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The Philosopher's Stone

Philosophical Discussion Group, Armstrong State University

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THE PHILOSOPHER'S STONE

The Newsletter of the Philosophical Debate Group

On Freedom

by Eric Verhine

As a result of several fervent and turbid discussions outside Gamble Hall on the nature and verity of individual freedom, the intrepid members of the Philosophical Debate Group have decided to take this up as their next topic. In so doing, we step twice into the river of a debate that has been flowing for centuries.

The debate of freedom versus determinism, however, does not extend back as far as most philosophical debates, which come to us from the mecca of all philosophical confusion, ancient Athens. This particular conundrum comes not from the Greeks, but from the always sunny tradition of Christian doctrine and theology. As Christian doctrine evolved and thinkers mulled over Paul's teachings on the sinfulness of human nature, some theologians began to ask if the individual is able to act free from the compulsion of sin, or if he is bound in slavery to sin. This question came to a answer in the 5th century debate between Augustine and Pelagius in which Augustine argued persuasively (in terms of the Christian worldview) that the will is bound by sin until regenerated by God's grace.

But as with all philosophical or theological "answers," Augustine's answer was not the final statement regarding the freedom of the will. Whether the will is free or bound thinkers continued to debate. The debate raged in Germany between Erasmus and Luther, eventually producing one the true classics of theology, Luther's *The Bondage of the Will*; I do not think I need tell you what Luther's opinion on this issue was. The debate raged all over the continent and even in America between the Arminians and the Calvinists, and this

particular phase of the debate produced what is in my lowly opinion the greatest work ever written on this subject: Jonathan Edwards' *A Careful and Strict Inquiry into the Prevailing Notions of the Freedom of the Will*. Edwards work is nowadays overlooked because he was Puritanical, Calvinistic, and pre-modern, but it should not be. For, while maintaining his stupendous New England rigidity and dogmatism, Edwards reasons more carefully and strictly on the question of freedom than any other philosopher I have read. He concludes that it makes sense to speak of a free agent, someone who can do as she chooses, but that it makes no sense to talk about a completely free will, for the will itself or the particular choice must always be subject to impulses (desires, emotions, lines of thought), the source of which, before regeneration, is indwelling sin.

I have dwelt so long on this history because it is important to recognize that the problem of freedom is one that comes to us from the Christian tradition. One of the most significant questions we can ask and answer in our own discussion of free will versus determinism is whether it still makes sense to debate this issue, given that God is dead and the Christian worldview is no longer taught or accepted. Does this debate still have the necessary context to make sense? If so, how? What is it, in place of indwelling sin, that binds the will? What is it, in place of God's mercy, that frees the will and allows the person to choose the good?

Modern philosophers have said much about individual freedom, but none have written more compellingly and originally than Jean-Paul Sartre. Sartre held that all philosophies of determinism and statements of victimization are no more than excuses that release the

individual from responsibility for her behavior. The individual, Sartre maintained, is radically and frighteningly free in all situations to choose what he will become and to create himself. Sartre's conclusions about freedom derived first from his experience during World War II of the myriad of excuses that people pleaded to justify their staying out of danger, but also from his doctrine that no such thing as a self or nature exists. What this means is that there is no such thing as an individual nature or essence which determines what a person is and how that person will act.

Many postmodern philosophers, such as Michel Foucault, follow Sartre in denying the existence of the self or essence. For Foucault, however, what follows from this denial is not radical freedom but radical determinism: since there is no aboriginal self, what the individual becomes is a matter of the social forces that shape her. Thus, for postmoderns the eventual self is not a creation freely and brazenly chosen, but a product of the linguistic, moral, economic, political, and cultural systems into which the individual is thrown at birth.

This comparison between Sartre and Foucault leads to other important questions regarding freedom. What follows from the denial of the self or individual essence? Does the absence of a self imply radical freedom or docility?

In an effort to provide more than my own ramblings, I asked two members of the PDG to write down some of their thoughts about individual freedom. I include these two passages with thanks to their authors. The first passage is by Jonathan Gerson, the second by Jesse Thomas.

What is freedom? Is it the illusion that we fabricate for ourselves to help make life easier? Or is it really something that can be obtained? I think that freedom is too much of a muddled concept to be properly understood in words. However, if it really is something that we can have, do we really want it? For if true freedom can exist, then we are doomed to be completely alone in our decisions, and that is scarier than being locked in a prison for life. To be completely free we must throw off everything that we have and have been taught. And this means being completely alone. (Jonathan Gerson)

Individual freedom implies a necessary knowledge of the individual. Only complete self-knowledge provides the basis for freedom. To be properly free, one must observe all the variables of life and recognize their combinations and relations. There are two "life-variables" of which one must become cognizant if one is to be free: endogenous and exogenous variables. Endogenous variables are those that can be manipulated by an individual. They include such externals as hair color, place of residence, and weight. Exogenous variables are those that are set out of one's own personal control. Features such as place of origin, eye color, height, and race are in this category. Additionally, numerous other exogenous variables enter into an individual's life through her society, family, and other relations. Keep in mind that one cannot control exogenous variables, not even by means of endogenous variables, which can serve only to combat psychologically and emotionally the necessity of exogenous variables.

When a person knows himself only in terms of exogenous variables, he falls into a life over which he has no control, and for him, freedom is surely impossible. When a person tries to manipulate the endogenous variables of life in order to go against the direction in which the exogenous variables push, she remains unaware of freedom, since she continues to allow the exogenous variables to determine her self-conception and course of life.

Again, the proper way to be free is to observe all the variables of life and to recognize their combinations and relations. Each variable has little meaning in an individual's determination, just as in the equation $1+3+5=9$ the 1 has no indication of the 9 imbedded in it. Only when all variables have been included and considered, their relations examined, will the recognition of true freedom appear. Individual freedom is only recognizable to those who have achieved the task of becoming an individual. (Jesse Thomas)

Please join the PDG on Wednesday, March 20 for our discussion on the nature and verity of freedom. As always, we will meet in the Honor's Lounge in Gamble Hall.

Summary of the Previous Meeting

Members of the PDG recently attended a seminar at Savannah State on "Philosophy and Race." The leaders of this discussion were Dr. Steven Weiss, a professor of philosophy, Dr. Gene Mesco, professor of biology, and Dr. Modibo Kadalie, professor of political science. Dr. Weiss began the meeting by trying to induce people to think about whether or not the concept of race still has utility, or whether it has enough utility to justify its continued use. He urged his audience members to consider how they would argue for using the concept of race, and whether this concept is used in generally positive or negative ways. Dr. Mesco contended that there is no biological basis for distinctions in race: to tell a black person from a white by looking at DNA is practically impossible. Dr. Kadalie, arguing from a Marxist point of view, asserted that the concept of race and the class distinctions built upon it are inherent in capitalism. As long, he maintained, as capitalism dominates Western economy and culture, racial inequality will persist, since such inequality is built into the nature of capitalism. It is difficult, even for one sympathetic to Marx, to see why class distinctions

must necessarily be racial under the dominion of capitalism, but this was Dr. Kadalie's contention. All in all, it was a night of stimulating thought and, as are all meetings of philosophers, no final solution.

First Annual PDG Cookout

All PDG members and non-members (which is the set of all possible people) are invited to attend a cookout at Dr. Weaver's house on Wednesday, March 13 at 3:00 p.m. The munificent Dr. Weaver will provide both vegetarian and non-vegetarian foods (the set of all possible foods). Dr. Weaver's address is 336 Ogeechee Drive, Richmond Hill. For directions, please feel free (but does it mean that you are?) to call him at either 961-3247 (office) or 727-6377 (home). The topics for discussion will be the quality of Dr. Weaver's cuisine and whatever else comes up, more than likely the nature and possibility of freedom. If you are planning to come, please let Dr. Weaver, Dr. Nordenhaug, or Eric Verhine know.

If you have any comments, questions, or criticisms regarding "The Philosopher's Stone" or the Philosophical Debate Group, or if you would like to submit a topic or article for debate, please contact either Eric Verhine or Dr. Erik Nordenhaug.

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