain goals he considers of higher value.

The discipline undertaken by the person in this case requires faith in the capacity of the authority-figure to have such a grasp of the totality of reality that the choices demanded of the disciple will effect his attainment of the goal he has appropriated. It is a process fraught with restlessness today as the complexity of society requires an increasing specialization of functions and the concomitant difficulty of relating these varying specializations to the common good. However, we may still note that the relationship with the authority-figure is in a sense a sacred relationship, inasmuch as it recapitulates the best and the worst aspects of more primordial interpersonal relationships and is somehow expected to bring them to perfection. This relationship must take account of the fact that present obligations felt by the individual at any given moment and in terms of his life-orientation are not independent of the movement of one's culture, religion, or nationality, or of humanity as a whole toward some realization in the future. With increasing complexity, therefore, there is a greater disjunction resulting with regard to the relation of various goods considered as desirable. Moreover, there is an increasing separation of the attainment of these goods from the immediate consciousness of the individual. For example, peace as a good, as a value to be sought, is no longer a familial or tribal concern, but something with global implications. In the meantime, an ultimate good, such as God or heaven, seems utterly foreign to everyday concern, and, except in times of crisis, not worth the surrender of more immediate values.

We can conclude, therefore, that the radical and ever-present contingency of faith as a process is intensified by, and inseparable from, an ambivalent attitude toward the authority offering a content to the faith-process. Ultimately, the restlessness stems from a concern whether or not God can promise and give man what he wants: namely, a self. This ambivalence not only touches a man's immediate relationship with a transcendent God, but affects the entire gamut of authority-figures, including those of the sacred society he accepts as his church. Today man is less influenced in his faith-relationships by his social environment and general public opinion. Elements of the faith-relationship that seem to be tainted with authoritarianism or dogmatism threaten the sense of freedom the individual feels he has already attained. At times, the acceptance of a vision of life's meaning offered by one authority seems less viable than a supermarket approach in which the individual attempts his own synthesis of various author-

ity claimants or simply falls into a state of anomie wherein no definitive vision of the meaning of human existence seems possible and life becomes absurd.

In conclusion, I must clarify a distinction. We say that a crisis in Christianity reflects the need to re-formulate traditional expressions of belief and hope. This type of theological endeavor, however, is to be distinguished from whatever disregards basic insights that are perennially relevant and that cry out for embodiment in ways appropriate to men of all times and cultures. In addition to establishing the already well-known need for adaptation of formulation, I have also attempted to ground my reflections in this paper regarding the Christian message and the hope intrinsic to it in a framework of creative growth: that is, the ascetic and organic nature of man's existence in the world. I have shown that man must submit to built-in limitations, not to his essential freedom, but to those forms of spontaneous action that confine the value of his activity to what is immediately perceptible. My conclusion, therefore, is that a crisis in Christianity (such as, I believe, we are now experiencing) results not necessarily from a refusal to submit to authority, but more likely from a failure to see in established authority any reason for confidence in its capability to bring the individual to self-realization.

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12. See Metz, *op. cit.*, p. 64.
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