The Idea of Necessity

by Theodore Dalrymple (February 2025)

Notre Dame Cathedral, Paris (Childe Hassam, 1888)

‘Is your journey really necessary?’ asked the poster of the would-be travellers on the trains in Britain during the Second World War. Presumably, if fewer people had travelled there would have been savings of fuel that could then have been used to drive tanks, fly aircraft to bomb cities, and perform many other functions essential to modern warfare.

It is, perhaps, salutary to ask yourself whether what you buy, what you consume, and what you do are really necessary. But the answer is rather complicated and can seldom be given simply in the affirmative or in the negative. Necessary for whom or for what? What, in fact, is necessity?

Certainly, it is not a natural quality that one can measure as surveyors measure land. There is no necessitometer. Whether something is necessary depends on the ends to be pursued, and on those there is usually very little agreement. Nevertheless, to say of something that is it unnecessary is rarely a term of praise or compliment; it implies selfishness or indulgence.

Freedom, said Engels, following Hegel, is the recognition of necessity. I confess that I have difficulty in understanding what this could mean. Marxists of scholastic temperament have tried to sift it, but their explanations put me in mind of Byron’s famous remark about Coleridge’s metaphysical vapourings:

And Coleridge, too, has lately taken wing…
Explaining metaphysics to the nation—
I wish he would explain his explanation.

I do not think that Engels meant anything as banal as that, by recognising the ineluctable, we free ourselves from the unhappiness or bitterness wrought by the struggle against what we cannot overcome. There is no doubt that acceptance of the inevitable is a component of contentment, but it requires a great deal of judgment to know what is inevitable and what is not. Death from mortal disease is inevitable unless there be a cure, but whether there exists such a cure is a matter of knowledge. What was once incurable may since have become curable, so that what was once inevitable is no longer so. The Promethean bargain has made the assessment of inevitability more complicated than it once was; but acceptance of the inevitability of what, in fact, is not inevitable does not necessarily lead to unhappiness. The benefits of acceptance of one's fate do not depend only the accuracy of the assessment of that fate.

If Engels meant by necessity *historical* necessity, it is difficult to see what freedom could have to do with it. If something is certain to occur, it does not need my push; if it needs my push, it is not certain to occur. It seems to me that the formulation is intended, or at any rate tends, to excuse in advance any extremity of crime committed in the name of some force conceived of as suprahuman, that is to say a force superior to that of any individual will, or any number of such wills. It is yet another instance of Man's eternal struggle to free himself of the onerous, often undesired, but inescapable responsibility that comes with being human, a struggle that Edmund in *King Lear* recognised:

> *This is the excellent foppery of the world, that when we are sick in fortune, often the surfeit of our own behaviour, we make guilty of our disasters the sun, the moon, and the stars; as if we were villains on necessity; fools by heavenly compulsion; knaves, thieves and treachers by spherical predominance; drunkard, liars, and adulterers by an enforc'd obedience of planetary influence; and all that we are evil in, by a divine thrusting on. An admirable evasion of whore-master am, to lay his goatish disposition to the charge of a star!*

It is characteristic of Shakespeare, of course, that he recognises (through his characters) the ambiguity and even contradictions of the human situation, for Edmund continues:

> *My father compounded with my mother under the Dragon's tail, and my nativity was under Ursa Major, so that it follows I am rough and lecherous. Fut! I should have been that I am, had the maidenliest star in the firmament twinkled on my bastardising.*

In other words, Edmund was what he was by nature: but whence came that nature?

Here is the mystery of mysteries, that has not been solved and will (I hope) never be solved: how do we become what we are, how do we attain that condition, unique in the universe (as far as we know), of being free (and obliged) consciously to choose our course of action, even if we often seem, from habit or laziness, hardly to use that ability, and even if, after having exercised it, we deny that that is precisely what we have done?

It seems to me that I cannot deny my freedom unless, *per impossibile*, I become a total sceptic: that I do not see what I see, that I do not hear what I hear, that I do not feel what I feel, for the sensation of freedom (once we have thought about it) is as strong as any apprehension of the world whatever.

Of course, I am taking of our freedom in the metaphysical, not in the political, sense: I do not mean to say that there is no difference in the matter of freedom between, say, North Korea and Australia. But even in the least free polities, men retain their metaphysical freedom. They can choose to do other than what they do, even if, were they to do so, there would be drastic consequences for them (and their families) that the great majority of humanity would not be prepared to accept. But not having an acceptable choice is not the same as not having a choice. And in fact, history is replete with examples of brave men who have accepted consequences that the great majority of their fellows would not have accepted, which is the essence of heroism (not that heroism is necessarily admirable, for it is perfectly possible to be heroic in an abominable cause, which is why it is so wrong to call terrorists cowardly).

But return to the question of necessity, not in the sense of the philosophical determinist, but rather in the sense of the moralist who is able to distinguish between necessities and everything else in the range of possible choices. In this sense, something is necessary in proportion as it is a precondition of something else, with life itself being a precondition of *everything* else. There is thus a hierarchy of necessities; and according to many utilitarians, moral conduct is that which enables the greatest number of people to meet the greatest number of necessities weighted according to their importance. For example, it would be wrong to please myself with luxury foods while I knew that my neighbour was starving.

The utilitarian wants an infallible and indubitable guide as

to what he ought to do: he cannot tolerate the inherently unknowability of what he seeks. It is inherently unknowable for a number of reasons. There is no common measure of what is desirable, or indeed of what is undesirable. Even what is necessary for the continuation of life, the precondition of everything else, depends on circumstances. The sum total of the effects of any course of action, extended into the indefinite future, cannot be known. I know that giving a coin to a beggar in the street will usually give him momentary happiness irrespective of the causes of his mendicancy, which is why I usually do it (though he may also be resentful that I did not give him a bigger coin, or more coins, despite obviously being in an economic position to do so), but I may also be assisting him to purchase more of the drug that will kill him, or encouraging—admittedly to an infinitesimal extent—beggary in society.

An infinitesimal extent is not a non-existent effect, however. Depending on the potential for beggary in society (and assuming beggary to be undesirable), the infinitesimal extent to which I encourage it by my gift might very well in the long-term outweigh the fleeting happiness that it gives. Of course, the latter is certain, while the former is purely speculative, but it is a real possibility, at least if everyone behaved as I do.

Not everyone behaves as I do, of course, though I cannot say how many do or do not. But is the right thing to do dependent on what proportion of people do likewise? One strain of moral philosophy does not allow us to take such things into account in estimating what we ought to do, though the effect of we do in the real world depends to an extent on how others behave. If rightness of conduct does not depend on what others do, which in turn affects the consequences of what I do, then the right thing to do does not depend upon the consequences to be expected from doing it. This would have the corollary that doing the right thing would be a matter of obedience to a

rigid and invariable rule, which I do not find plausible.

Take the rule, for example, that doctors should tell their patients the truth. No doubt in many, or perhaps most, cases this is correct, that is to say is *now* correct; but the number of cases in which it is correct will vary, according to cultural and individual circumstances. Would it be right of a doctor to tell a highly neurotic patient all the possible deleterious effects of a treatment that has a high chance of saving his life, but which he will be much less likely to accept if those possible deleterious effects are laid out before him in great detail? I have in my own close family an example of the humane effect of a lack of frankness on the part of a surgeon, though of course the surgeon concerned had to make a guess at what the beneficial effect of his lack of frankness would be, and thereby tolerate the thought that he might be mistaken.

The idea of necessity, and likewise of importance, does not help us very much in deciding what to do, or in ordering our priorities. If we say that we should do only what is most necessary or important to do, according to a hierarchical table of necessity or importance, we should all end up doing, and neglecting, the same things.

But human society is so complex that no such table could be drawn up, even in theory. To say, for example, that while people go without food or medicine (anywhere in the world, if we truly believe that all humans have equal claims on our concern) we should do nothing except provide them with food or medicine; and in the meantime, until our aim had been accomplished, all the arts of civilisation, from cuisine to curation, would have withered or been held in abeyance.

Had the doctrine that necessities should be provided for before the refinements of civilisation can properly be attended to held sway, mankind would never have developed a civilisation. A great deal of what makes life worth living was

first developed in times when so-called necessities were far less fulfilled than they are now. The great monuments of the past, the great achievements of culture and science, were the products of societies that would horrify us. How, we would ask if we could be taken back in time, could they think of building *Notre-Dame* when so much of the population is hungry, in rags, without any comfort (other than that of religion, of course)?

This does not mean that we are free—morally speaking—to disregard such phenomena in the world as famine and natural disaster, to pass them by on the grounds that we are more concerned for the arts of civilisation. But the proper weight to give them wherever they occur is not a straightforward calculation. I know that there are people suffering from genuine hardship in my society, who would be very glad of the price of admission to an art exhibition (let alone of the catalogue). But does that mean that there should be no more exhibitions and no more catalogues?

To adapt Sir Toby Belch slightly, dost though think that because there is hardship there shall be no more art or beauty?

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Theodore Dalrymple's latest books are *Neither Trumpets nor Violins* (with Kenneth Francis and Samuel Hux) and *Ramses: A Memoir* from New English Review Press.

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