ONE

THE LACK OF FREEDOM

> You have only to consider yourself free to feel yourself bound;
> you have only to consider yourself bound to feel free.
>
> —Goethe

The growth of freedom has been the central theme of history, Lord Acton believed, because it represents God's plan for humanity. One does not need such a Whiggish view of history to notice that the history of the West, at least, has indeed been a story of the development of freedom, whether actualized or idealized. We trace the origins of Western civilization back to the Greek "emancipation" of reason from myth. Since the Renaissance, there has been a progressive emphasis, first on religious freedom (the Reformation), then political freedom (the English, American, French revolutions), followed by economic freedom (the class struggle), colonial freedom (independence movements), racial freedom (civil rights), psychological freedom (psychotherapy frees us from neuroses), and most recently gender equality and sexual freedom (feminism and gay rights emancipate women and sexual "deviance"). Today deconstruction and other postmodern intellectual developments free us from authorial intention and the strictures of the text itself—what might be called "textual liberation."

So it is no surprise that freedom today is the paramount value of the Western world, and through the West's influence it has become that

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of the rest of the world as well. "People may sin against freedom, but no one dares deny its virtue." Yet is this virtue losing some of its luster? Recently it has become more obvious that the critiques of democratic individualism espoused by some East Asian nations are usually little more than the apologetics of authoritarian regimes.[1] Nonetheless, the history of freedom contains enough contradictions to make us pause. As important as the Renaissance was for the development of personal freedom, we also see in it the roots of the problems that haunt us today, especially the extreme individualism that liberated greed as the engine of economic development and that continues to rationalize the erosion of community bonds. The French, Russian, and Chinese revolutions resulted in Napoleon, Stalin, and Mao, respectively, vindicating Burke's warnings about the sudden disintegration of even oppressive political authority. And today our technological freedom to transform the natural world is despoiling it so effectively that we are in danger of destroying ourselves as well.

If freedom is our supreme value, then, it is a problematic one. This chapter explores that problematic from a Buddhist lack perspective. It argues that making freedom into our *paramount* value is dangerous, for freedom conceived solely in secular, humanistic terms is fatally flawed. It cannot give us what we seek from it.

Part of our resistance to such a conclusion is caused by the difficulty in considering freedom objectively. That ideal is so much a part of us, so deeply involved in the way we understand ourselves, that it is hard to look *at* it. But this value has a history. Rather than being "natural," it is the result of a complicated genealogy that needs to be examined. Therefore a comparative approach can help to delineate our situation: Why did the ideal of freedom arise in the West, when and where it did? How does it contrast with the primary values of non-Western cultures?

Another difficulty is that the very concept of freedom is extremely elusive. It is almost impossible to define in a satisfactory fashion, because the abstract concept loses meaning outside particular contexts: freedom *from* . . . or freedom *to* . . . In *Freedom in the Making of Western Culture* (1991), Orlando Patterson distinguishes what he calls the chord of freedom into three notes: personal (being able to do as one pleases within the limits of others' desire to do the same), sovereignal (the power to act as one pleases, regardless of the wishes of others), and civic (the capacity of members of a community to participate in its life and governance). Such a tripartite definition already suggests the tensions

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that have dogged the history of freedom from the very beginning. If freedom is a chord it is evidently an unresolved one. It is unfortunate that throughout history fighting for freedom has been much easier to do than to live freely. Why does that continue to be so?

Most studies of freedom emphasize that the West has made the major contributions to the theory and practice of freedom. Patterson also attempts to explain why freedom did not evolve in the non-Western world. His short and sketchy treatment of this question discusses North and South American Indian tribes, African preliterate societies, a group of South Pacific tribes, ancient Mesopotamia, and dynastic Egypt. It does not consider India and China, philosophically the most sophisticated non-Western cultures and therefore the ones we would expect to offer the most interesting alternatives to the Western understanding of freedom. In India, for example, *mukti* has long been acknowledged by almost all schools of thought as the highest spiritual goal:

> [S]ince human existence was traditionally conceived as a cycle of birth and death interspersed with experience or suffering, the freedom of the self could be described as freedom from this cycle of *samsara.* Freedom or *mukti,* thus, means freedom from ignorance about the self, that is, *avidya,* freedom from the passions or *klesa,* freedom from suffering or *duhkha,* and finally freedom from death and time. The Buddhists, the Jainas, and the Yogins also conceive the ideal of freedom from all limitations of knowledge, while the Siddhas seek freedom from all natural limitations. (Pande 448)

Oblivious of this, Patterson follows the received wisdom in concluding that the West's value complex of freedom is "superior to any other single complex of values conceived by mankind" (402–403). We may raise some questions about this by bringing to bear the Buddhist critique of the ego-self: the supposedly self-existing subject that, because it understands itself as separate from the world, is often preoccupied with liberating itself from the bonds that tie it to the world. For Buddhism, the ego is not a self-existing consciousness but a mental construction, a fragile sense-of-self dreading its own no-thing-ness. Our problem arises because "my" conditioned consciousness wants to ground itself—i.e., to make itself *real.* Its perpetual failure to do so means that the sense-of-self has, as its inescapable shadow, a sense of lack, which it always tries to escape. What Freud called "the return of the repressed"

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in the distorted form of a symptom shows us how to link this basic project with the symbolic ways we try to make ourselves real in the world.

Such a lack interpretation of the Buddhist no-self doctrine has two important implications for the way we view freedom. First, any culture that emphasizes the individuality of the self will naturally come to place paramount value on the freedom of that self. Freedom is usually defined as *self*-determination, and etymology (*de* plus *terminus,* to limit, set boundaries) reveals the implication of establishing boundaries between the self and the not-self. So it is not surprising that from its very beginning the Western history of freedom has been strongly associated with the development of the self, or, to put it another way, with increasing subject-object dualism. Insofar as freedom is understood as freedom from external control, a discrimination is implied between internal (that which wants to be free) and external (what one is freed from). This is important because what Patterson calls the "stillbirth" of freedom outside the West is related to the fact that non-Western societies have had different conceptions of the self and its relationship with the other.

The second implication, and my main working hypothesis in this chapter, is that if the self-existence and autonomy of that sense-of-self is an illusion, as Buddhism claims, then such a self will never be able to experience itself as enough of a self—that is, it will never feel free enough. It will try to resolve its lack by expanding the sphere of its freedom, yet that can never become large enough to be comfortable. This dynamic helped to generate what we know as the history of the West: a never-ending quest for "genuine," i.e., complete, personal freedom. But can there be such a thing, if there is no "genuine" self to have it?

We shall see that this relationship between the self and its freedom explains much about the curious development of Western freedom and perhaps as much about our predicament today.

THE INTERDEPENDENCE OF FREEDOM AND TYRANNY

To understand the West in context we must begin with what existed before the West—in this case, before the classical Greek period. Some recent historical studies have emphasized that the value placed on freedom was generated out of its opposite, the "social death" of slavery. Since slavery was so common, however, this idea by itself does not go

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very far to explain why social freedom developed only in the West.[2] The basic problem is that among nonslaves the presence of slaves reinforced their own sense of group solidarity and participation; and what the slave desired was never freedom in our evolved Western sense (which would have been fatal, since there was no place for a "free" person in such societies) but reduced marginality and partial resocialization into the master's community.

This already shows something important about the relationship between the individual self and its valuation of freedom: there is no social context for esteeming freedom until there is a social role for the individual to function as an individual. Dynastic Egypt provides a good example. As Max Weber noticed, the "prevailing rule would be 'no man without a master,' for the man without a protector was helpless. Hence the entire population of Egypt was organized in a hierarchy of clientages." For Weber this reveals "the essential characteristic of a liturgy-state: every individual is bound to the function assigned to him within the social system, and therefore every individual is in principle unfree" (in Patterson, 36, 37).

This principle applied to the pharaohs as well, for although they were gods even gods had their role to play in maintaining the cosmic order. That is why every attempt of the pharaohs to free themselves from the power of the priests was thwarted. When everyone is fixated within a divinely sanctioned hierarchy, there is no social space for personal freedom because the social structure has no place for self-directed individuals.

Just as important is the implication for what Patterson calls sovereignal freedom, the power to do utterly as one pleased with another person. In spite of the authoritarian nature of most human societies, such sovereignal freedom did not normally exist, because all social relationships existed within a network of countervailing powers (including divine powers that limited human *hubris*). This points to one of the tragic paradoxes that have dogged the history of the West: personal freedom and totalitarianism are not opposites but brothers, for the historical conditions that made democracy possible also made totalitarianism possible. The self-directed individual could evolve only by the destruction or weakening of the "hierarchy of clientages" or (in more tribal societies, including pre-Cleisthenes Athens) of kin-based lineages; yet the authority vacuum created can just as well be manipulated by those in a position to seize absolute political power no longer limited by countervailing social forces.

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This point may be made from the other side: the breakdown of hierarchies and lineages allows for the development of more autonomous, self-directed individuals, but it also allows for the creation of the *masses.* That brings out another disturbing aspect of this paradox: the eagerness with which the plebs have repeatedly embraced their autocratic rulers. Dostoyevsky's Grand Inquisitor emphasizes that man has "no more pressing need than the one to find somebody to whom he can surrender, as quickly as possible, that gift of freedom which he, unfortunate creature, was born with." We are not born free—what freedom we have is the result of complex historical conditions—but Dostoyevsky's arrow is otherwise right on target: if (as the sense-of-self's sense-of-lack implies) freedom makes us anxious, the more free we are the more anxious we will be, and the greater our need to resolve that anxiety one way or another—usually by surrendering it to some father protector or other authority figure.

The psychoanalyst Otto Rank divided our anxiety into two complimentary fears. *Life fear* is the anxiety we feel when we stand out too much, thereby losing our connection with the whole; *death fear* is the anxiety of losing one's personhood and dissolving back into the whole. "Whereas the life fear is anxiety at going forward, becoming an individual, the death fear is anxiety at going backward, losing individuality. Between these two fear possibilities the individual is thrown back and forth all his life." This can just as well be expressed in terms of freedom: we feel the need to be free, but becoming more free makes us more anxious and therefore more inclined to sacrifice that freedom to someone who promises us security (including absolution for our sense of lack). In short, human beings have two great psychological needs, freedom and security, and unfortunately they conflict. This explains the temptations of totalitarianism:

> Totalitarianism is a cultural neurotic symptom of the need for community—a symptom in the respect that it is grasped as a means of allaying anxiety resulting from the feelings of powerlessness and helplessness of the isolated, alienated individuals produced in a society in which complete individualism has been the dominant goal. Totalitarianism is the substitution of collectivism for community . . . (May 212)

Today the anonymity of mass men and women within impersonal societies no longer offers the securities of clientage hierarchies and

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lineages, leading to an accumulation of anxiety (lack) that can seek a collective outlet. The history of Greece and Rome reminds us that this problem is not uniquely modern.

Yet there is another "solution" to this dialectic, or an opposite temptation: The members of a society may decide instead that they are not yet free enough, that they must struggle further to become truly free. Unfortunately, this approach threatens to become a vicious circle because it denies us any solace in community bonds, inasmuch as we never can feel free enough. To express it in terms of sense of lack, today one of our main ways to objectify our lack is by feeling that we are not yet as free as we deserve to be. This is not to deny that there are always many human wrongs that need to be human righted, but this does give us some insight into, e.g., the attraction of victimhood. Victimhood is learning how to address the problem of one's life by discovering how one is being exploited or has been abused; then one's anger and self-pity become justified, socially acceptable, and sometimes lucrative. From a Buddhist point of view, however, this is dangerous, since rather than pointing the way to overcome one's sense of lack it reinforces one's delusive sense of self as that which has been abused.

For the masses totalitarianism is a temptation to surrender our freedom, yet the sense-of-self's sense of lack also enables us understand this authoritarianism from the autocratic side. Another way to try to resolve one's sense of lack is by extending control over others. If the self is groundless and therefore naturally anxious, it can try to defend itself and gain control by seeking to dominate what is outside it. "This absoluteness, the sense of being one (my identity is entirely independent and consistent) and alone ('There is nothing outside of me that I do not control') is the basis for domination—and the master-slave relationship" (Benjamin 33). If, again, no amount of control can allay the insecurity that haunts the self, this search for control also has a tendency to become demonic. Stalin never felt secure enough because it is not possible to feel secure enough.

The need to surrender our freedom by submitting to an authority figure therefore meshes all too comfortably with the anxiety that drives tyrants to keep trying to totalize their power. They evolved together at the expense of those countervailing social forces that traditionally limited the exercise of such concentrated power as much as the exercise of personal freedom. Ironically, then, the development of tyrants' sovereignal freedom is not only the negation of personal freedom, it is just as much an effect of personal freedom.

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THE RELIGION OF THE SELF

> The many basic terms [the Greeks] contributed to our lexicon—history, physics, geometry, geography, logic, theology, ethics, politics, aesthetics, etc.—testify to the literally extraordinary range of their thought.
>
> There remains a significant exception: the Greeks did not develop a higher religion. (H. Muller 158)

On the contrary: the Greeks developed the higher religion of the self—i.e., humanism—and the result of their experiment was the discovery that such a religion does not work. The Greco-Roman experiment with secular humanism failed, not for extraneous historical reasons (e.g., the Roman conquest of Greece, the barbarian conquest of Rome) but because it self-destructed. Its distinctive contribution to the development of freedom (and the individual self) survived only as sublated into the Augustinian synthesis of Neoplatonic thought with Christian theology, which devised another way to cope with the greater anxiety of greater inwardness: by postulating an original sin, caused by Adam's misuse of freedom. Our lack is the result of his original sin. Fortunately it can be resolved, but unfortunately only in the afterlife.

In "discovering" the eternal psyche that persists unchanged, early Greek thought also discovered the idea of eternal substance (Parmenides' Being, etc.). That which was believed to persist unchanged (the psyche) sought that which was believed to persist unchanged (Being). Beginning with Parmenides, only that which is permanent can be grasped by genuine knowledge, for comprehending transient things provides merely a semblance of knowledge. From a Buddhist point of view, however, the knowledge that the Greeks sought was from the beginning a delusion, in retrospect an intellectually glorious but nonetheless vain quest of a constructed individual to ground itself by discovering the eternal Ground of all things.

In setting up reason as the method whereby this psyche and this Being may be discovered, the Greek thinkers opened a door to what proved to be a blind alley. Despite its other fruits, rationality, the science of thinking, does not by itself provide a handle to grasp and resolve the sense-of-self's sense of lack. The new religions of the self that tried to do so, such as Epicureanism and Stoicism, eventually reached a dead end in the speculations of Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius. Yet Neoplatonic emphasis on subjective inwardness survived in the Augustinian emphasis

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on the self's essential sinfulness. Sin required constant watchfulness and introspection, thus deepening the self's introversion, and it provided that self with a way to understand and cope with the deeper sense of lack shadowing it. As we shall see in the next chapter, faith that this lack will be overcome (initially, in the return of Christ and the millennium that it would inaugurate) generated a future orientation that would continue long after that faith had yielded to more secular preoccupations.

We have seen that in traditional societies lack was usually dissolved by dissolving the individual into his or her society—that is, by integrating the person into the social structure, as in dynastic Egypt. In such cases the issue of freedom does not arise because the individual does not exist. Questions about the meaning of one's life also do not arise because human society is likewise integrated into the cosmos, often through the vital role of a priest-king (at the top of the social pyramid) in helping to maintain the cosmos. In such societies there is no clear distinction between sacred and secular, which tends to preempt social revolution: to challenge the orders of a god-king would also be to challenge the order of the universe.

Since this pattern was widespread, it is rather our distinction between sacred and secular that seems curious. What needs explaining is not the integration of secular with sacred but our split between them: i.e., the belief in a transcendence that is distinct from and superior to the natural world. Elsewhere (1996, 154ff) I have argued that the category of transcendence is important for explaining the differences between South Asia (India, which emphasized it) and East Asia (China and Japan, which did not). In order to see this difference, however, transcendence must be understood to have at least three related but different meanings: as another "higher" reality, such as God or Brahman; as a universal or absolute ethic, such as the Mosaic Decalogue (usually derived from a higher reality, such as Yahweh); and (remembering its etymology: *trans* plus *scendere*, to climb over, to rise above) as that perspective by which we "rise above" the given in order to observe it critically and gain the leverage to change it. Although these three types tend to reinforce one another, Indian transcendence traditionally emphasized the first, Hebrew transcendence the second, and Greek transcendence the third.

Why did explicitly transcendental perspectives arise in these places and not, for example, in Egypt or Mesopotamia or Japan?

> "Transcendence," whether it takes the form of divine revelation or of theoretical cosmology, implies a search for authority

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> outside the institutionalized offices and structures of the seeker's society. Even its most concrete form, the law code, implies a transfer of authority from the holders of office to the written rule. Transcendental impulses therefore constitute, by definition, an implicit challenge to traditional authority and indicate some dissatisfaction with it . . . new transcendental visions are . . . likely to be presented by persons in a precariously independent, interstitial—or at least exposed and somewhat solitary—position in society . . . (Humphreys 92, 112)

In India a two-stage process created these conditions. First, the Vedic development of complicated rituals led to a need to differentiate priest from king, and then a new social role appeared: the renouncer who, being outside of traditional society, discovered or invented a "discipline of salvation"—e.g., Shakyamuni, the founder of Buddhism, and Mahavira, the founder of Jainism. In Israel the "interstitial" Hebrew prophets, especially Amos, Isaiah, and Jeremiah, developed the ethical monotheism established in the Mosaic covenant by fulminating against the impious people and their rulers.

While it is futile to seek the necessary and sufficient historical causes for Greek self-consciousness, retrospectively we can observe how a number of factors reinforced one another to promote that particular type of transcendence (the third of the types mentioned above). In general, the Greek distinction between sacred and secular may be traced back to the "emancipation" of reason from myth and the correlative distinction between *nomos* (convention) and *phusis* (nature); significantly, those are still the categories that frame our debates today. Humphreys finds the necessary precondition for such a transcendental perspective on society in the privileged and relatively independent position of axial-age intellectuals, such as the sophists, whose special linguistic skills provided "the ability to recreate social relationships and manipulate them in thought" (Humphreys 111).

This ability was a result of complex cultural conditions that encouraged the development of humanism. When the Indo-Europeans invaded Greece their Aryan sky gods, patrons of vitality and power, encountered the local chthonian fertility deities and learned to coexist with them in a live-and-let-live manner that did not foster the absolutism of the Abrahamic heritage. Homer recreated the gods in man's own image; his detached, ironical attitude toward them meant his dei-

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ties authorized no sacred book, proclaimed no dogma, and set up no powerful priesthood.

Greek merchant fleets beat the Phoenicians at their own game, sparking a great colonizing movement that dotted the Mediterranean and Baltic seas with Greek city-states. Thales, Pythagoras, Herodotus, Democritus, Plato, and other pioneer thinkers continued traveling to other cultural centers such as Egypt and Babylon (and India?) to acquire more learning. The exposure to such different influences and contradictory customs encouraged skepticism toward their own myths. Thales founded natural philosophy when he did not use gods to explain the world. Unlike Moses, Solon did not get his tables from them when he gave Athens new laws. In his funeral oration, a profoundly religious occasion, Pericles did not even mention the gods but celebrated the virtues of Athenian democracy. Greek drama reduced the gods' role by emphasizing human motivation and responsibility. Socrates used the gods to rationalize his mode of inquiry, yet his quest for wisdom did not otherwise depend upon them.

One does not escape the gods so easily, however. Psychologically they serve a crucial function. We ground ourselves in a mythological worldview because it organizes the cosmos for us: it explains who we are, why we are here, and what we should be doing with our lives. In the process, mythologies usually explain what our lack really is and how it can be resolved. Even if that vision becomes too fanciful or constrictive, its disappearance is likely to be worse, because that not only liberates the self, it also liberates its lack. And that points to the problem with the Greek alternative of humanism and rationalism: it did not work and could not work insofar as it did not show the sense-of-self how to resolve its sense of lack. Instead, the increased individuality of the Greeks aggravated their lack.

This helps us to understand what we now know about the "harmonious Greeks." Since Burckhardt and Nietzsche it has become apparent that the Greeks were not Apollonian but profoundly anxious and troubled, "an unusually energetic, restless, turbulent people, given to excess," who idealized harmony and balance because it was a virtue they rarely achieved. As Thucydides noticed, they "were born into the world to take no rest themselves, and to give none to others."[3]

Although this restlessness was made worse by burgeoning Greek skepticism, it was originally connected with their religion. Homeric mythology had offered no hopes of a heavenly afterlife. Death is not even the peace of sleep, for everyone ends up in Hades, whose shades

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are aware that they will never again participate in the joys of life. It was an inauspicious origin for Greek humanism, and it got worse, as there was "an undeniable growth of anxiety and dread in the evolution of Greek religion,"[4] which is what one would expect if stronger sense-of-self means stronger sense of lack.

> [T]he individualism of the Greeks was more likely to become reckless and lawless, or simply selfish, because it was neither sanctioned nor disciplined by an explicit democratic or religious principle. It was rooted in the Homeric tradition of personal fame and glory and was nourished by habitual competition, as much in art and athletics as in business, but everywhere off the battlefield with little team play. . . the individualism was tempered by little sense of strictly moral responsibility, or in particular of altruism . . . (Patterson 218)

Greek competitiveness exceeded even our own. Despite their lack of lawyers, the Athenians were perhaps the most litigious people who ever lived, once they discovered that in this way one could conquer one's opponents without resorting to violence. The recourse to law would seem to be an improvement, yet sometimes the difference is hard to see. In the fourth century B.C. only three Athenian generals were killed in battle, while at least six (perhaps eight) were sentenced to death in the Athenian courts for losing a battle. The cultural flowering that continues to awe us today is easier to appreciate in retrospect. Because it so fundamentally challenged the old ways of doing things, such an explosion of creativity was profoundly disturbing to most people at the time. Most progressive thinkers were tried for heresy: Anaxagoras, Diagoras, Socrates, probably Protagoras and Euripides; later Plato and Aristotle wisely absented themselves. No one suggested liberating the slaves or emancipating women. When Athens became democratic, it became not less but more imperialistic and genocidal, as the Peloponnesian War demonstrates, which is to say that collectively the Athenians' impulses toward greed and domination may actually have increased because they had evolved a new mode of self-governance.[5]

But are such criticisms anachronistic? We should not criticize the Athenians for not living up to democratic principles that they were just begining to develop. It is not surprising that there was no check on mob rule, for the problem with mob rule needed to be experienced for checks to be perceived as necessary. The concept of human rights—the

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notion that the individual should have some protection against the state and the will of the majority—requires a more evolved sense of autonomous personhood and the sanctity of the self, along with the development of empathy and altruism in place of the "stranger anxiety" that predominated in classical Greece.

Nevertheless, the problems mentioned above are precisely the sort to be expected if the increase in self-consciousness were shadowed by an equivalent increase in anxiety, i.e., lack. When this lack—the feeling that "something is wrong with me"—is not explained by a sacred world view that resolves my doubts in a faith that grounds me in the cosmos, I shall try to ground myself in more individualistic, self-ish ways.

There was another alternative: to forget oneself, and thus the burden of one's lack, in the temporary ecstasy of Dionysian catharsis:

> Dionysus was in the archaic age as much a social necessity as Apollo; each ministered in his own way to the anxieties characteristic of guilt-culture. Apollo promised security: "Understand your station as man; do as the Father tells you; and you will be safe to-morrow." Dionysus offered freedom: "Forget the difference, and you will find the identity . . ." He was essentially a God of joy [who] enables you for a short time to *stop being yourself,* and thereby sets you free. . . . The individual, as the modern world knows him, began in that age to emerge for the first time from the old solidarity of the family, and found the unfamiliar burden of individual responsibility hard to bear. Dionysus could lift it from him. (Dodds 76)

How did the more thoughtful members of Athenian society react to these developments? Aeschylus was proud of having fought in the Persian War that saved Athens from foreign domination; a generation later, Euripides wrote his last unfinished play in exile bemoaning that "we are slaves to the masses" and affirming popular kingship as an alternative. Many other examples could be cited, but the most important for us, of course, were the responses of Plato and Aristotle. We do not know how much the former's political views were colored by his personal experience of Socrates' trial and execution, yet there is no doubt about his dislike of democracy, which he dismissed as "an agreeable, anarchic form of society, with plenty of variety, which treats all men as equal

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whether they are equal or not" (*Republic* 565d). The basic weaknesses of democracy are mob rule, demagoguery, and a tendency toward anarchy, since the mass of people grow impudent from "a reckless excess of liberty" (701b). The main concern of *The Republic* is the problems with city-state democracy; it addresses the root of the problem by analyzing the democratic personality, which lacks a coherent organizing principle and therefore follows the strongest pressures of the moment—a recipe for social as well as psychological strife (561c-d). Further experience only deepened Plato's distaste for personal freedom, as this extraordinary passage in *The Laws* (XII 942a-d) reveals:

> The organization of our forces is a thing calling in its nature for much advice and the framing of many rules, but the principle is this—that no man, and no woman, be ever suffered to live without an officer over them, and no soul of man to learn the trick of doing one single thing of its own sole motion, in play or in earnest, but, in peace as in war, ever to live with the commander in sight, to follow his leading, and take his motions from him to the least detail—to halt or advance, to drill, to bathe, to dine, to keep watch . . . in a word, to teach one's soul the habit of never so much as thinking to do one single act apart from one's fellow, of making life, to the very uttermost, an unbroken consort, society, and community of all with all. A wiser and better rule than this man neither had discovered, nor ever will . . .

This is not totalitarianism in the modern sense, more the jaundiced view of an old man who has observed the development and the failures of personal liberty, for without self-control freedom becomes libertinism. Aristotle was almost as critical of the democracies in which he lived, for "in these extreme democracies, each man lives as he likes—or, as Euripides says, 'For any end he chances to desire'" (*Politics* 1310a). He preferred a mixed constitution combining the best of oligarchy and democracy, with a more "bourgeois" bias than Plato's ideal state.

These elitist views were a response to changing social realities. If the fifth century was one of civic freedom, the fourth century (which began with Socrates' execution) increasingly became that of individual freedom and self-indulgence. The integrity of the *polis* declined in favor of concern for personal advancement, which came to preoccupy those

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who controlled economic life and many of those who controlled political affairs. Demosthenes lamented that politics had become the path to riches, for individuals no longer place the state before themselves but view the state as a way to promote their own personal wealth. It would become a familiar complaint.

The consequences of this for Greek thought were profound. About the end of the fifth century—that is, at the same time as the above development—philosophical discourse on freedom took a radically new turn: A critical distinction was made between outer and inner freedom. Socrates' emphasis on knowledge, by which man can share in the universal and eternal, paved the way by urging men to place their passions and impulses under the control of self-reflection. In the context of the philosophical inquiry that was primary for him and his successors—a search for the Truth about the human soul and human society—democracy had failed; but instead of freedom being renounced it came to be redefined.

The *Republic* makes a momentous analogy between harmony in the state and harmony in the soul. Internalizing the Greek sociological understanding of freedom and slavery as requiring one aother, Plato came to conceive of reason as the master (hence the free party) with desire and emotion as its slaves. The virtue of freedom was retained by reconceptualizing it in terms of the self-mastery of self-consciousness. In contrast to the incoherent life of the democrat, who lives "for any end he chances to desire," the psychic tendencies of the spiritually developed individual harmonize with one another because they are governed by reason (*Republic* 431).[6] Rather than solving the growing problem with civic freedom, however, this aggravated it. Like the merchants and politicians who retreated into the more private world of their own self-advancement, those who succeeded Plato retreated from committment to the *polis* into the more private world of abstract thought, which for them became the only method by which *true* freedom might be gained.[7] "Post-Aristotelian ethical philosophy was marked by a clean break between morality and society, by the location of virtue firmly within the individual soul" (Finley 120).

Restated in terms of lack: the democratic experiment in self-government had not worked to resolve the increased anxiety that the increased individualism of the "democratic personality" generated, for the self-governance of the *demos* clearly did not entail the self-governance of the self. Just as the sophists had realized that the state is a construction that can be reconstructed, so those after Socrates realized that the

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psyche is a construction that can be reconstructed, with reason as the master. And the aggravated sense of lack that shadowed increased individualism required such psychic reconstruction.

Needless to say, that reconstruction did not appeal to many. This meant that new gods besides reason would have to be found. In the early Hellenistic age the cult of *Tyche* "Luck" or "Fortune" became wisely diffused, being "'the last stage in the secularising of religion'; in default of any positive object, the sentiment of dependence attaches itself to the purely negative idea of the unexplained and unpredictable, which is *Tyche*" (Dodds 242). In the second century B.C. astrology suddenly became popular: "for a century or more the individual had been face to face with his own intellectual freedom, and now he turned tail and bolted from the horrid prospect—better the rigid determinism of the astrological Fate than that terrifying burden of daily responsibility" (Dodds 246). In the first century B.C. people became increasingly preoccupied with techniques for individual salvation:

> There was a growing demand for occultism, which is essentially an attempt to capture the Kingdom of Heaven by material means—it has been well described as 'the vulgar form of transcendentalism.' And philosophy followed a parallel path on a higher level. Most of the schools had long since ceased to value the truth for its own sake, but in the Imperial Age they abandon, with certain exceptions [notably Plotinus], any pretence of disinterested curiosity and present themselves frankly as dealers in salvation. (Dodds 248)

Dodds's conclusion is hard to dispute: "once before a civilized people rode to the jump—rode to it and refused it." The great experiment of Greek rationalism, as a humanistic alternative to religion and superstition, had failed.

In retrospect, the fateful Platonic move was equating freedom with reason and understanding psychic reconstruction in terms of the domination of reason. The immediate philosophical heirs to this were Cynicism, Epicureanism, and Stoicism, which developed into religions of the self, straddling between more conventional religions and philosophy as we know it today, which has become a search for propositional truth. In place of salvation through ecstatic mysteries they offered a salvation to be gained from rational self-cultivation, but they were just as much religions in that they were designed to cope with the personal

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lack caused, as they now understood it, by the self's desires and passions. Their ultimate aim was *autarkeia,* inner freedom from negative emotions and their entanglements. For the Stoics the soul of the sage was in a permanent *apatheia,* without excessive emotions, and for Epicureans the ideal psychic state was *ataraxia,* imperturbability of spirit. The aim of their theorizing was to contribute to the development of such states of tranquillity, which they equated with *autarkeia.* The metaphor of fortress became common; as the cynic Antisthenes put it, "wisdom is the safest wall, and a fortress must be constructed of our own impregnable reason." Yet the sense-of-self's sense of lack remained a fifth column that no fortress could defend against.

The irony of their goal is that as they worked to develop and preserve the self's freedom from emotional bonds to the external world, they also contributed to the further bifurcation of self from other, of subject from object, that aggravated the sense of lack. The three stoas of Stoicism reflect this increasing introversion: the first stoa emphasized harmony between self and cosmos, but the second stoa was more concerned about whether the psyche controls the body, and the third stoa became preoccupied with the personal freedom of the self-controlled individual, as described in the *Discourses* of Epictetus and the *Meditations* of Marcus Aurelius.

And just how lack-free was the self-controlled individual? Marcus Aurelius always held the deepest reverence for Epictetus, but when Epictetus, after one of his discourses on "the road which leads to freedom," was asked if he himself were truly free (*Discourses* 4.1.128–31), he had to admit that while he wanted and prayed to be so, he was still "not yet able to face my masters." Yet he could point to someone who is, or was: Diogenes the Cynic, who had died over four hundred years earlier! Evidently none of the Stoic masters since then had achieved it.

Patterson's discussion of Epictetus and Aurelius is insightful regarding their ultimate failure even by their own criteria. "The uniqueness of Marcus and Epictetus was in searching not so much for freedom as for the source of the yearning for, and meaning of, freedom. Shifting the terrain from the outer to the inner world was the beginning, not the end, of the struggle" (278). A Buddhist could not put it better. By both the philosophical and the social standards of his time, Marcus the Roman emperor should have been one of the freest men who ever lived; what his *Meditations* unwittingly reveal, then, is how little such freedom meant, both his sovereignal dominion and the reason-able

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freedom developed by his self-control. With him the Stoic tradition culminates in the realization that such freedoms do not by themselves bring personal fulfillment or peace of mind. In my Buddhist terms, they cannot resolve one's sense of lack.

The increased introversion entailed by psychic reconstruction enlarged the sphere of one's subjectivity, but identifying that freedom with reason provided no way to cope with the increased sense of lack shadowing it. Freedom understood in such secular terms proved to be unsatisfactory.

The stage was set for return to a more explicitly religious perspective: the Augustinian discovery/construction of sin. If even the internal freedom of dominant reason does not satisfy, but freedom still remains one's ultimate value, then there must be yet another, even more internalized kind of freedom. . . .

THE ANCIENT SIN

Their Egyptian and Babylonian captivities taught the Hebrews the value of freedom, and even their allegiance to God was a voluntary contract (Abraham's covenant, Genesis 15:18). Nevertheless, the Hebrew prophets, and later Jesus, were not very concerned about individual freedom. Instead, they emphasized obedience to God. The moral earnestness of Amos, Isaiah, etc., generated an ethical interpretation of history that traced evil back to humanity and made it our business to overcome it. This introduced a concern for social justice rather than the valuation of personal freedom. Jesus taught submission to the will of God, a surrender that led not to freedom but to love. Neither he nor the earlier prophets had any time for the humanism and relativism that created the conditions for the Greek valorization of freedom.

Paul, however, employed the terminology of freedom to express the Christian message in a way that appealed to the many freedmen of the Roman empire. In Christ we are redeemed from the spiritual slavery of sin into spiritual freedom: "for freedom Christ has set us free; stand fast, therefore, and do not submit again to the yoke of slavery" (Galatians 5:1). When we try to unpack the metaphor, though, it becomes difficult to work out exactly what freedom can mean in the context of our submission to God.

To understand the failure of classical humanism is to appreciate the importance of Augustine, who salvaged the inwardness of its enhanced subjectivity and bequeathed it to the Western tradition that

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developed after him and out of him. He was able to recuperate and revitalize this interiority of self-presence because he added a new element, or perspective: the awareness of sin, and particularly the incorrigibility of original sin. "The Ancient Sin: nothing is more obviously part of our preaching of Christianity; yet nothing is more impenetrable to the understanding." Needless to say, this did not deter Augustine from explaining it.

Sin provided precisely what the classical Greco-Roman tradition lacked, a way to understand and cope with the sense of lack that shadows the groundless sense-of-self. Human beings have been dislocated by an ancient Fall. Now I know what is wrong with me: I have sinned. And now I know what must be done: atone for my sins (including that of our father, Adam) and strive to sin no more in the future. The classical emphasis on reason is replaced by the primacy of will, a faculty unknown to the Greeks; the problem of reason, which is error, is superceded by the problem of will, which is sin. The rigorous self-examination and never-ending watchfulness that required encouraged an ever-deepening inwardness exemplified in Augustine's own *Confessions.*

Yet there is an important difference between the Christian understanding of sin and my Buddhist understanding of lack, and their identification was a fateful confusion. Belief in sin does not in itself actually show the way to resolve lack; rather, one's anxiety is short-circuited by the belief that one's lack will (or can be) alleviated in the future. For the first Christians this would happen at the Second Coming, which was imminent but later became attenuated into a preoccupation with the future.

Augustine played a crucial role in this development. In his early years as a Manichaean and then a Neoplatonist he shared the classical belief in the possibility of self-perfection. With his conversion to Christianity he brought Neoplatonic free will with him: Man is the author of his own degradation. Yet postulating an original sin made this degradation more foundational and difficult to cope with, as he himself soon discovered. The extraordinary book ten of the *Confessions* "is not the affirmation of a cured man; it is the self-portrait of a convalescent." But the convalescent never fully recovered. What became distinctive in Augustine's religious attitude was "a sharp note of unrelieved anxiety about himself and a dependence upon his god" (Brown 177, 123). The later sermons and letters reflect his terrible realization:

> that he is doomed to remain incomplete in his present existence, that what he wished for most ardently would never be

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> more than a hope, postponed to the final resolution of all tensions, far beyond this life. . . . All a man could do was to "yearn" for this absent perfection, to feel its loss intensely, to pine for it. (Brown 156)

For Augustine, then, true freedom could only culminate a long process of healing—a process so difficult that we cannot expect it to conclude during our lifetime. As Peter Brown adds, this marked "the end of a long-established classical ideal of perfection" (156). But if perfection is not attainable in this world, it must be postulated as attainable somewhere else: There must be another world, after death, in which our lack can be resolved. The stage was set for the success of the late medieval church, which as God's agent on earth would gain a monopoly on the dispensation of lack.

This was a complex, many-sided legacy. Sin offered a way—indeed, led to the development of a spiritual technology—to cope with lack, but the increasing subjectivity it promoted also deepened the sense of lack that needed to be coped with, as the example of Augustine himself shows. According to how it was handled, sin could liberate you from considerable anxiety or enmesh you more tightly in labyrinths of self-doubt and self-hatred. Understood metaphorically, the doctrine of original sin contained at its core an invaluable grain of liberating truth: Our sense of lack is the price of our individuality and freedom; my lack teaches me that I am not self-present but conditioned by something that it is my spiritual responsibility to discover. Understood more literally, however, original sin enslaves my incipient freedom to those religious institutions that claim to control its dispensation.

Yet the radical inward turn Augustine encouraged, by seeking God within, opened the door for what seems to have been the spiritual freedom of the great Christian mystics, such as St. Francis and Meister Eckhart, who discovered what according to Buddhism is the only true way to resolve our lack: liberation from self in nondual union with something greater than the self, a loss of self-preoccupation that can lead to identifying oneself with all creation—not only with the needy and sick, but with Brother Sun and Sister Moon.

Not surprisingly, it took centuries for such a complex intellectual inheritance to be adjudicated. One Augustinian tension, in particular, had great implications for the future of personal freedom. His influential *City of God* went further than had any of the earlier Church Fathers in endorsing the powers of emperors. This divine sanction of secular

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authority was used to justify the subordination of church to state that was so characteristic of Christian Europe until the eleventh century. During this period kings were considered semireligious personages and had great influence on church affairs, while prominent churchmen played important roles in secular affairs as advisers, administrators, and rulers of ecclesiastical principalities. The danger with this, from the transcendental perspective discussed earlier, is that such a conflation of sacred and secular authority tends to reproduce the all-encompassing social hierarchy of clientages found in non-Western civilizations (e.g., dynastic Egypt), a conflation that discourages individual solutions to the problem of lack by discouraging individuals.

> The *respublica christiana* was necessarily organized as a hierarchical system in which the lower ends were subordinate to higher, and inferior powers to superior; authority in the entire structure descended from above . . . Self-determination, in this view, could only appear . . . as a violation of the very structure of reality, and political duty appeared to consist only in patient submission and obedience. (Bouwsma 6)[8]

Yet the *City of God* also discouraged this conflation. Written to justify the fall of Rome, it did not identify the City of God with the City of Man. Instead of being the privileged vehicle of God's will, the Roman empire was only one in a series of historical societies. It was neither sacred nor necessary for human salvation. This set the stage for the protracted late medieval struggles between papacy and monarchs, each claiming the higher authority—i.e., greater sovereignal freedom. This in turn encouraged the development of doctrines that justified resistance to unjust rulers. It was "a short step from the question which sphere of power—the spiritual or the secular—should dominate to the deeper question of the nature of power itself and the sources of its authority. Once the Western mind latched on to this problem, it set in train a series of reflections that became, in effect, the modern intellectual history of freedom" (Patterson 384).

The historical factors that encouraged more radical and "self-sufficient" subjectivity were complex, yet among the most important was the development of the religious idea that salvation was not to be earned simply by engaging in religious rituals, for it required the effort of self-transformation. Because sin was now less in the act than in the intention, "the new view was an invitation to introspection, to exploration of

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the conscience. The apparatus of moral governance was shifted inward, to a private space that no longer had anything to do with the community" (Duby, 513). This signified the victory of Augustine's Neoplatonic inwardness, from being the spiritual exercise of philosophers to a requirement of all Christians. In 1215 the Fourth Lateran Council decided to make confession private, regular, and compulsory:

> The decision to make all Christians confess at least once a year was in part a repressive, inquisitorial measure; its purpose was to unearth insubordination and heresy lurking in individual consciences. But can there be a revolution more radical or an effect on attitudes more profound and prolonged that that which followed the change from a ceremony as public as penance had been (a spectacle of exclusion staged in the public square) to a simple private dialogue, as in the exempla, between sinner and priest, or between the soul and God (for oral confession was an inviolable secret, and worthless unless followed by a silent effort of self-correction)? (Duby, 531–32)

In this way the conditions for a transcendental perspective were preserved in medieval Europe and matured at the end of it. As we shall see in later chapters, the clash between sacred and secular authority again created space for the emergence of the individual by opening up the possibility of self-determination—and the valorization of personal freedom.

FREEDOM FROM FREEDOM

The above conditions encouraged a transcendence very different from that found in India or among the Hebrews, and help us to understand what has happened to transcendence in the development of the West. When we remember that the transcendental is, most fundamentally, that which provides a perspective on the world and leverage for changing it, we can see that transcendence has not disappeared from the modern West; rather, the transcendental dimension has become internalized into the supposedly autonomous, self-directed individual who began to develop again at the end of the Middle Ages.

The "rebirth" of Europe occurred when traditional Christian answers to questions of ultimate meaning and lack no longer satisfied the cultural elites who went on to find or make their own solutions to

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the problem of life. Later Luther encouraged this by sanctifying a more private relationship with God. Instead of believing in the corporate church as the means to resolve lack and gain salvation, now everyone must work it out for oneself. Personally having a direct line to transcendence provides the leverage to challenge all worldly authority, religious institutions as well as secular ones. Convinced he was following God's will, Luther refused to shut up: "Here I stand; I can do no other." This sanctioned the principle that one's personal understanding and moral principles can provide an appropriate perspective to confront social structures. Thus Luther was more than a prophet: after him everyone had to become his or her own prophet.

Eventually God could abdicate because by then his role had been largely assumed by the self-sufficient self-consciousness that Descartes described. The result was the Cartesian self: an increasingly anxious individual who relied on his or her own judgment, who measured the world according to his own standards, and who used her own resources to challenge the present situation, the social environment as much as the physical one. A condition of all these, of course, is personal freedom, which became and remains our paramount value.

What does all this mean for our lack now? For all the problems with sin, at least it taught a way to cope with the feeling that "something is wrong with me." Today, although our sense of self (and therefore our sense of lack) is stronger than ever, and our subjective alienation from the objectified world greater than ever, we no longer believe in sin. Therefore we lack an effective, socially agreed upon way to understand and deal with our lack, which means that it tends to manifest in individualistic ways that further weaken community bonds and relationships. One of these ways has already been noticed: If freedom is our ultimate value, then, when we feel that something is wrong with us, it must be that we are not yet free enough. This route is dangerous because it tends to become a vicious circle. It contains no resolution of lack, only its aggravation.

Today, however, we find ourselves in a radically different situation, which is beginning to transform our valuation of freedom. Like it or not, our paramount value must be reexamined from a new perspective. The ecological degradation of the earth, which threatens our own survival, supersedes other problems. This situation cannot be understood in terms of, or solved by, our need for greater freedom. On the contrary, freedom in this case is itself the problem, as the human species has attempted to enlarge the sphere of its own collective sovereignal

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freedom by commodifying the whole earth in its quest for ever-greater power. If totalitarianism is a form of government in which centralized authority exercises absolute control over all aspects of life, our humanistic domination of nature seems to describe a totalitarian relationship with the natural world and suggests what is wrong with it.

It is amazing that, although the ecological crisis is already seriously degrading the natural cycles upon which we all depend, life otherwise goes on almost normally. It is, quite literally, business as usual. No doubt our attention is circumscribed by consumerism and distracted by high-tech media addictions, but I think there is another problem as well: The environmental crisis is running up against the basic parameters of Western civilization, which has viewed progress in freedom as the solution to everything. As many have emphasized, what we need today is not a Declaration of Independence but a Declaration of Interdependence that tempers our understanding of freedom by emphasizing that "complete" freedom is a delusion too dangerous to tolerate anymore.

To conclude in a somewhat facetious way: what we need now is freedom from freedom, i.e., from our need for greater freedom, which is another way of saying that what we need today is responsibility. None of this denies the importance of freedom, any more than the Buddhist critique of self can be used to rationalize an Egyptian-like hierarchy of clientages. Yet it shows us that our understanding of freedom, like that of the self that values it, needs to be contextualized. The history of classical humanism and our present situation both show the problems that occur when the self and its freedom are understood solely in secular terms.

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