



# OUR CULTURAL COUNTERDREAM

## *Remaking Human Beings and Unlawing the Law*

BY ANDREW R. DELOACH

Few depictions of the evolution of culture can transport us more intensely from terror to delight as the *Oresteia* of Aeschylus. It is the classical celebration of the triumph of human progress. It begins in the darkness of primitive ritual, barbaric vendetta, and blood feuds. It culminates with the triumph of civic order, restoration, and justice. The utter savagery of the house of Atreus gives way to the harmonious democracy of the Areopagus, Athena's high court for communal justice.<sup>1</sup> This is "a story of creation" in which the creators grow more human as the culture created grows more humane.<sup>2</sup>

And yet it is also a story of re-creation—the redefinition of culture and of humanity. As the *Oresteia* tells of the struggle to form the institutions of democracy, it anticipates the pains of preserving them, even in our day. With order and stability come reflex and reaction. Cultural stasis frustrates our expectations of perpetual renewal, and leaves "a reservoir of unused, turbulent energies."<sup>3</sup> The weighty demands of progress drive our culture urgently on toward utopia, always with the possibility of new conflict and "a new barbarity."<sup>4</sup> It is not difficult to observe how obstructed desires cause our culture to seethe with frustration, indifference, and hate. Against Athena's settled order we witness the postmodern "counterdream": the savage dissolution of all limits that restrain our freedom.

In this dream, however, the cultural redefinition begins not in violence but in boredom—in the metaphysical boredom and discontent known as *acedia*. The great hope of this metaphysical boredom, in its abhorrence of the necessary limitations of law and of creation itself, is unconstrained freedom in the total redefinition of human nature. *Telos* and the transcendent are voluntarily surrendered. The end result is the loss of both dignity and the capacity for love, and with them any ultimate basis for human rights.

### ACEDIA AND THE EMPIRE OF DESIRE

At the heart of this present cultural redefinition is the vice of *acedia*. The one it infects is actively engaged in a revolt against limits, place, order, and even life itself.<sup>5</sup> Whether for the fourth-century monk or the postmodern man, *acedia* is an indifference toward truth and goodness, and a hatred of the created world: it "abhors what God has given, namely reality and the limits of order..."<sup>6</sup> Inevitably, such hatred wants to be free from the world—along with any authoritative worldview, norms, or history. With this revolt comes "a profound withdrawal into the self," the unencumbered, autonomous self who seeks in wild abandon for complete satisfaction of personal desires.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>1</sup> ROBERT FAGLES AND W.B. STANFORD. "THE SERPENT AND THE EAGLE: A READING OF 'THE ORESTEIA,'" 14, 81. *THE ORESTEIA*, BY AESCHYLUS. Tr. Robert Fagles (Penguin 1977).

<sup>2</sup> *Id.* at 87. There is far more to be said on this topic that ought to be left to an expert in Greek tragedy. It will suffice to point out that Fagles' point here is one of several reasons why it is appropriate to consider Greek tragedy in a discussion of culture, justice, and (especially) humanity. As Nicholas Rudall, professor of classics at University of Chicago, has aptly explained, Aeschylus and the other Greek tragedians were largely engaged in inventing the philosophy of what it means to be human.

<sup>3</sup> GEORGE STEINER, IN *BLUEBEARD'S CASTLE: SOME NOTES TOWARDS THE REDEFINITION OF CULTURE*, 17 (Yale University Press 1971).

<sup>4</sup> Fagles, *supra* note 1 at 97. Here Fagles and Steiner coincide in their recognition of the possibility—the tendency, even—of recurring catastrophe. Indeed, what Steiner describes as the "inescapable drive towards war, towards a supreme assertion of identity at the cost of mutual destruction" is a fundamental feature of human culture, and particularly our modern culture. (STEINER, *supra* note 3 at 24.) His thesis parallels much of the thesis of this article.

<sup>5</sup> R.J. SNELL, *ACEDIA AND ITS DISCONTENTS: METAPHYSICAL BOREDOM IN AN EMPIRE OF DESIRE*, 61 (Angelico Press 2015).

<sup>6</sup> *Id.* at 10.

<sup>7</sup> Jean-Charles Nault, *Acedia: Enemy of Spiritual Joy*, *COMMUNIO* 31 (Summer 2004), 245-46, <http://www.communio-icr.com/articles/view/acedia-enemy-of-spiritual-joy>, retrieved September 14, 2017.

But more than hatred undergirds this revolt. As Michael Hanby points out, our cultural counterdream is less about celebration of self, pursuit of pleasure, or will to power than the hopelessness of boredom.<sup>8</sup> And this is not mere tedium—boredom with some *thing*. It is a fatigue and indifference that, though consumed by desire, can find no intrinsic value in the objects of its desire. It is at ease with nihilism. The “roused and thwarted energies of dreams and desires” that characterize this boredom—uncaptivated by transcendent truth, goodness, or beauty—are redirected toward unadulterated expressions of will.<sup>9</sup> This is freedom founded on voluntarism, and technology is the preferred means of satisfaction, whether it be entertainment (which “presumes the state of boredom as the norm”<sup>10</sup>) or the making, re-making, and ending of human life.<sup>11</sup> Thus, the pervasive *acedia* of our day, what George Steiner prophetically called the great *ennui*, is “a long whine of loathing, of nausea at the apparently unshakeable regimen” of created reality, being, order, and law.<sup>12</sup>

Indeed, this *acedia* is now more than an individual vice. It is a cultural malady in full revolt against the Western (Judeo-Christian) tradition and with it, the Christian understanding of the human being. What Alasdair MacIntyre and Charles Taylor (and Steiner before them) have described as “malaise” is a societal struggle to attribute worth to anyone other than ourselves—and even to our selves.<sup>13</sup> “The meaninglessness of the world,” says Snell, “allows us to treat it and others and ourselves exactly as we wish.”<sup>14</sup> Our bored culture refuses any debt either to order or to others.

The Christian view of being, and of human beings, is fundamentally relational. Human beings are ordered toward others. This is part of our *telos*, our created purpose, our being the bearers of God’s image. The *imago Dei* is given freely to us so that, in response, we would be a living gift to others. We are more truly human—and truly free—when we trust in the Creator to orient our desires and actions according to the limitations He has given for our good.

Contemporary culture recoils at this idea. Inordinate will turns us away from others, away from communion with the Creator and our fellow human beings. With this comes “sadness about what ought to gladden us most,” namely, participation in the created order and the life of God.<sup>15</sup> In its place, inordinate desire for unfettered freedom compels the erasure of those beneficial limitations within which our selves and our societies truly flourish. Our culture grows more willing to harm and even kill each other in its perverse longing for satisfied desires.<sup>16</sup> While traditional cultures constrain and limit desire, our culture maintains that desires (so long as they harm no one else) ought to form culture.<sup>17</sup> This is the counterdream, the “postmodern metaphysical dream” that R. R. Reno so astutely calls the Empire of Desire, which at once feeds on and is polluted by “an antinomian sensibility.”<sup>18</sup>

We are trained to be suspicious of longstanding moral traditions; we are told to adopt a critical attitude toward inherited norms. ... It serves a moral conviction, widespread though often tacit: that human beings flourish to the

<sup>8</sup> Michael Hanby, *The Culture of Death, the Ontology of Boredom, and the Resistance of Joy*, COMMUNIO 31 (Summer 2004), 184–185, <http://www.communio-icr.com/articles/view/the-culture-of-death-the-ontology-of-boredom-and-the-resistance-of-joy>, retrieved September 14, 2017. According to Hanby, boredom differs from *acedia* and the related concept of *ennui*; his distinction of boredom from these two, though not inapt, is rather cursory. In fact, his definition of boredom as a “double nullity of both subject and world” coheres well with the lengthy descriptions of *acedia* (and boredom) in Snell and Nault, and with Steiner’s concept of “the great *ennui*,” which can only be mentioned but not developed here.

<sup>9</sup> Steiner, *supra* note 3 at 22.

<sup>10</sup> Hanby, *supra* note 8 at 185.

<sup>11</sup> *Id.* at 188. Hanby explains (quoting John Paul II) that “the use of science to subordinate vulnerable life” is a danger “inherent in the culture of death, obsessed with ‘programming, controlling, and dominating birth and death.’” See also OLIVER O’DONOVAN, *BEGOTTEN OR MADE?* 2–3 (Oxford 1984).

<sup>12</sup> Steiner, *supra* note 3 at 22.

<sup>13</sup> See Snell, *supra* note 5 at 72.

<sup>14</sup> Snell, *supra* note 5 at 60.

<sup>15</sup> JEAN-CHARLES NAULT, *THE NOONDAY DEVIL: ACEDIA, THE UNNAMED EVIL OF OUR TIMES*, 80 (Ignatius Press 2015).

<sup>16</sup> Snell, *supra* note 5 at 61.

<sup>17</sup> R. R. Reno, *Marriage, Morality, and Culture*, FIRST THINGS (September 2009), <https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2009/09/marriage-morality-and-culture>, retrieved October 1, 2017.

<sup>18</sup> R. R. Reno, *Empire of Desire: Outlining the Postmodern Metaphysical Dream*, FIRST THINGS (June 2014), <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2014/06/empire-of-desire>, retrieved October 1, 2017. Reno’s article, together with Hanby’s, is indispensable reading on the subject of our culture’s voluntaristic pursuit of limitless freedom and the cultures of desire and death it creates.

degree that they're free to satisfy their personal desires. ... [W]e push these social mores, disciplines, and restraints to the margins of our souls, creating space for bespoke lives tailored to our desires.<sup>19</sup>

*Acedia* has turned us inward, and thus prohibits our attention to the other. It is self-love with no room for self-giving love. It has produced a deranged (dis-arranged) view of the human being as instrument and resource, raw material for the making. In this post-cultural Empire, human beings live in “the mode of unrepressed bodies” seeking and finding satisfaction,<sup>20</sup> willing its project of creating unlimited freedom—all the while longing for a violent dissolution.<sup>21</sup>

## UNCONSTRAINED FREEDOM

Undoubtedly, the project of our culture has become “the liberal pursuit of unconstrained freedom” in every sphere of life.<sup>22</sup> Our Empire grows ever more disgusted with the triumph of the *Oresteia*. Such imposed order is an affront to unfettered desire. This revolt is founded not on the protection of justice and human rights but on the extension of freedom—“the abolition of limits which constrain and direct us.”<sup>23</sup> Scientific technique is made an accomplice in the pursuit of freedom even from “the necessities imposed upon us by our bodily nature.”<sup>24</sup> The despisers of Western (and particularly Christian) culture “will not rest until they have leveled every aspect of human life.”<sup>25</sup>

The preferred means of achieving this reconstructed reality is the law. While technology (particularly medical technique) may often be the implement, it is the law that imposes. And so it has been by and through

the law—specifically the courts—that our culture has asserted its will, demanding rights and freedoms previously unwritten and unknown. The unmistakable watchword of this revolution is “equality.” But equality as shorthand for “equal rights under law” is a pretext, because the law always limits. What our culture desires is not equality but limitless freedom. Whether it be the right to contraception,<sup>26</sup> abortion,<sup>27</sup> or same-sex marriage,<sup>28</sup> the demand to legally abolish these limits was laid down, and the U. S. Supreme Court willingly contrived rights in the “penumbras” and “emanations” of otherwise explicit Constitutional guarantees. Countless examples of such reasoning abound in our jurisprudence—limited only by the imagination of the jurists and their capitulation to the will of the culture.

If any contrivance of the courts clearly illustrates Reno’s antinomian impulse to create “space for bespoke lives,” it is Justice Kennedy’s doctrine that freedom grants the right to define *and* express one’s own concept of human existence, identity, and

meaning.<sup>29</sup> Abortion is championed in the name of privacy and women’s healthcare, and marriage is reinvented as mere state recognition of love and the right “not to be condemned to live in loneliness.” These are simply the foundation stones of the right to define. Any limitation on the Kennedy doctrine will be easily swept aside when pressed to its logical end. Unrestricted autonomy must permit assistance in dying to relieve oneself and others of burden at the end of life—and for that matter, any time before. The right to define must permit one to assume a gender (actually known or artificially invented) contrary to his or her biological sex, without need of justification. The concomitant right to express

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<sup>19</sup> *Id.*

<sup>20</sup> *Id.*

<sup>21</sup> Steiner, *supra* note 3 at 23.

<sup>22</sup> O’Donovan, *supra* note 11 at 20. Although O’Donovan limits this pursuit to the private realm, it has arguably erupted into the public realm. In fact, it seems that O’Donovan was at least aware of this trend, for he recognizes “the imposition of society’s projects and purposes upon the way reality is understood” and the “struggle with society to exact a reality-concession.” *Id.* at 25-26.

<sup>23</sup> *Id.* at 6.

<sup>24</sup> *Id.*

<sup>25</sup> R. J. Snell, *Advent in the Deathworks*, FIRST THINGS (December 2016), <https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2016/12/advent-in-the-deathworks>, retrieved October 4, 2017.

<sup>26</sup> *Griswold v. Connecticut*, 381 U.S. 479 (1965).

<sup>27</sup> *Roe v. Wade*, 410 U.S. 113 (1973).

<sup>28</sup> *Obergefell v. Hodges*, 576 U.S. (2015).

<sup>29</sup> This is a synthesis of the doctrine crafted by Kennedy in two significant Supreme Court decisions: *Planned Parenthood of Southeastern Pennsylvania v. Casey*, 505 U.S. 833 (1992), and *Obergefell v. Hodges*, *supra* note 28.

this identity demands that everyone else must honor the artifice. If “love is love” forms the only boundary on what constitutes a marriage, then certainly marriage as a concept cannot long be limited to two persons, but must be open to polyamory and polygamy. Even the limitation to *persons* must fall. Marriage to robots and even self-marriage (“sologamy”) are coming increasingly into fashion. One simply cannot be condemned to live in loneliness, even if one lives alone. Once we have begun the revolt, what principled reason remains to refuse the right to define?

What remains is the continuation of the project. Abolition must proceed, impermissible limits must fall. And this use of law-for-freedom is carried out in unison with technology-for-freedom. We are a technological society not because of what we *do* with technique, but because of the way we *think* of everything we do “as a kind of mechanical production.”<sup>30</sup> As Oliver O’Donovan explains, “the technological transformation of the modern age has gone hand in hand with the social and political quest of Western man to free himself from the necessities imposed upon him by religion, society, and nature.”<sup>31</sup> Even our use of law becomes a manipulative and mechanistic production of legislative change by artifice. The metaphysically bored and legally bound circumvent the democratic process and find a willing plaintiff to create a test case and force it through the courts.<sup>32</sup> Success brings legal recognition and satisfaction of desire.

But even that satisfaction remains bound by law. The Kennedy doctrine, despite its seeming openness to any redefinition, is nonetheless limited in *Obergefell*: freedom permits the right to define “within a lawful realm.” Marriage is changed, but remains limited. Abortion can’t be had without State and medical assistance.<sup>33</sup> Here, then, is the problem for the postmodern counterdream. To attain the unconstrained freedom so desired and willed, our culture needs our legal system. Law is the means of imposing the revolutionary will. But once

that new freedom is won, the law stands in the way of still more freedom. Freedom remains fettered. The only solution, and the most logical outgrowth of the Empire of Desire, becomes a violent dissolution of the law itself.

## THE ORESTEIA IN REVERSE

Our Empire, as Reno explains, has rules and regulations—“minimal but bright-line limits.” But they stand in the way of our desire for unconstrained freedom. And so they are softened, from hard law to flexible norms, eventually reaching expressions of altogether meaningless preference. “The Empire’s anti-law holds sway: It is forbidden to forbid.”<sup>34</sup> What’s more, this negative right *against* forbidding necessarily entails a *positive* obligation to yield and affirm.

In the past, the instruments of political power have been used to tear down official forms of limitation and censure so that desires can find their satisfactions. ... Our present and widespread social censure of moral censure inculcates and reinforces a non-judgmental ethos. Now we are embarking on a much more aggressive program. Everybody should have access to ... affirmation. Everybody has a right to feel normal.<sup>35</sup>

Now the law—with its inherent limits and order—must be vanquished. It seems we are practically begging to play out our own end of ancient Greek tragedy, and no more tragic a character than Oedipus will do. Responding to the flippant dismissal of religious authority by Jocasta, mother-wife of the King, the Chorus admonishes them both:

Great laws tower above us, reared on high  
Born for the brilliant vault of heaven—  
Olympian Sky their only father,  
Nothing mortal, no man gave them birth....<sup>36</sup>

<sup>30</sup> O’Donovan, *supra* note 11 at 3, 73.

<sup>31</sup> *Id.* at 6.

<sup>32</sup> For example: *Roe v. Wade*, 410 U.S. 113 (1973); *Hollingsworth v. Perry* 570 U.S. (2013) (a challenge to the voter-passed Constitutional amendment prohibiting same-sex marriage in California); *Gill v. Office of Personnel Management*, 682 F.3d 1 (1st Cir. 2012) (a challenge, filed by the Gay & Lesbian Advocates & Defenders, to the Defense of Marriage Act); *United States v. Windsor*, 570 U.S. (2013) (a challenge to the Defense of Marriage Act, filed with assistance from the A.C.L.U.).

<sup>33</sup> Dr. Grégor Puppink, *Abortion and the European Convention on Human Rights*, IRISH JOURNAL OF LEGAL STUDIES, Vol. 3(2) 2013, 161, [http://ijls.ie/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/IJLS\\_Vol\\_3\\_Issue\\_2\\_Article\\_8\\_7\\_Comparative\\_Puppink.pdf](http://ijls.ie/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/IJLS_Vol_3_Issue_2_Article_8_7_Comparative_Puppink.pdf), retrieved October 1, 2017.

<sup>34</sup> Reno, *supra* note 18. Reno continues: “Legal regulation of personal behavior, family life, and social interactions expands in order to take over the ordering, harmonizing function once performed by an unofficial but deeply internalized cultural *nomos*.”

<sup>35</sup> Reno, *supra* note 17.

<sup>36</sup> SOPHOCLES, *Oedipus the King*, in THE THREE THEBAN PLAYS, 209, Ins. 957-60. Tr. Robert Fagles (Penguin 1984).

But the Chorus also recognizes the desire of these mortals to be free from authority—particularly religious authority—and sees their will to destroy that foundation: They are dying, the old oracles sent to Laius,

Now our masters strike them off the rolls.  
Nowhere Apollo's golden glory now—  
The gods, the gods go down.<sup>37</sup>

Following ancient precedent, our present society has discarded Western Judeo-Christian foundations; our masters “strike them off the rolls.”<sup>38</sup> Moral order is replaced by social order. Law is permitted, even used, to unlaw itself.<sup>39</sup> Thus, the Kennedy doctrine must permit everything. Choose your child's sex and even demand its health with pre-implantation genetic diagnosis.<sup>40</sup> Make your child with a donated gamete and surrogate womb regulated by simple contract. Make for yourself a different gender, or even make yourself a different sex. Make your own *child* a different gender and assault the course of human growth.<sup>41</sup> Make an entire population free of Down syndrome.<sup>42</sup> Set the value of persons not on their being human but on their possession of abilities—both at beginning and end of life.

We have seen the beginnings of this mentality in various “living document” interpretations of constitutions and human rights treaties. We are all too familiar

with this practice in the United States. It manifests itself in triumphant (and terrifying) fashion in Europe, where the European Court of Human Rights embraces an “evolutive interpretation” of the European Convention on Human Rights, “adapting it to the changes that have taken place over time—to changes in society, in morals, in mentalities, in laws, but also to technological innovations and scientific progress.”<sup>43</sup> We cannot but be alarmed by the European Court's reliance on “consensus” and “continuing international trend” as indicators of acceptable limits. Once the Court is satisfied with the appearance of consensus or trend in domestic laws, the remaining countries of Europe will have no choice but to fall in line, the decision being imposed upon them.<sup>44</sup> This and many of our own courts are increasingly willing to negate the voice of democracy.

If the *Oresteia* is a celebration of the triumph of human progress, this *Oresteia*-in-reverse is the triumph of digress, the unlawing of law, and the retribution of savage will against democracy—all in the yearning for unfettered freedom. Reno is correct in saying that “[t]he destruction of civilization—the abolition of repression—becomes the great imperative against imperatives.”<sup>45</sup> In this post-cultural world we simply seek and find satisfaction of desire. This antinomian Empire must finally vanquish the limits of law.

<sup>37</sup> *Id.* at 210, lns. 994–97.

<sup>38</sup> Would that our culture were not so short-sighted and unwilling to heed the ancient wisdom that followed the tragic downfall of Oedipus. In Sophocles' *Antigone*, written before but occurring chronologically after the events in *Oedipus the King*, the Chorus sings the praise of “Man the master, ingenious past all measure” who “conquers all, taming with his techniques . . .” This strikes us as the ideal anthem for postmodern man, yet the Chorus continues with a striking warning to men ancient and contemporary: “When he weaves in/the laws of the land, and the justice of the gods/that binds his oaths together/he and his city rise high—/ but the city casts out/that man who weds himself to inhumanity/thanks to reckless daring.” SOPHOCLES, *Antigone*, in *THE THREE THEBAN PLAYS*, 76–77, lns. 391–415. TRANSLATED BY ROBERT FAGLES. (Penguin 1984).

<sup>39</sup> I am indebted to Jeff Shafer for bringing this concept from Milton to my attention in his outstanding article on the use of this technique by the transgender movement. The idea, according to Milton, is that no law can permit activity that attacks that very law, “no law, that is, that ‘intends not to unlaw itself.’” Jeff Shafer, *Supreme Incoherence: Transgender Ideology and the End of Law*, *FIRST THINGS* (March 2017), <https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2017/03/supreme-incoherence-transgender-ideology-and-the-end-of-law>, retrieved September 12, 2017. I only discovered Shafer's article midway through preparing my own, but it has been enormously helpful.

<sup>40</sup> Puppink, *supra* note 33 at 160, citing *Costa & Pavan v. Italy*, No. 54270/10, 28 August 2012.

<sup>41</sup> A recent, and entirely representative, statement on Twitter by a parent prescribing puberty blocking medication to her child: “Forcing their bodies to go through puberty because people like you don't understand their experience is abhorrent. You don't get to decide.” (Posted October 2017).

<sup>42</sup> See, e.g., Alexandra Desanctis, *Iceland Eliminates People with Down Syndrome*, *NATIONAL REVIEW* (August 2017), <http://www.nationalreview.com/article/450509/down-syndrome-iceland-cbs-news-disturbing-report>, retrieved September 4, 2017.

<sup>43</sup> JEAN-PAUL COSTA, “What are the limits to the evolutive interpretation of the Convention?” *Dialogue between Judges* (European Court of Human Rights, Strasbourg, 2011), 5, quoted in *THE ‘CONSCIENCE OF EUROPE’? NAVIGATING THE SHIFTING TIDES AT THE EUROPEAN COURT OF HUMAN RIGHTS*, 8 (ADF International 2017).

<sup>44</sup> PAUL COLEMAN, *EVOLUTION, CONSENSUS, AND THE MARGIN OF APPRECIATION*, 22. *THE ‘CONSCIENCE OF EUROPE’? NAVIGATING THE SHIFTING TIDES AT THE EUROPEAN COURT OF HUMAN RIGHTS*. (ADF International 2017).

<sup>45</sup> Reno, *supra* note 18.

## THE CONSEQUENCE: OPTICAL DEMOCRACY

The intended consequence of this unlawing is a total redefinition of human nature and a negation of settled doctrines. Authority and limitations must be nullified in favor of perpetual preference. But the unintended, and far more dire, consequence, is the disqualification even of preference and so the complete annihilation of human dignity. It is what Cormac McCarthy described as “optical democracy”:

In the neuter austerity of that terrain all phenomena were bequeathed a strange equality and no one thing nor spider nor stone nor blade of grass could put forth claim to precedence. ... [H]ere was nothing more luminous than another...and in the optical democracy of such landscapes all preference is made whimsical and a man and a rock become endowed with unguessed kinships.<sup>46</sup>

Our Empire of Desire becomes a landscape where no one thing has precedence over another. Humans are not exceptional but equivalent in relation and dignity with a rock. Life is not sacred at *any* stage. Unconstrained freedom negates itself.<sup>47</sup>

This optical democracy is an anthropological crisis in our culture. Abortion, euthanasia, in vitro fertilization, transgenderism, and many more practices have “impaired the manner in which physical life itself and its legal protection can coincide in time.”<sup>48</sup> Obviously much more than our social institutions and practices are at stake. We have called “the intelligibility of humanity” into question.<sup>49</sup> As Oliver O’Donovan tells it, “[w]e have stamped the decisions of our will upon the material which the world has offered us, to form it in this way and not in that.”<sup>50</sup> The inexorable result is that what

we “make” of humanity is altogether *alien* from our true humanity.

Thus, the autonomy so cherished, so idolized, by the discontents of our culture must inevitably reject the dignity of others as a threat to personal sovereignty.<sup>51</sup> Unconstrained freedom cannot logically acquiesce to co-exist with human dignity, and thus with human nature. The loss of human dignity means that we have also lost the historic basis for human rights.<sup>52</sup> But far worse, when all rights are transformed into preferences and all preferences are made whimsical, we have lost the ability to call anything—*anyone*—good or bad, “intrinsically desirable or detestable.”<sup>53</sup> Put simply, it means that we have lost the capacity to love, and with it our very humanity.

*Overcoming acedia requires more of us than simply maintaining a correct worldview. It calls for affirmation of our own being and our proper work and dignity.*

## OVERCOMING ACEDIA: REJOICING IN THE GIVENNESS OF THINGS

Everything we have has been given to us. Our own existence is maintained by the sustaining grace of God. Whatever freedom we have is purely a gift, and

our dependency on God does not reduce our worth. Rather, our dignity is founded on the fact the God, in Christ, freely chose to create us in His image. Contrary to the *acedia* that drives our culture’s pursuit of unlimited freedom, true freedom is found in the givenness of creation, in the limits that God has created to order us for our happiness and good. Happiness does not come from unrestrained desire. It comes from desiring to live according to the limits that transcend our individual desires.<sup>54</sup> This is true freedom, dependent on relationship to our Creator, who overcomes *acedia* in the incarnation of Jesus Christ and his gift of saving and reconciling grace.<sup>55</sup>

Overcoming *acedia* requires more of us than simply maintaining a correct worldview. It calls for affirmation

<sup>46</sup> CORMAC MCCARTHY, *BLOOD MERIDIAN, OR THE EVENING REDNESS IN THE WEST*, 258-59 (Vintage International 1985).

<sup>47</sup> Hanby, *supra* note 8 at 187.

<sup>48</sup> Puppink, *supra* note 33 at 149.

<sup>49</sup> Hanby, *supra* note 8 at 198.

<sup>50</sup> O’Donovan, *supra* note 11 at 1.

<sup>51</sup> Snell, *supra* note 5 at 13-14.

<sup>52</sup> See, e.g., the Preamble to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (“Whereas recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world”).

<sup>53</sup> Hanby, *supra* note 8 at 187.

<sup>54</sup> Reno, *supra* note 17.

<sup>55</sup> Nault, *supra* note 15 at 85-87.

of our own being and our proper work and dignity.<sup>56</sup> We must, with the Holy Spirit's help, rejoice in the order of God's creation and the truth of reality. Revolt against the given order in our humanity reduces relationships (particularly man/woman relationships) to "simply a profound form of play."<sup>57</sup> But a proper and joyous relationship honors the other as created and, therefore, possessed of a goodness that is not merely good *for* something. For both joy and love presuppose the goodness and beauty of another,<sup>58</sup> which are not whimsical but are intrinsic to the other. In joy and self-giving love we can say to another: It is good that you exist.

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<sup>56</sup> Snell, *supra* note 11 at 97.

<sup>57</sup> O'Donovan, *supra* note 11 at 17.

<sup>58</sup> Hanby, *supra* note 8 at 196.