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Facing Our Original Sins

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It is difficult to speak about racism when one has not suffered its effects directly and even more so when one's own ancestors may have been their very cause. It is hard to imagine what it is like to have one's very humanity assailed so thoroughly and relentlessly. The tragic events of the summer of 2020 made this act of empathetic imagining "easier," so to speak. And whether or not racism was the actual motivation of the officer who killed George Floyd, the event unleashed many long-bottled-up experiences of it. No less than Republican Senator Tim Scott testified to "the pain of being stopped 18 times driving while black."

In the current conversation, there is a lot of talk about how *systemic* racism is. The modifier suggests that, even after legal reforms to end discrimination, racism lies so deeply in the fabric of things it can hardly be recognized. It is in *people*, underlying conscious thoughts, even good intentions and deeds. It is in *institutions*: schools, housing projects, welfare agencies, prisons, etc., where black Americans face impediments to basic things necessary for human flourishing. We don't address the correctness of that idea—especially its unfalsifiability—here, but we do recognize racism in the form of slavery as our original sin. It is our "hidden wound."

One aspect of the question that has hardly been touched in recent discussions about racism, however, is the precise nature of it when it appeared in its original form. When Africans were brought forcibly to American shores, their de-humanization—the condition for their becoming chattel—was *embedded in their very bodies*. In this original form, so "systemic" and virulent was racism that the impediments to human flourishing were lodged *within*, impediments which would then be passed on to progeny for generations to come, only to be further exacerbated by other systems. The best analysis of this original system is offered by Harvard sociologist Jacqueline Rivers who argued in a [recent lecture](#) that the single greatest impediment to the flourishing of black Americans has been the "Four-Hundred-Year Experiment on the Black Family," from the mutilation of the black family under slavery, to the assimilation of its fragile remnants into mainstream American culture.

It is no small thing to be able to move about as you wish, to see your wife or husband or mother and father when you wish, but the similarities between our “freedom” and slavery are striking, and frighteningly so. That is why, even if it is *we ourselves* who abolish our human nature, making it malleable to *our own* brute wills, it is still slavery.

In her account of the beginning of the “experiment” on the black family, Rivers notes the attempt to *exterminate* it by attacking its three constitutive relations: marriage, motherhood and fatherhood, and childhood. Slavery *ripped children from their own parents in the slave trade*. It *deprived enslaved men and women of the right to marry, legally putting up* insurmountable obstacles to any common-law marriages they did have. “Abroad” husbands, kept on separate estates and granted only rare visits to their wives, could neither provide for their children nor protect their wives from the frequent predations of their masters. Finally, the institution even used slaves as studs and breeders—regardless of their common-law commitments—to generate “product” for the domestic slave trade after the official end of the trans-Atlantic one. With this thoroughgoing attack on family bonds, the slave was made a perpetual orphan, culturally displaced in the most radical sense, because displaced from the very basis upon which any culture worthy of the name is built: *the natural bonds of flesh and blood*. This single fact helps to explain the singularity of the predicament of black Americans then and now with respect to other minorities who have also faced racism in the United States. Those others have never been so systematically undermined *from within*.

The deprivation of the basic natural bonds was not accidental to chattel slavery. It belonged to its *essence*. It was precisely how people were deprived of their humanity, then made available to an order of brute will and force, to commercial exchange, and even manufacture (breeding). But human beings are *begotten, not made*, and as such they belong to a prevenient natural order. The basic fact of being born (*natus*) is to have a nature (*natura*). It is to *be something* already, a *kind* of being with its own inner life. If people are to be “up for grabs,” then, they must be ripped away from that nature by being ripped away from all that gave them birth. This is why when St. Peter Claver, the Spanish Jesuit, baptized over 300,000 slaves brought in on ships to Cartagena in the 1600s, he scandalized so many. For by offering them to become “born of God,” he recognized them to be born of man and woman, that is, *human*, his own brothers and sisters.

As we Americans once again face our nation’s original sin, with public prostrations and confessions, it is all too easy for us to miss its essence. But if we miss this, we risk overlooking another even more ubiquitous sin, one that attacks the same things slavery attacked—marriage, motherhood and fatherhood, and childhood—even if we commit it *in the name of freedom*, slavery’s apparent opposite. It is the sin that now attacks the very evidence of and condition for the natural bonds at all: the distinction between the sexes itself. We have spent a lot of energy contriving a new lexicon and a new medicine to get *that* out of the way. And now it has been officially *abolished* with the Supreme Court’s 2020 decision in *Bostock* which evacuated any and all meaning whatsoever from “sex,” leaving behind a mere anatomical shell indifferent to all “identities” or “situations.” And were the “Equality Act” to be passed, our official abolition of sexual difference would be applied to every nook and cranny of public and private life.

The idea that we could thus uproot our “identities” from our bodies is relatively new, thanks to

recent bio-technological “developments.” Yet, however much it had been unimaginable before, it has, retroactively speaking, been desirable for centuries, insofar as it is the ultimate solution for uprooting individuals, once and for all, from their embeddedness in the chain of generations. And it has been so particularly on our shores. In his observations of nascent America De Tocqueville observed something in the American soul that gave rise to a troubling deracination, *among the free born*, no less:

[N]ew families constantly issue from nothing, others constantly fall into it and all those who stay on change face; the fabric of time is torn at every moment and the trace of generations is effaced. You easily forget those who have preceded you, and you have no idea of those who will follow you.

What is it in our soul that makes this effacement so “desirable”? It is that the generations situate the individual in a *prevenient natural order*, an order prior to choice.

The most “suspect” of those prevenient relations is, of course, the one founded on birth, where there is quite literally no choice in the matter. In the Old Country, John Locke sowed the initial seeds for this suspicion with his “discovery” in Genesis of a more “natural” man who was free *because* he had *not* been born. His new method of education, indeed, would cultivate those seeds by offering those who *had* been born the possibility of being purged of the “imperfection”^[1] and attuned to the “more natural” society, a collection of “blank slates,” all re-made in the image of the primordial Adam.^[2] But it was in America where this new account of fatherless and motherless “perfection” really gained traction, since there one had the strong sense of history beginning all over again, as something entirely new. One was not an *heir* to something but, rather, a new “Adam.” R. W. B. Lewis described this perhaps unavoidable temptation in his book *The American Adam*:

[T]he American myth saw life and history as just beginning. It described the world as starting up again under fresh initiative, in a divinely granted second chance for the human race, after the first chance had been so disastrously fumbled in the darkening Old World. . . . America, it was said insistently from the 1820’s onward, was not the end-product of a long historical process; . . . it was something entirely new.

Suspicion of the most basic of natural relations, would inevitably turn to the institution that gives rise to it. Thus, just as relations between children and parents had to be re-described along the new contractual lines, so too was the relation between spouses.^[3] Indeed, in the early colonies there was a certain exuberance about marriage, because unlike the paternal/maternal-child bond, marriage could offer a much clearer image of the kind of voluntary union Americans wanted politically,^[4] a purely *voluntary* one.^[5] Spouses, of course, *do consent* to marriage; but in so doing they consent to something that has first taken hold of them. Their bodies are *already* ordered to each other. They, then, have *fallen* in love, or *been presented* to each other (by others in their community). But to make marriage a purely voluntary union is to reject all of this. It is to make of marriage a “relationship” between two who (ideally) have little else that binds them, and a “capstone” added to a life otherwise indifferent to it. In the early colonies and later, in the free states, divorce was predictably just on the other side of the new “relationship.”^[6] And so, eventually, would same-sex “marriage” be.

If marriage is re-made along purely contractual lines, so must motherhood and fatherhood. Liberation from the natural bond between men and women requires the liberation of

motherhood and fatherhood from the carnal bonds between them and the establishment of a new parenthood on intentional, arbitrary, and contractual ones, enabled by the technological manipulation of human biology and . . . a lot of money. Liberated mothers and fathers in whatever combination, in other words, must become breeders and studs; and their liberated children, motherless and fatherless children, just like “Adam.” There is a long history in American feminism that looked forward to just this kind of brave new world of “freedom.” It was stated most starkly by the feminist Shulamith Firestone as early as 1970:

[T]he end goal of the feminist revolution must be . . . the elimination of the sex distinction itself. . . . The reproduction of the species by one sex for the benefit of both would be replaced by . . . artificial reproduction: children would be born to both sexes equally, or independently of either . . .; the dependence of the child on the mother (and vice versa) would give way to a greatly shortened dependence on a small group of others in general and any remaining inferiority to adults in physical strength would be compensated for culturally.

What is it about our “freedom” that leads it to attack the same thing that slavery attacked: marriage, motherhood and fatherhood, and childhood? In one of his most stunning texts, then-cardinal Joseph Ratzinger writes:

The child in the mother’s womb is the very example which brings out the basic figure of human freedom and makes clear what is typically human about it. . . . The being of another person is so closely interwoven with the being of this person. . . . [T]o be oneself in this way is to be radically from and through another. Conversely, this being-with compels the being of the other—that is, the mother-to-become a being-for. . . . The child in the mother’s womb is simply a very graphic depiction of the essence of human existence in general. [But] [t]he radical demand for freedom, which has proved itself more and more clearly to be the outcome of the historical course of the Enlightenment . . . and which today largely shapes the public mentality, prefers to have neither a whence nor a whither, to be neither from nor for, but to be wholly at liberty. In other words, it regards what is actually the fundamental figure of human existence itself as an attack on freedom which assails it before any individual has a chance to live and act. The radical cry for freedom demands man’s liberation from his very essence as man, so that he may become the “new man.” In the new society, the dependencies which restrict the I and the necessity of self-giving would no longer have the right to exist. (emphases added)

What is it about our “freedom” and slavery that leads each to attack the “fundamental figure of human existence”? Neither can stand to allow a “whence and a whither.” This is why the “fundamental figure of human existence”—the child in the womb—has no right to exist, and why the legal right to abolish it is so sacrosanct. It is a “no!” to the “attack” of our parents on our freedom (by giving us birth). And now it is why the quintessential sign of being born, the sex distinction itself, has no right to be acknowledged in any meaningful sense, and why the legal right to abolish it has likewise become sacrosanct. It is the ultimate “no” to being *anything* at all. For the sake of “freedom,” Benedict XVI says:

Man and woman as created realities . . . no longer exist. Man calls his nature into question. From now on he is merely spirit and will. The manipulation of nature, which we deplore today where our environment is concerned, now

becomes man's fundamental choice where he himself is concerned. From now on there is only the *abstract human being*, who chooses for himself what his nature is to be. (emphasis added)

There are many distinctions that could and should be made about the state of slavery in the American South and our state of "freedom." It is no small thing to be able to move about as you wish, to see your wife or husband or mother and father when you wish, but the similarities between our "freedom" and slavery are striking, and frighteningly so. That is why, even if it is *we ourselves* who abolish our human nature, making it malleable to *our own* brute wills, it is still slavery. And it is why the official right to do so, and the official prohibition to say or think or act otherwise, inscribed in law (with *Bostock*), has made us all slaves now, *slaves of our own "freedom."*

Many sense that a "freedom" premised on cancelling out our actual selves, *transgressing* them to become something *else*—even disappearing altogether as "fluid"—will not make us free after all. As for the next generation, is it really possible to imagine children who will be more free because they have been "freed" from birth—often from one or both of their actual mothers and fathers—by being made, not begotten, and treated like property? C. S. Lewis' "man molders" who cut out their posterity "in what shape they please" come to mind.

Against this brave new backdrop, we should ask if there is another freedom, one that doesn't bear all the essential markings of slavery. Even more, in this new moment of national reckoning, we should ask *those who bear its marks so literally*. They know better than we what freedom looks like and what it doesn't; for they can see all the broken bonds for what they are, even when they are broken "freely." We should ask more *of* them, in other words, than that they be the occasion for the sanctimonious handwringing of virtuous elites, or more perversely, than that they be coopted into the more ubiquitous project of self-enslavement under the guise of "freedom," that now more ubiquitous sin of ours. Rather, we should hope that those who bear the memory of an older tradition—of a *people bound together by flesh and blood*—bring forward the memory of a truer freedom, for the salvation of us all.

N.B. A shorter version of this essay was published in *First Things*.

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[1] Adam was "capable from the first instant of being able to provide for his own support and preservation and govern his action." John Locke, *The Second Treatise on Government*, VI, §, 56.

[2] Cf. James E. Block in his book *The Crucible of Consent: American Child Rearing and the Growing of Liberal Society* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 21.

[3] D. C. Schindler shows Locke's subversion of the natural familial relations in his re-description of them as essentially contractual in *Freedom from Reality: The Diabolical Character of Modern Liberty* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2017), 182–85.

[4] Jay Fliegelman, *Prodigals and Pilgrims: The American Revolution against Patriarchal Authority, 1750-1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 123–53.

[5] See Allan Bloom on the re-definition of the love between man and woman along liberal contractual lines in his chapter "Relationships" in *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York:

Simon and Schuster, 1987) and “The Fall of Eros” in *Love and Friendship* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993).

[6] Thomas Paine wrote: “As soon as ever you meet you long to part; and not having this relief in your power, by way of revenge, double each other’s misery: whereas in ours, which have no other ceremony than mutual affection, and last no longer than they bestow mutual pleasures, we make it our business to oblige the heart we are afraid to lose; and being at liberty to separate, seldom or never feel the inclination. But if any should be found so wretched among us as to hate where the only commerce ought to be to love, we instantly dissolve the bond.” Cited by Fliegelman, *Prodigals and Pilgrims*, 124.

