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Review of *Freedom from Reality: The Diabolical Character of Modern Liberty* by D.C. Schindler

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Abstract:

A review of D.C. Schindler's recent book *Freedom from Reality: The Diabolical Character of Modern Liberty* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2017).

Keywords: John Locke, liberalism, liberty

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Schindler, D.C. *Freedom from Reality: The Diabolical Character of Modern Liberty*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2017. 486 pp. \$55 (hbk). ISBN 9780268102616.

Reviewed by GEOFFREY WELLS

Not to put too fine a point on it, but since Louis Hartz's characterization of the predominant liberal tradition in America (*The Liberal Tradition in America*, [New York: Harcourt Brace, 1955]), defending liberalism or attacking its putative sins has become something of an academic growth industry. In recent years, some of the more strident voices critical of liberalism have come from natural law theorists, especially from the perspective of Catholic social thinking, who lay squarely at the feet of liberalism what is claimed to be its latitudinarian tolerance of moral excess (or, rather, regress). The consequence, they contend, has been the slow erosion of a common moral *paideia* derived from the tradition of cognizable, universal, objective, and transcendent moral laws. D. C. Schindler, though not a self-proclaimed natural law theorist, might well agree with this indictment, insofar as his own concern addresses the putative negative influence of a Lockean egoism permeating liberalism's mistaken thinking on human freedom. But for Schindler, more than a moral philosophy is needed to understand the failure of liberalism. Identifying the true relationship, or the realized consistency of a relationship, between who we are in the wholeness of our being and what we do relative to our power to act is, in fact, the work of ontology. Schindler's exposé on the West's "escape from reality" endeavors, then, to lay bare the bedeviling inconsistencies in Locke's thinking on freedom in order to establish his own Aristotelian profile on this subject.

The Socratic maxim that the unexamined life is not worth living may be Schindler's unspoken premise; his explicit desire, on the other hand, is that his readers reconsider, if not discover for the first time, the fundamental principles necessary for a good life. This means we are to embrace, according to a principle of Aristotelian metaphysics, the "actuality" of the a priori good-in-itself as a necessary substrate, a perfection, that is always there, whether we acknowledge its being or not. One might interpolate—fairly, I think—that within this scheme some umbilical connection subsists between right acting based on objective, universal moral truths and the ontological good controlling the "potency" of everyday acting, insofar as the act must be a continuous means of realizing one's true end. Moral truths, however, must be subsumed under the ontological priority of an intrinsic necessity anchoring potency to the actuality of truth, so that the act of choosing "from above," as he describes it, fully embodies the telos of a higher and prior good (28). Otherwise, according to Schindler, untethered pure potency is effectively impotent in the face of actual conditions.

The significance of this for power is critical: power is either grounded and directed to proper ends or it is impulsive and unchecked. Unarguably, to understand the good that structures, or should structure, the political organization of human beings—for Schindler, the good means order (156)—one needs to know something about human nature as the touchstone for the proper organization and administration of our relational interactions. But for all his discussion of the good, its meaning remains elusive, probably because it requires acknowledgment of pluralism's reality. As an ontology meant to explain personal freedom, which existentially comprehended fails in the absence of what ought to be wanted (the good-in-itself), Schindler layers onto the personal social and political

components as well, thereby reintroducing the problematical reality of competing multiple ideas of the good. His appeal to Aristotle as a resolution of this dilemma is unpersuasive, or so this review will argue. Political authority, properly oriented to some prior Aristotelian “actuality” (the good), creates the salubrious condition, he believes, of receiving from and passing on goodness to others. Indeed, his belief that positive law, when it embodies the essence of this true reality, functions as a “golden thread” (299) binding the community into a whole, not only mimics Plato’s organic character of belonging, but approximates the moral *paideia* natural law theorists wish to reestablish. This has value as a theological principle, perhaps; it is less clear, however, what this means for secular political society other than that we must find common moral identity. But without this metaphysic of reality, freedom, in the good’s absence, devolves for Schindler into the diabolic use of power originating from the unanchored, self-motivated will (172).

The shock value of his claim that diabolic liberty is our Lockean legacy is meant to draw the reader back to an appreciation of properly grounded human self-determination. Without relegating it to a Kantian formula of duty to itself alone, reason can be fully autonomous, and therefore truly free, only so long as human reason remains attached to that which is greater than itself alone, meaning, the teleology intrinsic to potentiality. According to Schindler, although Locke endeavors to explain freedom as the exercise of will to begin something new and as the power to change something without also reducing it to mere spontaneity, Locke’s effort to ensure will’s freedom from a deterministic cause, to be its own source of power, ultimately require that he disconnect it (through uneasiness or the suspension of desires) from that which is external to itself but which must of necessity remain intrinsic to reason’s comprehension of the good. With Aristotle’s metaphysics providing a roadmap for Schindler, to fully comprehend the epistemic context of human freedom, one must further recognize and embrace the “symbolic” union of actuality and potentiality in a separate and transcendent reality determining human action. The condition for true human autonomy and personal self-realization become possible only in the actuality of the “real” so that a genuinely “generative freedom,” in the sense of allowing one to create something new, is at the same time genuinely teleological, in the sense that spontaneity is fully cemented in the reality of the good all humans inherently strive (or should strive) to realize (292). Locke’s concretization of choices made “from below” by the self-interested ego severs the good from its instantiation in real acts, literally dividing (*dia-ballō*) actuality from potentiality in the actualization of the “diabolic” (33, 143).

Schindler’s disrobing of Locke’s flawed logic on human will is impressive, but his substitution of an Aristotelian metaphysics as the proper ground of freedom is not without significant socio-theological complications. A meaningful cosmos, he argues, depends on the principle of absolute meaningfulness, and this principle is by its very nature first, preceding—indeed superseding—all other considerations without exception. In other words, there can be no more momentous claim than the Christian one: the “that-than-which-nothing-more-decisive-can-be-thought” (270). Liberalism, born as a response to the claim of the Christian event of the absolute’s incarnation in Christ, is for him unable to resolve the problem of religious violence that springs from religious differences over the meaning of this event. On this point, however, Schindler may be guilty of some disingenuousness. While he may not misrepresent the effort of liberalism to promote the ideal of religious pluralism (to accept pluralism as an articulation of the problem is to accept liberalism as the solution), he does misrepresent the nature of

Christianity's relationship to political systems by suggesting that what may be true for me personally also should provide the basis for social order or that we can resolve the many inevitable conflicts (and not only religious ones) emerging in a secular pluralist society by appealing to the tradition of a prior religious actuality—one, we can assume, that subordinates mere interest to its standards of truth, goodness, and beauty. Schindler wants us to escape the negotiation of power understood as unanchored egoism, but his solution to the absolutizing of power within liberalism, as though there were nothing outside it to which it is subordinate, is to absolutize the actuality of truth as he thinks of it within a Christian tradition filtered through Aristotle. Hardly a less idiosyncratic choice, nor one without a troubling undercurrent.

That each of us brings preferred truths to public discourse doesn't threaten the value of open dialogue embedded in the ethos of liberal democracy, but one of Schindler's asides in which he seems to embrace the classical notion of citizenship exemplifies the following, troubling undercurrent: one is not only born to citizenship, but as a member of a city one is defined by the city's end. What are we to make of this, exactly? Concern for the loss of classical tradition and hierarchical authority is disconcerting if we recall the classical sense of piety, which in its own authoritarian way empowered the head of the family as absolute spiritual leader and understood that each community was identified by its own peculiar god. Deference to the state's god—clearly an unpalatable option for us today—seems much less likely in liberal society than in some more holistic alternative, such as Schindler's. His employment of a Platonic-Aristotelian metaphysics to disclose the excesses of liberalism cannot escape the social implications embedded in any appeal that metaphysics may have. I do not mean to minimize the ontological significance of the relationship between the material and immaterial in being human (our being-ness), but nothing about the failures of liberalism and the rejection of Lockean ontology necessarily leads one back to nor justifies in a *prima facie* way an Aristotelian ontology. Such an approach is simply a matter of preference.

Nor is this overstating the concern. Schindler's disquietude for many familiar liberal practices and concepts (choice, self-determination, modern natural rights, voting, autonomy, privacy, equality, freedom of thought and press, free markets, and technology), while not meant to disparage these practices as inherently evil, is meant to show how they have become distorted in the "society of devils" by the legacy of liberalism (193ff.). This conjures a rather dire image of Lot's drift away from Abraham's pastoral sobriety into the godless city, going well beyond Kant's meaning, I think. There are valid reasons, indeed, to regret our collective loss of the real: for example, in the manner that advanced technology distracts, if not robs, us of the sense of nature (in the telluric sense). But Schindler's criticism of technology, to take one example, is at once romantic and excessive (245-48). I can hardly imagine any commercial farmer today, desiring to feel closer to the earth, willing to abandon his air-conditioned combine so he might harvest his toil's produce (now meager as a consequence) by hand. The humanistic, much less the economic, implications of farmers returning *en masse* to the plow are staggering to consider.

If this seems a picayune point, more important, and notably absent from his litany of targets, is any discussion of the US Constitution, and of the concomitant principles of rule of law and due process. This particular lacuna surely is not trifling: the Constitution, the rule of law, and due process provide the context for understanding and pursuing the other practices he examines, and cannot be considered even remotely by references to Platonic

ideals or an Aristotelian telos. The Constitution and rule of law *are* the secular foundational truths of the United States, and they are the context of continuous efforts of Americans to define and realize the secular good. One can certainly appreciate the artistry of Schindler's application of logic to his critique of Locke; he is, in a word, masterful at this. But the glaring flaw in his argument is to assume that in liberal society each of us as a citizen is *and remains* throughout life a blank slate of sorts, acting on superficial and momentary preferences of self-interest without regard for anything more enduring or substantial in our lives. To expose Locke's illogic is intellectually useful, but it does not follow from this that every citizen who believes in the institutional freedoms of a liberal political order must necessarily exercise a thoughtless will, any more than one who finds value in Aristotelian metaphysics is obligated to accept everything Aristotle says on the subject.

Maybe, then, in spite of his eristic artistry, Schindler strains to squeeze an overwrought criticism of liberalism into the skinny jeans of his definition of freedom without justifying how the binary metaphysics of Plato and Aristotle represent the only alternative for our redemption from a kind of moral non-cognitivism and existential drift. Disregard of James Madison in this context, while excusable in a book of this sort, is yet disappointing. To be sure, there is room for Aristotle in our dialogue on liberalism's contributions to the putative decline of morality in American society, if this were all he wanted to do; one needs only to recall Henry Veatch's "modern interpretation of Aristotelian ethics" in his *Rational Man* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2003). But Veatch's approach, though useful in its way for critiquing aspects of liberalism, is clearly more limited to concerns regarding the development of virtuous character rather than an expansive ontological critique of modern American society. Although Schindler chases Plato and Aristotle to the conclusions he wishes to find in a generative, yet teleological freedom, the grounding of the prior reality that makes his compatibilism possible must remain by his own argument Christian. He does not chase down the implication of what this might mean, however, especially if this entails an attempt to make of us a society of angels, when as Madison rightly argues we are not. And no doubt cannot be, appeals to our better angels notwithstanding. But neither does it follow from this that we are consigned by default to be devils.

Schindler is right to underscore the relationship of fundamental beliefs to the integrity personal choices. But extrapolating from personal considerations to apply the same underlying justifications to broader social ethos, as it seems he wants to do, misses a point. Locke may well have argued freedom ultimately derives from the power of the will to act on its own. In my experience, however, the counterfactual to this logic is that most human beings do not act arbitrarily on the basis of some untethered will or uninformed desire. Most of us believe something deeper after all, even if we do not all believe in the same fundamental thing. It is also worth remembering, as Judith Shklar well-argued ("Redeeming American Political Theory," *American Political Science Review* 85, no. 1 [1991]: 3-15, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1962875>), that liberalism pace Hartz is but one of the many pieces of an eclectic political culture—pieces evincing a diversity of intellectual traditions and institutional practices that, sadly, also include inimical traditions of nativism and racism. No doubt Schindler would agree traditions such as these have no part in the good.

Even so, this ought to give us pause. Case in point, how, we might ask, in the history of Americans' confused understanding of nation and nationhood—evidenced its current

dialogue on this—does Schindler’s ontology clarify the ideal (the good) of *e pluribus unum*, especially to which part of this slogan regarding unity and diversity Americans should be most committed as evidence of their respect for human freedom? Schindler seems satisfied to merely encourage his readers to think about his argument. Fair enough, so long as the public debate concerns fundamental values rather than metaphysical absolutes, and so long as we redouble our commitment to J. S. Mill’s insight that scrutiny of truth, however we might present it, is a desirable prophylactic against the insulation of convenient prejudice substituting for truth. Thoughtful vigilance, after all, is also a good. Schindler, however, believes modern liberty precludes a deep participation in the intrinsic meaning of the good (176). To accept his position as stated stacks the deck; at the very least it would end the debate before it begins.

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