

The still point of the turning world: Progress, nature and freedom

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Abstract

What is the meaning of the notion of progress? For some, the word seems to suggest continual movement from worse to better. According to Kant, this movement is inevitable, because “the human race has always been in progress toward the better and will continue to be so henceforth”. However, this Enlightenment optimism has run aground. As George Grant shows, following Nietzsche, the failure of progress is paradoxically rooted precisely in the project of the expansion of human freedom: once man has emancipated himself from every god and from every nature, he no longer knows what to will. Is there a way out of this impasse? The second part of this paper explores a few possibilities. I will propose that a more helpful word than “progress” is “maturity”. Maturity has to do with development within a given order, and thus provides a clue to thinking freedom and nature as complementary and not antagonistic. A seed develops into a tree, maturing into what it “really” is over time. Two further examples open this intuition to its fully human dimensions.

1. Introduction

In many sectors of the modern world, there is a noticeable tension between the two concepts of “nature” and “freedom”.

A first level of the question can be seen in the title of this journal, which means “discovery”. This title could express the view that science has to do with the discovery of nature. Nature could be understood as something stable but hidden, which can be discovered if looked at in the right way. To exaggerate in the service of clarity: in this view, nature is an absolute which human freedom cannot change.

There are other widespread ways to think about the task of science, for instance the less ambitious idea that science produces more or less approximate mathematical models which can be used to predict and manipulate physical reality. This technological harnessing seems to some the expression of a more modest approach to knowledge, in that it does not claim

to know reality in itself, but is concerned with “what works”. That power may then be used to further the purposes that human freedom assigns to it: one thinks of medical use, food production, transport, and the like. In this reading (again, exaggerating), nature is basic raw material which can be harnessed and used as far as human freedom’s ingenuity is capable of doing.

In practice, both of these views often implicitly coexist in the researcher. She may feel most fulfilled when “discovering” something new in an experiment; and she may often justify her work to others by describing possible useful applications of it. It is my concern simply to put in evidence that the affirmation by some of a nature seems to curtail the freedom of others who would like to extend their freedom even further: any limit seems to negate freedom and stop progress. This tension between freedom and variations on the theme of “nature” can be found in many other aspects of contemporary society, from jurisprudence to medical ethics to ecology to art.

In the present article I will explore this tension. The immense questions in play cannot be treated exhaustively in a short space, but I hope at least to provoke further thought on the matter. In keeping with the interdisciplinary character of Euresis Journal, I will attempt to present my reasoning in a way that is accessible to specialists of other fields. While this endeavor will lead me to use rather broad strokes in treating the themes in this paper, my hope is nonetheless to trace an itinerary across several fundamental philosophical and theological questions of general interest and relevance.

I will approach the question first through a clarification of the interplay between the terms “freedom” and “nature”, and then by considering their interaction in time.

2. Freedom and nature

At the beginning of George Grant’s commentary on Nietzsche in his Massey lectures published as “Time as History” [1], a link is proposed between the concepts of nature and freedom:

[...]two languages are used together in the sermons preached by our journalists about the achievement of landing on the moon. These events are called another upward step in the march of evolution, one of the countless steps since life came out of the sea. Man and nature are seen together. On the other hand, in the same sermons there is talk of man in his freedom conquering nature, indeed transcending himself. In as archetypal an event for technological man as the space programme, it is right that the two languages should come together in the hymning of the achievement. The two languages come together as man is seen not only as a part of evolution, but as its spearhead who can consciously direct the very process from which he came forth. In such speaking, man is either conceived as the creator, who arose from an accidental evolution, or if evolution is itself conceived within a terminology about the divine, man is then viewed as a co-operator, a co-creator with God.

Let us not be led astray by the last sentence in the quotation. Instead, let us concentrate on the first part of the text, in which freedom is side by side with nature. Nature is a complex concept which in Grant's context brings us to think of the physical world; of evolution, and therefore of a movement of development determined by material causes. But on closer examination of this and other passages in his text, Grant seems to be referring first of all to the related philosophical concept, "essence". It is primarily in this sense that I will use his word "nature" in what follows.¹

Freedom on the other hand speaks of novelty, uniqueness, unrepeatability, unpredictability. Human freedom is capable of actions which are not determined by material causes, so much so that its operation can "conquer nature", "transcend itself", and generate progress.² Grant reminds us that the believers in the Enlightenment who gave form to North American society "conceived time as that in which human accomplishments would be unfolded; that is, in the language of their ideology, as progress". It is worth briefly looking at that "ideology" as expressed by one of its principal sources, Immanuel Kant, in order to better understand Grant's reasoning.

In his late work "Whether the Human Race is Continually Advancing Toward the Better"³ Kant examines three possibilities; namely, that history is in decline, that it is in progress toward the better, or that things are stable:

In three cases one could make predictions. The human race exists either in continual retrogression toward wickedness, or in perpetual progression toward improvement in its moral destination, or in eternal stagnation in its present stage of moral worth among creatures (a stagnation with which eternal rotation in orbit around the same point is one and the same).

The first of these possibilities is quickly eliminated: "Decline into wickedness cannot be incessant in the human race, for at a certain stage of disintegration it would destroy itself". This reasoning seems to have something childish about it when observed from the hither side of the twentieth century. Perhaps Kant could believe it impossible that the human race destroy itself; precisely that specter has been an important part of social thought after Hiroshima.

¹Even a brief treatment of this group of concepts would bring us too far afield for the present paper. Therefore, I will simply continue to use Grant's word in what follows, and avoid entering the complex debate about the meaning of each of these concepts.

²I am not concerned with confuting the thesis that freedom is mere illusion. Josef Pieper's affirmation in "The End of Time" [2], rings true:

history is not simply the "unfolding" of something previously given that was not yet unfolded, because it is not simply "development" for this reason, in the sphere of history the concretely future cannot be calculated in advance, neither by the stars nor by statistics.

³The essay was not immediately published. It saw the light in 1798 as part of Ref. [3]. For the following reflections on Kant I am indebted to Josef Pieper's work [2].

Kant also believed that a “stagnant” situation in human history would be another impossible outcome, and so rejected the idea that history is an eternal oscillation without genuine progress. His reasons for this would be interesting to develop further, but would take us too far afield in the present paper.⁴ In the end, he proposes that [3]

there must be some experience in the human race which, as an event, points to the disposition and capacity of the human race to be the cause of its own advance toward the better, and (since this should be the act of a being endowed with freedom), toward the human race as being the author of this advance.

What sort of event⁵ could be this indicator? Kant proposes that the “universal sympathy” with which the French revolution was welcomed is the sort of event which indicates progress toward the better as the form of history. Not the revolution itself, but rather

simply the mode of thinking of the spectators which reveals itself publicly in this game of great revolutions, and manifests such a universal yet disinterested sympathy for the players on one side against those on the other, even at the risk that this partiality could become very disadvantageous for them if discovered. Owing to its universality, this mode of thinking demonstrates a character of the human race at large and all at once; owing to its disinterestedness, a moral character of humanity, at least in its predisposition, a character which not only permits people to hope for progress toward the better but is already itself progress in so far as its capacity is sufficient for the present.

Kant has perhaps excessive faith in his prediction, and goes on to assert that he has demonstrated in the most rigorous way possible, “in spite of all skeptics”, that the “human race has always been in progress toward the better and will continue to be so henceforth.” He concludes his reasoning with a sort of prophetic vision of the end result of this intra-worldly progress:

Gradually violence on the part of the powers will diminish and obedience to the laws will increase. There will arise in the body politic perhaps more charity and less strife in lawsuits, more reliability in keeping one’s word, etc., partly out of love of honor, partly out of well-understood self-interest.

It is beyond the scope of this article to evaluate further Kant’s ideas, but at least we can see that to speak of progress, in the terms of the “believers in the Enlightenment”, means to speak of a forward-thinking, future-oriented mentality which is deeply convinced of its capability to effect the change “toward the better” that it desires.

⁴One of these reasons can be found in his eighth thesis from the “Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View” [4]:

The history of mankind can be seen, in the large, as the realization of Nature’s secret plan to bring forth a perfectly constituted state as the only condition in which the capacities of mankind can be fully developed, and also bring forth that external relation among states which is perfectly adequate to this end.

Kant has a prior commitment to progress which does not permit him to adequately entertain the idea of “circular” time.

⁵It would be interesting to connect this theme with some later thinkers who make frequent use of the same term (Heidegger, Giussani).

There are those who turn their nostalgic yearning toward the “golden age” or see time as an endless circle, but in general our Enlightenment-influenced culture looks to the future.⁶ This being-projected-toward-the-future often has an anxious character. The present seems unsatisfactory because it is fleeting and empty. Many find that the past seems dusty, inadequate or quaint. There may have been great thinkers in the past, but as they did not know the present time it seems that they cannot have much to say to it. Only the future seems to hold promise and hope.

In Grant’s words [1]: “To enucleate the conception of time as history must then be to think our orientation to the future together with the will to mastery.” That is to say, the choice of the founders of American society falls squarely on the side of freedom, against nature. These founders and their heirs are brought to seek “mastery” in order to give form to the future. They think of human freedom as the key to dominating “nature” and giving it a new and improved form. The desire for mastery and this emphasis on the future and on the exercise of human freedom has an immense consequence

In the modern call, human wills are summoned to a [...] staggering challenge. It is our destiny to bring about something novel; to conquer an indifferent nature and make it good [emphasis mine] for us. [...] All else in nature is indifferent to good. Our wills alone are able, through doing, to actualize moral good in the indifferent world. It is here that history as a dimension of reality, distinguished from nature, comes to be thought. History is that dimension in which men in their freedom have tried to “create” greater and greater goodness in the morally indifferent world they inhabit.

Here we begin to see the further consequences of the tension between freedom and nature: the very goodness of things seems to depend upon freedom. The human project thereby assumes promethean dimensions, and in order to live his “mission”, man must be strong and resolute.⁷ When everything depends upon the will, that will must not waver.

Not only this, man also must accept that all the “ideals” that have given meaning to action until now are in fact a human creation, and do not reflect any given order at all. The logic is pitiless. Nietzsche’s critique has shown that all ideals, which he terms “horizons”, are relative, created by men. If both terms are understood as absolutes, in choosing freedom over nature, man chooses to drift in an infinite, shoreless sea without any guiding star. And

⁶As westerners found their hope in an imaginable future, they turned more and more to mastery; their concentration on mastery eliminated from their minds any partaking in time other than as future.” Grant, *Time as History*, 24.

⁷As Grant [1] notes,

The challenge of the will is endless to the resolute, because there is always more “creation” to be carried out. Our freedom can even start to make over our own species. As Hegel so clearly expounded, doing is in some sense always negation. It is the determination that what is present shall not be; some other state shall. But it is positive in the sense that in its negating of what is, it strives to bring forth its own novel creations. In this sense the burden of creation itself is placed upon us. Resoluteness for that task becomes the key virtue for the history makers a resoluteness which finds the sources of novelty in their own “values”. They assert that meaning is not found in what is actually now present for us, but in that which we can yet bring to be.

this is tragic:

Nietzsche affirms that once we know that horizons are relative and man-made, their power to sustain us is blighted. Once we know them to be relative, they no longer horizon us. We cannot live in an horizon when we know it to be one.

Once one has realized that values are man-made, even those that one had been willing to die for, they are no longer capable of sustaining sacrifice, and the “resolute drive to mastery” finds itself suddenly without direction. Many of our contemporaries wish to “create a better society”, to “improve the state of the world”. These desires are at the heart of the scientific endeavor as it relates to technology, and are also deeply ingrained in the drive to affirm the rights I alluded to in the introduction. Yet, as Grant continues [1],

To say that man has a history and therefore cannot be defined is to say that we can know nothing about what we are fitted for. We make ourselves as we go along. This is what Nietzsche means when he says that we are at the end of the era of rational man. We must live in the knowledge that our purposes are simply creations of human will and not ingrained in the nature of things. But what a burden falls upon the will when the horizons of definition are gone. [...] We have been taught to recognize as illusion the old belief that our purposes are ingrained and sustained in the nature of things. Mastery comes at the same time as the recognition that horizons are only horizons. Most men when they face that their purposes are not cosmically sustained, find that a darkness falls upon their wills. This is the crisis of the modern world to Nietzsche.

Progress cannot be wholly determined by God or by nature without eliminating the human element; and progress cannot be wholly the fruit of man’s action without running into the contradiction that once man has emancipated himself from every god and from every nature, he no longer knows what to will.

This is truly a paradoxical result. In affirming freedom over nature, it is freedom which ends up emptied of significance. Precisely the immense critique which brought about mastery and the emancipation from “nature” finishes by freezing men’s wills, like self-conscious actors suddenly unable to remember their lines. Even the most enthusiastic and apparently obvious crusades for human rights and emancipation, which are a sort of contemporary mirroring of the Enlightenment mentality, are susceptible to the same chilling critique Nietzsche turned on the traditional “horizons” he had in mind. At most, according to him, there is a “will to power” which seeks to affirm some arbitrary “value” upon the world. This activity is deemed “progress” by those who believe in the values proposed; but Nietzsche sees deeper, and shows that belief in those values is arbitrary. Is there a way out of this impasse?

Two questions open up at this point which exceed Grant’s affirmations. The first is the question regarding nature. Is it really true that there is no nature, no prior order to give direction to willing and mastery?⁸ Second, one of the strongest reasons for denying the

⁸To face this question, among other things we would need to examine the fact that science proceeds by looking for correspondences, often called “laws”. The mathematical description of reality, the comprehensi-

existence of nature⁹ is the idea that to affirm nature would be tantamount to renouncing freedom. Freedom is so dear that many would prefer anything to becoming slaves.¹⁰ This is to beg the question, however. Is it really the case that true freedom is incompatible with the existence of nature?

3. Time and maturity

A complete treatment of these two questions would require much more than an article. A possible resolution can begin to be seen, however, by situating the interplay of freedom and nature in time.

Perhaps a different word can clarify what we have heretofore denominated by “progress”. The word “maturity” might help. What matures remains itself, yet is enriched. Something remains stable (“nature”) and yet there is also a newness which could be thought of as a first approximation of freedom. A seed becomes a seedling, that becomes a tree, capable of producing new, overabundant seed. A tree is “better” than a seed in the sense that it is the fulfillment of the nature of the seed. It can be seen then that “maturity” does not refer to something static, opposed to freedom and movement, as some are tempted to think of “nature” being. Nor still is it something in random motion, purely relative, without any stability.

The example of the development of a seed to a mature tree leaves freedom too far in the background, however, to be an adequate solution to the problems we have seen. A more complete example of maturation of the relationship between nature and freedom could be found in the experience of a close friendship, whose “progress” together is an adventure of discovery, a deepening of truths already partially known, a movement forward in depth and intensity, more than in quantity or variety.

The movement in friendship is not toward someone else, as tragically shown in Mozart’s Don Giovanni. Nor yet is it toward a static nature which could have been described fully at the beginning of the relationship. As friends live, their nature changes. Or better, they mature. If they do not, the friendship quickly grows stale and shallow: a friendship which stops growing ceases to exist as friendship in the full sense. This growth requires a constantly new adherence¹¹ of freedom, which among other forms takes the shape of renewed self-

bility of reality, is a potent indication that some sort of stable natural order, some “logos”, exists in reality. It would also be interesting to look in depth at what Grant thought about these questions, which certainly did not escape him, but which seem incomplete in his writings.

⁹Recall Nietzsche’s “man is the as yet undetermined animal”.

¹⁰When we think about it, we are inclined to vigorously condemn Dostoevskij’s Grand Inquisitor, who promises comfort and peace at the price of renouncing freedom. Although when we don’t think about it, we are just as likely to embrace the mediocrity of panem et circenses.

¹¹The word is perhaps unusual. I take it from L. Giussani’s thought, and use it to mean, roughly, “choice”. There is an overtone of the asymmetry between freedom and nature: nature is in some sense stable, while freedom moves, changes, and “adheres” to it. More importantly, “to adhere” (in Giussani’s original Italian)

communication and forgiveness. Progress in a friendship means to move toward the full nature of one's self and of the other.

Particularly in its beginning and in the crucial moments of growth, the progress in a friendship has the quality of wonder and surprise, freely given affection for that which is. Each person adheres to the other, as he or she is now and is becoming. In friendship, newness is not sought elsewhere or otherwise, but rather within. It is a positive, gratuitous discovery. As it matures, this discovery takes the form of free self-giving in joy to affirm the other person.

Each of these moments is like what T. S. Eliot described as the "still point of the turning world", a paradoxical expression which I borrow to express the moments in which time is lived as an event, ever renewed and ever itself. In that point, one's limited capacity for giving and receiving is filled and expanded, made capable of receiving and giving more. It is an event of increasing freedom within the continuity of nature.¹²

In speaking of events, we are again reminded of Kant. He thought that if one could find a truly unrepeatable and positive event, it would be strong evidence for the existence of progress toward the better.¹³ We also find this affirmation in the Jewish people, and not as a theory but rather as a statement of fact. The belief in creation, in prophecy, and the awaiting of a Messiah who would end the time of injustice and usher in an age of peace and goodwill, expresses the particular view of time which we call history. For the Jews, certain exceptional events later called *magnalia Dei*, "great works of God", signaled new beginnings: Abraham's call out of his homeland, the exodus out of Egypt, the Babylonian exile and the return and rebuilding of the temple. These were not mere occurrences, like lightning striking. These were events, creative acts of God's sovereign freedom, moments which signaled a before and an after, in which something new and irrevocable had happened. This is part of the meaning of the Covenant, a free act stipulated between two parties. After God made a pact with Noah, with Abraham, and with Moses, a new situation arose.¹⁴

The Christian continuation of this reading deepened and complicated the picture. Christian sacramental theology affirms that the great actions of God, like the creation and the liberation

contains reference to an affectionate, positive stance not a dry, neutral "choice". One "adheres" to a proposal made by another person.

¹²It is quite probably the case that society "advances toward the better" as a result of many such friendships within it forming and maturing. Within those relationships, the disinterested event Kant spoke of is a present reality and generates true progress. The related question, whether it is the case that macroscopic progress in society can also be the result of the free decisions made by governments or by powerful individuals, is not my concern here.

¹³The character of being "events" is tied to the freedom of the person who causes the event. Out of sovereign freedom, *ex nihilo*, not out of necessity, God "created the heavens and the earth". Out of sovereign freedom he chose Abraham, freed the slaves from Egypt, and gave the Law. His action comes from nothing, it is not possible to deduce it from prior causes.

¹⁴Many questions arise at this point about freedom, God's action, and the historical value of the Jewish scriptures. For the purposes of this article, it suffices to observe that this interpretation of facts led to a typological interpretation of history.

out of Egypt, continue in life of Jesus and in the sacraments. These *magnalia Dei* too are to be considered absolute beginnings within time. The Jewish people interpreted the crossing of the Red Sea in terms similar to those used in speaking of the Flood, and of the creation of the world itself; Christian interpretation of the Scriptures includes Christ's baptism and each Christian's baptism in the same line. This leads to a concept of history which proceeds by discontinuous events, yet is united by an overarching project which is gradually revealed, and which can be partially discerned in each of the specific events involved.

In the light of these ideas, the question of progress can be seen in a deeper way. According to the Judeo-Christian reading of history, it is first of all God's action that generates a movement "from worse to better", to borrow Kant's formulation. This is crucial, because one of the main reasons for the impasse we reached above was the tacit assumption that human freedom is either absolute or it does not truly exist. But only divine freedom could be unfettered; the freedom of a creature cannot have this characteristic. Created freedom is never absolute, it is always in a relationship both with its creator and with the other creatures that surround it. This relationship is not necessarily a prison, however. In friendship, the freedom of each person obeys the nature of the other, and in time may reach ever greater fulfillment of itself both as freedom and as nature.

In speaking of friendship, I am attempting to speak to all my readers. However, I believe that an even more intense and complete experience of this kind can be found in the Eucharist. Although this affirmation places itself outside the experience of some of my readers, it may still be helpful to describe briefly its close correspondence with the relationship between freedom and nature in time that we have seen.

The Eucharist can be described in a way which is again reminiscent of Eliot's poem [5]:

*And do not call it fixity,
Where past and future are gathered.
Neither movement from nor towards,
Neither ascent nor decline.
Except for the point, the still point,
There would be no dance, and there is only the dance.*

In the Eucharist truly "past and future are gathered." In the words of the Catechism [6], it is the memorial of a past event, the physically and temporally localized presence of the Lord, and it is an anticipation of the future, "pledge of the glory to come". It is the "new and eternal covenant". In the Eucharist, time may be experienced as the contemplated presence of the eternal. In that contemplation, the human person is brought to ever-greater likeness to the Image contemplated.

As we noted above, in Christian thought the sacraments are "new creations" in time which extend and actualize the *magnalia Dei* of the past. In this sense they are events which

generate “progress towards the better”. In the Eucharist, this progress is particularly clear. The physical nature of the bread is raised to heights to which it could never have aspired: its very substance changes. It becomes viaticum, food for the journey to eternal life. Yet this movement of ascension does not abolish but rather completes the original nature. It is still nourishment, albeit on an infinitely greater level.

The sacraments are also essentially the cooperation of man and God. In them we see divine freedom and human freedom side by side, no longer antagonists. In the Eucharist, which is the transubstantiation of bread offered as “fruit of the earth and work of human hands”, we see that the Good which human freedom cannot bring about on its own nevertheless depends upon human hands to come into being.

Grant’s and Nietzsche’s “darkness upon the will” does not plague human freedom lived as creaturely obedience. In obedience and in sacramental cooperation, human freedom is preserved precisely through the generosity and the humility of the hidden God. He does not force anyone into anything. God freely “lets us be”, offering His gifts, and showing that the fulfillment of creaturely freedom has the same form. This then is progress: in the free act of receiving the gifts of the Creator and offering them back to Him, we and our world progress toward maturity.

The tension between freedom and nature, then, is not so absolute as it seemed. If the proper distinction is made between created and divine freedom, and the interplay between human freedom and nature is observed in time, it is possible to understand both terms in their beauty and richness without reduction, and it is not necessary to choose one over the other.

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