

## INELUCTABLE SLAVERY

Slavery is my subject. I wish to speak not of natural slavery nor of conventional slavery but of moral slavery and especially of an ineluctable slavery akin to moral slavery. I shall argue that moral slavery is most commonly to act in accordance with moral principles accepted without due deliberation. We may easily lapse into enslavement of this kind by accepting and acting on generalizations taken uncritically from others or foisted off on us by others. Or we may enslave ourselves in this way by accepting and acting on our own generalizations when we fail to deliberate or deliberate poorly. But I shall argue also that, even if we exercise our deliberative faculty, and even if we exercise it properly, we remain enmeshed in an ineluctable slavery of an epistemological or an ontological variety.

Slavery of these moral and philosophical kinds resembles slavery in the classical sense. Aristotle is most explicit on the topic. He divides slavery into one kind imposed by nature and another kind imposed by convention. A natural slave (ὁ φύσει δοῦλος) is someone who has an intellectual deficiency, he explains. A slave of this kind does not have a faculty of deliberation (οὐκ ἔχει τὸ βουλευτικόν) (*Politics* I 13,1260a12-14). But a slave can perceive arguments, presumably by hearing them (*Politics* I 5,1254b22-23). The implication is that he can also act on these arguments. He can do what he is told, in other words. A natural slave, therefore, belongs to another as a living instrument of action (*Politics* I 4,1253b27-1254a15 ; I 5,1254b16-22).

A person who is a natural slave, then, does not possess any liberty of indifference. He cannot construct moral concepts for himself, nor can he choose among them. He can only follow instructions received from others. Because of his mental deficiencies, one might even deny personhood to a creature of this type. Nor can a natural slave have much liberty of spontaneity. Because he cannot fend for himself, he

## INELUCTABLE SLAVERY

can only be the property of another, or, we would better say, the ward of another.

But the Aristotelian concept of natural slavery is a dangerous one. The concept is dangerous because slavery of the natural kind we may so easily confuse with slavery by convention. Slavery of the conventional kind (ὁ κατὰ νόμον δοῦλος) is simply that imposed by external force (ἡ βία), especially in war (*Politics* I 6,1255a4-7). Might makes right, is the motto of the ancient slaver (1255a7-19). Though fully a human being, a conventional slave thus belongs to another as an instrument of action (*Politics* I 4,1254a15-17).

Conventional slavery in modern times garnered legal sanction for a considerable time in Europe and America, and the force imposed was force of arms. Slavery of this sort is also similar to wage slavery. But wage slaves labor under the coercion not of military but of economic force, which can be rather severe in our so-called free markets. This slavery presently enjoys legal condonation if not sanction. Market force makes right, is our motto.

The poor victims of conventional slavery obviously do have liberty of indifference. If they did not, they would lack the ability to deliberate, and they would be natural not conventional slaves. Conventional slaves thus have in principle the choice of accepting or rejecting their situation and acting accordingly. In practice they can seldom do little more than choose from among precious few options laid down by their masters. In a word, these poor souls have little liberty of spontaneity. Their slavery is involuntary because it rests on the threat of force, if not its overt exercise.<sup>1</sup>

Traditional Aristotelian slavery, then, includes two varieties. A natural slave is properly the property of another, but a convention slave is forcibly the property of another.<sup>2</sup>

1. Williams recognizes that social and economic institutions, such as the ancient city, can demand the imposition of conventional slavery. But he unfortunately refuses to take seriously the distinction between natural and conventional slavery. Hence, he believes that modern liberal philosophers are less accepting of institutional constraints than was Aristotle himself (*Shame* 5.110-17, 124-29).

2. See Preus for a discussion of some exegetical complications.

But I wish to discuss slavery of yet other varieties. What I shall call moral slavery resembles more natural slavery than conventional, though it has elements of both. A natural slave on the Aristotelian account cannot deliberate for himself but can apprehend and act in accordance with general concepts about moral matters. A moral slave resembles a natural slave because he merely apprehends the concepts of others and acts on them, or he accepts and acts on haphazard concepts of his own. Though he can do so, he deigns to deliberate for himself or does so poorly. Either way he subjects himself to moral notions, often ill-conceived, without giving them due deliberation.

But a moral slave bears a resemblance to a conventional slave. He can easily be the victim of internal or external constraints. Poor education or psychological trauma can prevent one from deliberating well, for example. Political, social, or economic institutions can also take their toll. But a slave of this sort has no physical constraints, not being in prison or in chains, to borrow a phrase from David Hume.

A wage master as well as a wage slave can thus be subject to moral slavery. He may, because he is a master, accept the practical principles and practices of a false institution. That is, he may act on a false concept of our human nature. A wage master has the capacity to deliberate as does a wage slave. But he easily may not deliberate about the very assumption that he need not allow other human beings to deliberate.

A conventional slave may or may not be a moral slave. Whether he is or not, depends on whether or not he accepts his enslavement uncritically. If he accepts his situation without question, he is a moral slave as well as a conventional one. He is not a moral slave if he does not accept his situation, though he may be obliged conform his actions to it.

A slave of the moral sort would thus have a terribly impoverished liberty of indifference. He is apt to have few options for action, and he chooses among them in a nondeliberate fashion, if he does choose. He acts for the most part in a haphazard manner on chance concepts. Even if he happens on one, he would not himself know a true concept to be true. Without any argument to support it, he could possess only an opinion which happens to be true.

But a moral slave does have at least some liberty of spontaneity.

He very likely labors under the internal constraints of convention or the external constraints of institutions, for example. But, again, he has no obvious constraints of physical force.<sup>3</sup>

Though it might appear voluntary, moral slavery, I wish to argue, falls under a genus which we would better denominate nonvoluntary slavery. We may again follow Aristotle. Aristotle distinguishes between actions which are voluntary (τὸ ἐκούσιον), nonvoluntary (τὸ οὐκ ἐκούσιον), and involuntary (τὸ ἀκούσιον). His discussion is difficult. But we may say, I believe, that a voluntary action we perform under a true concept and a true percept, a nonvoluntary one under a false concept but a true percept, and an involuntary one with a true concept but a false percept (*Ethics* 3 1,1110b18-24.1110b28-1111a2). Presumably, one would be insane if our concepts and our percepts both were false (compare 1111a3-19).

We can thus see that a moral slave acts in a nonvoluntary manner. When he accepts a generalization uncritically, he acts either under a false moral concept or a concept not known to be true. He fails to consider what is right or wrong in a given situation. He acts instead for the sake of a concept readily suggested by others or merely imagined by himself. Wittingly or unwittingly, he merely accepts these concepts at face value.<sup>4</sup>

We might observe that moral slavery cuts far deeper into the human psyche than conventional slavery. Nonvoluntary slavery is worse morally than involuntary for both the slave and the master. Internal constraints are worse than external because they make us less than human. Within moral slavery neither master nor slave can even hope

3. Williams implies that we can be moral slaves to morality itself, though he draws no connection with Aristotelian slavery. The chapter in which he take up the question bears the title, "Morality, the Peculiar Institution", which is obviously an allusion to slavery. He argues that moral considerations are surely important for deliberation, but other considerations may have even greater importance for an agent (*Ethics* 10,182-87).

4. There is an involuntary slavery resulting from ignorance of the minor premise in deliberation. Enslavement to faulty deliberation of this sort is the stuff of tragedy and, presumably, of comedy as well (*Poetics* 13,1452b30-1453a12; 5,1449a32-37).

to act in accordance with a true concept of himself. Both labor in nonvoluntary action under a false concept of their nature.

Indeed, a chattel or wage slave has at least the possibility of moral freedom, difficult though it may be to aspire to it or to attain it. But I would not deny that external constraints, worse physically, can easily cause internal ones. I refer not merely to the constraints of slavery itself, which Aristotle in fact calls a tyrannical rule, but to the constraints of familial or political tyranny (*Ethics* 8.10.1160b22-32 ; 1160a36-1160b12).

What horror moral slavery entails we may also see in the fact that to free a moral slave from his internal bonds is actually an impossible task. After all, a moral slave only can free himself, and this accomplishment is no mean feat. But one may easily free a chattel slave or a wage slave from his external or physical bonds.

We see, then, that those who are moral slaves act in a nonvoluntary manner. They do not exercise their faculty of deliberation, though they are able to do so. But now I am about to argue that even those who escape moral slavery still remain in the bondage of nonvoluntary slavery of another kind. Human freedom so-called is, paradoxically no doubt, the stuff of nonvoluntary slavery. Human freedom nonvoluntary slavery? you might wonder. Is not freedom the very opposite of slavery? When free, do we not act under a generalization known to be true?

We do not, I am afraid. Those of us bold enough to claim to be free do differ from moral slaves. We use our faculty of deliberation to the best of our ability. But we must concede, I believe, that our deliberative faculty is at best very feeble. Even when we think our selves most free, we shall thus find that our actions all are at bottom nonvoluntary.

Nonvoluntary slavery of this kind I would divide into two subspecies. The one subspecies is epistemological, the other ontological. We are epistemological slaves because we can never be certain of our principles even if we could know our goodness. Why? Our knowledge can only be hypothetical. We are allotted no absolute truths, true once and for all. We can only have concepts empirically true, dependent on our percepts of contingent events. And, of course, our percepts of these contingencies have their own limitations.

Recall what Plato has to say about Socrates and his second sailing. Socrates does not claim to know a cause which is absolutely good and necessary. But he merely assumes as an hypothesis (ἡ ὑπόθεσις) the proposition which appears to be the strongest, and he accepts that which seems to agree with it and rejects that which does not (*Phaedo* 99b-100a).

We are ontological slaves because our actions are subject to our very nature. Even if we had a glimpse of the truth, and we do not, we would not be at liberty to change the most basic truths about ourselves. We can have no control over our own nature. True, we may change and develop our character. But we ought best to do so only in a manner consonant with our nature. I do not deny that we may act against our nature. But action of this sort is literally perverse and exacts its toll.

Socrates himself suggests that we are enslaved to the conditions of our very existence. There is a secret doctrine, he informs us, that we are in a prison of some sort, and that we cannot free ourselves or run away. Indeed, he asserts that we are the chattel (τὸ κτήμα) of the gods, who are our guardians. That is why we may not commit suicide (*Phaedo* 62a-c).

We can only aspire to a nonvoluntary slavery of this epistemological and ontological sort, then. We can never free ourselves from our nature, and we can never understand our nature, either. But we may, I believe, distinguish between a meliorative and a pejorative sense of nonvoluntary slavery. In the meliorative sense we try to the best of our ability to grasp what our nature is and to act in accordance with it. But in the pejorative sense we make less than optimal effort to attain knowledge of ourselves.

We might say that we can never truly do what we wish because we can never truly understand who we are and what we ought to do. We can only do what we believe to be good, and what we believe good is surely false. We are thus slaves to our ignorance.

You might now wonder, Does this ineluctable slavery of either nonvoluntary variety entail any consequences for human goodness? If we cannot be truly free, could we ever hope to be virtuous or happy? Obviously, we cannot be absolutely virtuous or happy. We cannot attain to any absolute self-knowledge. Nor can we be truly

happy in any relative sense, either. Our lot is to remain self-ignorant. We can have no knowledge other than hypothetical knowledge, with which we cannot fathom even our nature.

We may, nonetheless, act on a concept for its own sake, even if we are ontological or epistemological slaves. Or even moral slaves in the sense which I have analyzed. We actually have the capacity to act on rather crazy ideas of various and sundry sorts. Need I mention the punctilious bureaucrat or the fastidious foodie.

Our felicitous foibles are immortalized in the good Don Quixote de la Mancha. He rode high as a knight errant on a swaybacked horse and performed what he took to be most noble deeds of justice. We may laugh at the Knight of the Woeful Countenance only because he fell prey to obvious fictions and wielded a makeshift lance. But our laughter cannot conceal the fact that his folly differs not in kind from our own.

We could further distinguish, if we wished, a nonvoluntary slavery, perhaps ineluctable as well, in accordance with passion. A passion can occasion slavery of a nonvoluntary sort if it interferes with our thinking about moral concepts. We might, for example, act from our will on concepts to which we or our social peers are emotionally attached.<sup>5</sup>

If we are fortunate, we may thus enjoy our happiness in little more than a fool's paradise. True, we may embody a concept in our action for its own sake. But our concept is surely false. Unless you wish to argue that we can indeed attain an absolute moral ideal. But I for one do not share your optimism. We cannot attain perfect knowledge nor can we know any thing perfectly. Not even ourselves.

Ontological or epistemology slavery is thus our lot in life. I prefer to take a melioristic attitude toward this ineluctable fact. If we accept our fate, our happiness need not too fearful as long as our paradise is

5. Williams does argue that, even when not in bondage to morality, our deliberative faculty can only remain subject to internal constraint. Our deliberations properly issue in a practical necessity demanded by the "ethical life" of an agent and a desire "essential to the agent" (*Ethics* 10,187-91).

We may also enslave ourselves involuntarily by acting out of passion. We would thus exhibit incontinence in the classic sense (See *Ethics* 7.3).

not too foolish. If we do our best to understand what we can, we ought to be able enjoy our happiness for more than a day. But if we are unaware of our fate, we may well become the author of our own tragedy or comedy.

I conclude, then, that we are ineluctably in moral bondage to our ignorance for reasons both epistemological and ontological. We may be even more benighted if we cease to struggle against our ignorance and rest content in our conceits.

Paul SCHOLLMEIER

*The University of Nevada, Las Vegas*

#### *Bibliography*

ARISTOTLE. *Nicomachean Ethics*.

— *Poetics*.

— *Politics*.

PLATO. *Phaedrus*.

PREUS, Anthony. "Aristotle on Slavery." *Philosophical Inquiry* 15 (1993): 33-47.

WILLIAMS, Bernard. *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985.

— *Shame and Necessity*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993.