

Reflections on Martin Luther, Individual Agency and Collective Responsibility

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If Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer were alive today, they would surely say “I told you so.” The opening words of their 1947 volume *Dialectic of Enlightenment* sound a stern warning: “In the most general sense of progressive thought, the Enlightenment is always aimed at liberating people from fear and establishing their sovereignty. Yet the fully enlightened earth radiates disaster triumphant.”

Instead of the Enlightenment liberating humanity from ancient superstitions and irrational demons, the authors go on to argue, instead of marking the transition from barbarism to civilization, the Enlightenment merely replaced an old myth with a new one: the idolatrous myth of universal rationality and its vicious henchman, instrumental reason. Standing amid the rubble of two devastating world wars, the authors conclude that the idea that humanity had become enlightened was not only wrong, but profoundly so. The darkness had grown both deeper and more dangerous. Disaster triumphant indeed.

In this quinentennial year of Martin Luther’s now-famous declaration on the door of Castle Church in Wittenberg, which both catalyzed and symbolized the Enlightenment shift toward the individual as sovereign — as the primary agent of thought and action — we reflect upon the narratives of progress that constructed the modern era in the West. We have disasters of our own, arguably even more dangerous than those to which Adorno and Horkheimer responded in their day.

Especially with Donald Trump at the controls of the world’s largest nuclear arsenal, which he has recently committed to making even larger, along with his newfound zeal for expanding the role of the US as the world’s polluter-in-chief, we find ourselves caught in the turbulence between the Scylla of nuclear holocaust and the Charybdis of global warming, among countless other hazards. Ongoing progress in our voyage as a human species is not inevitable, nor is the undeniable progress we have made in many areas of human endeavor irreversible. To adapt Claude Debussy’s well-known comment on Richard Wagner’s music, we’re here to assess extent to which the Enlightenment appeared as a beautiful sunset that was mistaken for a dawn.

In my own view, both Luther on the one hand and Adorno and Horkheimer on the other were 100% half-right, though for different reasons. Luther rightly recognized the centrality of individual agency and action, including in the process of salvation, though many of us — myself included — would quibble with Luther concerning from what humanity needs to be saved and how salvation happens. Adorno and Horkheimer rightly insist that we cannot rely upon the structures of rationality and the exercise of instrumental reason alone to save us. For my part, I

will suggest that what the Enlightenment turned to the individual ultimately revealed is how completely individual agency depends upon collective forms of responsibility.

Luther's primary claim in his declaration on the door was that salvation is an individual matter, not an institutional one. To that point in the history of the Christian Church, salvation was understood as coming to individual believers through the sacraments of confession and communion as administered by priests on behalf of the church. Luther drew a line straight from God to individual believers, cutting the church out of the process of salvation itself. We are justified by faith alone, Luther insisted. On Luther's terms, confessing sins directly to God, and by faith believing in the efficacy of the atonement, brought immediate and full absolution directly from God.

This theological shift from an institutional to an individual means of salvation both catalyzed and symbolized a broader shift toward individuals as the primary agents of action — in the political realm as democracy and in the economic realm as capitalism. To the extent that this was understood as progress, which in many ways it certainly was, it also introduced a disjuncture between individual agency and collective forms of responsibility. As humanity has learned the hard way, however, individual agency becomes possible only when individuals in the aggregate take collective responsibility for establishing and maintaining the arenas of action within which individuals can exert their agency. Put differently, the more we champion individual agency, the more we tend to undermine the institutions — religious, political, and economic — that are needed to uphold individual agency.

Setting aside the question of whether salvation in Luther's sense is necessary or even possible, let me put forward my central point concerning the relationship between individual agency and collective responsibility. I do so by referring to the writings of the Cambridge-mathematician-turned-Harvard-philosopher Alfred North Whitehead, who argues that each element of experience is constituted by its relationships to all other elements of experience. We are made up of, or constituted by, relationships. As Whitehead once put it, "We are dependent on the universe for every detail of our experience." This principle applies to everything whatsoever. Nothing — not a person, not a rock, not a galaxy — is what it is strictly within itself. There is no such thing as an isolated entity of any kind.

In his book *Modes of Thought*, published in 1938, Whitehead applies this principle more generally. He writes:

The basis of democracy is the common fact of value experience, as constituting the essential nature of each pulse of actuality. Everything has some value for itself, for others, for the whole. This characterizes the meaning of actuality. By reason of this character, constituting reality, the conception of morals arises. We have no right to deface the value experience which is the very essence of the universe. Existence, in its own nature, is the upholding of value intensity. Also, no unit can separate itself from the others, and from the whole. And yet each unit exists in its own right. It upholds value intensity for itself, and this involves sharing value intensity with the universe. Everything that in any sense exists has

two sides, namely, the individual self and its signification in the universe. Also either of these aspects is a factor in the other” (MT 110-111).

The concept of morals arises, Whitehead says, because each of us has value for ourselves, and yet at the same time, each of us has value for others and for the whole. Everything that exists has two sides: the individual self and the significance of the self in the universe. Existence is the ongoing development of this interplay of value intensity. Even though each element of experience exists in its own right, no element of experience can separate itself from the others — from the whole.

This assertion runs counter to one of the founding conceits of modern thought, according to which human beings are, in the words of the late Harvard political philosopher John Rawls, “free, equal, and independent” persons. This notion of the individual, while dangerously solipsistic, is both grounded in and reflective of the revolutionary idea, centuries in the making, that to be human is alone sufficient cause to be afforded certain rights. The development of human rights, first as an idea and then as a body of covenants and laws, arguably represents the signal achievement of political philosophy in the modern era. If so, then the Universal Declaration of Human Rights may well represent its apotheosis.

In December of 1948, urged on by the indefatigable Eleanor Roosevelt, delegates to the fledgling United Nations surveyed the devastation of two world wars and together shaped a vision for a distinctly different future. They declared: “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of goodwill.” They continued, “Everyone has the right to life, liberty, and the security of person. No one should be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment. Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion... Everyone has the right to take part in the government of his or her country, directly or through freely chosen representation.” And so on. Humanity has rarely been so boldly imaginative nor so courageously defiant of the travesties of the past or the challenges of the future.

The problem with rights, however inventively imagined and triumphantly asserted, is that they are not self-enacting. Martha Nussbaum, a philosopher and legal scholar at the University of Chicago, takes on this problem in her 2006 book *Frontiers of Justice*. She begins by explaining the conundrum in personal terms. If we are fortunate, she says, the assumption that we are “free, equal, and independent” is true for at least part of our lives; but it is never true for any of us throughout all of life. Babies are not free, equal, and independent; nor are many people who are elderly. Nor are we if we become sick or disabled, or if we are born poor or disadvantaged in some other way. In light of the fact that being free and independent is at best a temporary condition, Nussbaum argues that we should think of human rights not only in terms of freedom, but also in terms of what she calls capabilities.

The question, she says for example, isn’t only whether you are free to have clean water, but also whether you are at least minimally capable of getting it. Are you minimally capable of finding shelter or medical care; of using your senses to imagine, think, and reason; of

participating in the political choices that govern your life; of acquiring and holding property? Nussbaum's point is that the right to something is worthless without at least a minimal capability of exercising that right. And, I would add in this context, the exercise of capabilities requires not only the individual freedom to exercise them but also the collective responsibility of making them possible in the first place.

Given the interplay between individual agency and collective responsibility, how should we respond to the disasters that now surround us? Given the retrograde motion that now exists in many world capitals, moving us not toward civilization but away from it, how should we respond as individuals? In these increasingly dire circumstances, is progress possible?

In an article titled "The Argument about Humanitarian Intervention," first published in 2002, the Princeton political philosopher Michael Walzer observes that there is nothing new about human disasters caused by human beings. He says, "We have always been, if not our own, certainly each other's worst enemies... History is a bloody and barbaric tale."

Walzer goes on to describe the 20th century as a time of innovation, both in the way disasters were planned and organized, and more recently in the way they were publicized." Humans developed the ability to kill each other on a large scale more efficiently and spread the news about it more rapidly. Given all we know, Walzer says, "The question is posed that has never been posed before — at least never with such immediacy, never so inescapably: What is our responsibility? What should we do?"

In response to his own question, he replies, "In situations like these, anyone who can help should help." Taking responsibility for the calamities that human beings have visited upon each other begins with an affirmation of individual agency.

This brings us back to Luther. His response to the abuses and excesses of the church wasn't to curse God, nor was it to declare, as Ralph Waldo Emerson would declare several centuries later in a similar fit of righteous indignation, that the church was an outmoded and expendable institution. Rather, Luther set out to reform the church by laying out his disputations concerning the sale of indulgences.

In this sense, the interplay between individual actualities and the whole that constitutes them illustrates the interplay between individual agency and the collective responsibility that makes it possible. The responsibility of the many makes the agency of the one possible, while the agency of the one makes the responsibility of the many necessary. To the extent that our institutions of collective responsibility — whether religious, economic, or political — do not safeguard the agency of each individual, not to mention each individual's worth and dignity, the institutions must be reformed, or rebuilt, or replaced. And the work of reforming our institutions of collective responsibility is a burden each of us must bear. If we can help in this process, and all of us can, then we should help.

Make no mistake: I'm not suggesting that our individual efforts, even taken collectively, and even assuming we're all working toward the same common end, will add up to the kind of systemic institutional change we desperately need to achieve, at least not in the short run. Even so, I remain optimistic — but not because I think everything will turn out alright, which it

won't. I'm thinking of optimism in Voltaire's sense. Optimism comes from the power we have to do the work that is ours to do.

One of Alfred North Whitehead's principal interpreters, the theologian James Luther Adams, puts the same conclusion a different way. He says, "The resources (divine and human) that are available for the achievement of meaningful change justify an attitude of ultimate optimism." He adds, "Anyone who does not enter into that struggle with the affirmation of love and beauty misses the mark and thwarts creation as well as self-creation."

Our work is to enter into the struggle of liberating people from fear and establishing their sovereignty. This is the work that is ours to do. This is the progress that is ours to make.