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Wesley Sutermeister

College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University, obsculta@csbsju.edu

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GUSTAVE THIBON AND HUMAN FREEDOM

Wesley Sutermeister

Gustave Thibon was a 20th century French philosopher perhaps best known for his role as social diagnostician in the wake of the national and global crisis that was World War II. Thibon, a contemporary peer of philosophers Gabriel Marcel and Simone Weil, sought to discover the root causes for this disaster that went beyond purely political and economic explanations. Instead, he engaged in a sustained reflection on the nature of humanity itself, paying particular attention to the thoroughly social character of human life. Thibon's analysis is deserving of attention today because it bears upon important theological-anthropological issues, namely, human nature, sin, and grace, especially in regards to their relationship to society as a whole. This brief study will focus primarily on Thibon's understanding of human freedom as it relates to questions concerning human nature, arguing that many of the problems that Thibon pointed out in post-WWII France still plague the contemporary world.

For Thibon, then, the major problem in the world is its lack of freedom. While admitting that he does exaggerate the issues to some extent in order to make a point,

Thibon argues that human beings are no longer free (1) bodily, (2) spiritually, (3) economically, and (4) politically.¹ Humans are no longer bodily free because of a rise in “the police-state mentality” which imposes restrictions on an individual’s movements, enforces “compulsory vaccinations and military conscription,” creates “retrospective laws,” and displaces whole populations.² They are no longer spiritually free because of a “unified education” that flaunts creativity and uniqueness, and also because of excessive slogans and propaganda which hamper the “spontaneous development” of a person’s thoughts and sentiments.³ Further, economically speaking, human beings are no longer free because the State has progressively taken on the roles of individuals: “the doctor, the educationalist, the director of conscience, industrialist, merchant and insurer.”⁴ This has led to the State becoming increasingly “omnipotent” over the lives of its citizens.⁵ Finally, human beings are no longer politically free because they “can no longer choose between men, to represent his concrete interests and aspirations, but only between so many abstract programmes... and monolithic political parties.”⁶ The flesh and blood of humanity is rapidly being replaced by governmental doubles who represent real individuals and communities in a machine-like, bureaucratic, and uniform manner.

According to Thibon, there are two underlying forces which contribute to these problems pertaining to human freedom: (1) the spirit of abstraction, and, as a specific example of this, (2) the idea of the masses.⁷ By abstraction, Thibon means the formulation of ideas about human beings in general that have no basis in concrete living, in existential reality.⁸ It is what happens when humans are labeled, grouped, and stripped of their unique personality, aspirations, ideas, and skills; they become mere consumers, spectators, or workers. Such an

attitude toward the human person is that of a corporation toward its workers or the government administration toward its citizens.⁹ “The human person,” says Thibon, “is no longer a member of an organism but a cog in a machine, a figure in a particular set of statistics.”¹⁰ This statistical, administrative view of the human person fails to see the spiritual and moral depths that each person carries within themselves. Thibon’s analysis is biting:

The various types of humanity now overshadowed by slavery—the mulcted taxpayer, the proletarian whose labour is bought like merchandise, the ‘insured person’ battenning on the national budget, the ‘economic man’ under every aspect of production or consumption, the anonymous elector who is simply a digit in a sum of addition, the human puppet jerked by the strings of propaganda – all can be reduced to one single type: the human creature emptied of respect, of the love due to a person, the human person treated as a *thing*.¹¹

The idea of the masses is a pernicious example of the potential for culture to degrade the individual human person, which Thibon emphatically decries: “This amorphous *mass*, brandishing, bear-like, the *massive* club of its *massive* claims, is characteristic of a society in the last stages of decadence.”¹² The idea of the masses considers all individuals as if they were the same, and the mass media certainly contributes to this flattening of human creativity and personality.¹³ Thibon quotes St. Dominic on this point: “grain massed into a heap goes bad.”¹⁴ Human life needs breathing space, both culturally and individually, in order to thrive. A society that attempts to unite people through forces which persistently ignore the unique dignity of individuals

and local cultures is destined to destroy these very things. Again, Thibon's diagnosis is better left in his own words:

Man has turned into a grain of sand, human society into a desert. There are no more bonds, therefore no more freedom. The grains of sand are docile, and the reason is simple: though they are heaped together, each of them is solitary. So the wind sweeps them up and carries them off at will. Ours is the age of the masses, the age of mass movements. But there is no greater "mass movement" than a sandstorm in the desert. The forces that move men are becoming more and more alien to what is deepest in human nature.¹⁵

In order to combat the tendency to abstraction and the masses, Thibon proposes a redefinition of freedom itself: "Human freedom is not a purely self-sufficient faculty, something suspended in thin air. It is dependent upon man's nature... it rests upon a necessity which it transcends."¹⁶ While the world views freedom as self-will, self-autonomy, or independence from all external forces and authorities, true freedom cannot be had apart from those natural and cosmic limitations that make up what it means to be human.¹⁷ "The great mistake," Thibon warns, "is to raise the problem of freedom in terms of independence. Man is a 'relative' being, and to be related means to be *bound* to something or someone."¹⁸ A view of freedom which refuses to take into account these necessary limitations or bonds (i.e. land, work, family, religion, community) is defunct and deserves to be called a "phantom freedom."¹⁹ Freedom arises from the posture, or attitude, that individuals take toward those realities of life that are a given, that have something of fate attached to them.

Thibon's stress on embracing human limitations for genuine freedom parallels Joseph Ratzinger's comments

about the nature of sin as a rejection of limitations, of creatureliness, and of the “inner standard of the human person.”²⁰ Such a rejection does not entail freedom but rather slavery. According to Thibon, “Man is tending more and more to throw off obedience to the cosmic rhythms only to become the docile slave of artificial cadences that are infinitely more rigid.”²¹ He calls for a recognition of and healthy respect for our limitations in order for human freedom to genuinely appear:

Our limitations are inseparable from all that is deepest in us, from our resources, from our life: it is by means of them that we breathe, that we exist at all. When we overstep them, we think to enrich ourselves, but all we do is to lose our way. It is our limitations that guard our strength and our unity. We live within them as blood in the arteries; the wall of the artery is no prison to the blood and we don't open an artery to “liberate” the blood. But there is a way of emancipating humanity, politically and scientifically, that is uncommonly like the opening of an artery.²²

It is Thibon's insistence that authentic human freedom cannot be divorced from love that causes him to react so strongly against any governmental guarantee of so-called freedom. Institutions simply lack the capacity to love. However, this is not to say that human freedom does not have a social dimension, it does: “Freedom depends on vital solidarity.”²³ Thibon is adamant that “if we look at the loftiest manifestations of freedom we find always at their heart some living bond: an obedience, that is to say, which is inspired by love.”²⁴ The key for Thibon is to learn to love those bonds which we are naturally given: “we are free to the precise extent to which we can *love* the people and things on which we depend.”²⁵ As such, the locus for

human freedom is the individual; not the government, not other social institutions, and not other people. Only the individual can choose to love those things and people to which they are bound. Thibon rhetorically asks, “What are a man’s being and love but a texture of relationships, the intimate presence of *the other* in the soul of the *I*?”²⁶ It is only this kind of love that can guarantee the flourishing of freedom.

Ultimately, for Thibon, it is Christ who points the way to the “true road of freedom,” because he bound himself to God in the most extreme way: death on a cross.²⁷ In this experience of being completely in the hands of external powers, of being literally pinned down by sovereign forces, Jesus exercised perfect freedom because of his love that bound him to God and his neighbors. God alone is the most loveable One who also guarantees the greatest freedom for human beings.²⁸ In loving God human beings do not experience slavery, but freedom, because this love is what created them and always gives them life. Karl Rahner says that, “Autonomy... does not decrease, but increases in the same proportion as dependence on God.”²⁹ When someone binds themselves to God, they do not find restriction or slavery, but freedom: “By losing myself to Him I have sovereign freedom, sovereign self-possession, because my will is thus wedded to the very springs of my being.”³⁰ Thus for Thibon freedom is what John R. Sachs describes as “the capacity and responsibility for human community and divine communion.”³¹ Freedom and love are bound up in the divine life, which has been made available to human beings through God’s radical grace manifested in Jesus Christ.

Notes:

¹Gustave Thibon, "Christianity and Freedom," in *Christianity and Freedom: A Symposium* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956), 1-2.

²*Ibid.*, 1. Again, the context of these statements is important: the decades immediately following WWII in France.

³*Ibid.*, 1.

⁴*Ibid.*

⁵*Ibid.*, 2. Further, "the State organizes and distributes; it can create nothing at all... there has been too much of a tendency to expect from the State more than God himself gives." Gustave Thibon, *Back To Reality* (London: Hollis & Carter, 1955), 17. There is this complaint as well: "For too long now man has been frittering away his nature by playing at the divine; it is time to teach him that the divine must pass through the human stage... there is only just time.. to re-educate this poor nature... of the use of its ontological joints" (76).

⁶Thibon, "Christianity and Freedom," 2.

⁷Thibon, *Back to Reality*, 21: "The most deep-seated evil we suffer from is our unrealism in thought and conduct." Citing a specific example – the abstraction of sensibility – Thibon says, "Just as in the saint (and, after a different order, in a great thinker or artist) the things of the spirit become concrete, so in the modern man it is the sensibility that *suffers from abstraction*" (142).

⁸In this regard Thibon speaks of those whom he calls the "*ideious*" who possess "a chimerical mind a man whose ideas come to nothing, never take flesh, never bite on nature" (*Ibid.*, 3). Further, "We are too much inclined to think that words exempt us from action, that it is enough to have described eloquently what it is necessary to do, and the thing is done" (3). This is our "orgy of hollow verbosity" (22). What we need instead is the "incarnation of the idea" (4); "True ideas and true desires – even, for that matter, true words – are to be recognized as such by their motive power; they naturally tend to become incarnate in action" (27). Elsewhere Thibon claims that, "Action, obedience, silence – these are all signs of strength, so many constructive virtues. Verbiage, a spirit of negation, hoping in others, all such false coinage, issued by weakness, ceases to be legal tender when once the hour of realities strikes" (30). In this way Thibon follows Gustavo Gutiérrez's emphasis on action first and reflection, or theology, second. Interestingly enough, they both refer to the philosophic maxim *primum vivere* (literally,

“at first to live”) to stress the priority of life experience. See James B. Nickoloff, ed., *Gustavo Gutiérrez: Essential Writings* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996), 25 and Thibon, *Back to Reality*, 39 and 117.

⁹It should be noted that this spirit of abstraction is a *potential* danger, not necessarily inherent in corporations or governments themselves.

¹⁰Thibon, “Christianity and Freedom,” 2. Also, “Mere anonymous workers, employees in some great factory or business... [are] weak interchangeable cogs, they rather get the impression that the vast machine they belong to would go on running just as well without them” (Thibon, *Back to Reality*, 7).

¹¹Thibon, “Christianity and Freedom,” 16. Marcel, paralleling these sentiments, argues that the “human being... tends progressively to be reduced to the status of a *mere* thing,” in Gabriel Marcel, *Man against Mass Society* (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine’s Press, 2008), 14. A further consequence of the spirit of abstraction is that it strips reality of all sense of mystery: “The soul, which cannot live without the breath of mystery, stifles in this stale and arid world: it is like being in a desert, of which all the bounds can be measured at a glance; the track to be followed can be observed all the way till it reaches the horizon: never a single detour unforeseen, where human hope might possibly lurk!” (Thibon, *Back to Reality*, 101-2).

¹²Thibon, *Back to Reality*, 64.

¹³See Thibon, *Back to Reality*, 121, where he claims that those “who travel about, go to the cinema, listen to the wireless, abandon the land and break with all their ancestral traditions... have no ideas of their own, no emotions that can be said to be really personal: their dim souls are all much alike.”

¹⁴*Ibid*, 126.

¹⁵Thibon, “Christianity and Freedom,” 7.

¹⁶*Ibid*, 3. Further, “To be free is to adhere inwardly, to adhere spontaneously to the particular surroundings that include and transcend us; it is to retain, with these surroundings, analogous relations to those between a member and the organism it belongs to” (4). Thibon’s language of the living “organism” is meant to counter the image of the dead, societal “machine.” He argues that “what is most important of all is to replace the *atomised* society we suffer from at present with an *organised* society... the atom simply exists for

itself, but the organ, by definition, cannot realise its own good except by serving the good of the whole” (Thibon, *Back to Reality*, 8-9).

¹⁷“To be free is to have the power to develop one’s nature, not in accordance with one’s arbitrary will but in obedience to the eternal laws of that nature... freedom is spontaneous obedience, obedience accepted and inwardly lived” (Thibon, “Christianity and Freedom,” 3).

¹⁸Thibon, “Christianity and Freedom,” 4. Similarly, “Our freedom... is both created and creative in relation to the bonds that attach us to the universe: it relies on the support of old bonds in order to forge itself new ones” (5). Further, “Man feels responsible only in so far as he is bound, and the only true bonds are organic bonds” (Thibon, *Back to Reality*, 5). In the same book he says, “There is no such thing, for man, as complete independence (a finite being that depended on nothing would be separated from everything, and so eliminated from existence). But there is a dead, oppressive dependence and a living, expansive dependence. The first of these is slavery; the second, freedom” (83).

¹⁹“The collapse of freedoms has its origin in the rupture of vital bonds, which in turn is due to the idolatry of freedom. Freedom has been confused with independence, which has led to the pursuit of a phantom freedom, abstract and all but absolute; in the mad career for it, real and concrete freedom has been lost. Divorced from its human context, blown up like a bladder, freedom has burst like a bladder” (Thibon, “Christianity and Freedom,” 6).

²⁰Joseph Ratzinger, *In the Beginning: A Catholic Understanding of the Story of Creation and the Fall* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 70.

²¹Thibon continues, “He is no longer ruled by the cycle of the seasons and the course of the sun, but every moment he must be consulting his watch!” (Thibon, “Christianity and Freedom,” 6).

²²Thibon, *Back to Reality*, 144.

²³Thibon, *Back to Reality*, 83. Again, “No freedom is possible without a certain reserve of attachment and communion” (Thibon, “Christianity and Freedom,” 5).

²⁴Thibon, “Christianity and Freedom,” 5. Furthermore, “A man is free when among all the bonds that solicit his choice he can choose those which correspond to this deepest aspirations. And here the problem of freedom merges into the problem of love” (4).

²⁵Ibid., 4.

²⁶Ibid., 5.

²⁷Ibid., 7.

²⁸God is “that absolute bond which gives perfect freedom” (Ibid., 7).

²⁹Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*, trans. William V. Dych (New York: Crossroad, 2012), 79.

³⁰Thibon, “Christianity and Freedom,” 8. In speaking of communion: “the more we are bound, the more we are free; the more we mean to others, the more we are ourselves” (9).

³¹John R. Sachs, *The Christian Vision of Humanity: Basic Christian Anthropology* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1991), 34.

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