Too much freedom seems to change into nothing but too much slavery.\(^1\) (Plato, Republic)

The greatest freedom of all is the power to forgo greater freedom for the sake of other values. This is the conceptual crux of what Pope Francis calls “authentic” freedom. Namely, the power to liberate ourselves from power under the gentle sway of reason; the will to subordinate our will to goodness, truth, and beauty. Freedom entails, as its first condition, the capacity to self-impose or positively accept responsible limitations on our freedom.

The reigning alternative is what Pope Francis deems to be an empty, incoherent, self-defeating, and altogether “false” freedom of complete dominance, whereby we are enslaved to power at the expense of real choice. Here, freedom entails, as its only condition, being unbounded, unlimited, and uncoerced; or, correspondingly, possessing absolute power. To be restricted by laws, morals, obligations, necessities, or, indeed, by our own choices, is to be, to that extent, unfree.

The conflict between these two conceptions of freedom is the essential theme of Laudato si’. The environmental focus, though important, is merely the drama of the narrative: a sobering lesson in what can occur when this “false” freedom displaces its “authentic” counterpart. And indeed, for Pope Francis, the pollution of our earth flows from the same contaminant that has polluted our political, social, and personal well-being: an individualism that promises limitless power.

But let’s take a step back. Where do these conceptions of freedom come from, what are they, and why are they in such conflict?

I.

The “authentic” freedom proffered by Pope Francis is as old as Plato. The core idea is that, for each of us, the ultimate aim—our *summum bonum*—is living well; or, simply, happiness. It then follows that our will is only “authentic”—we are only *truly* free—if we live in harmony with this implicit end. To live poorly or unhappily thus results from a “false” will: a kind of tyrannical rule over oneself. The question then becomes, what is it to live well or happily?

The sentiments woven throughout Laudato si’ suggest that the modern world has given the same answer to this question as that of Callicles in Plato’s Gorgias:\(^2\)

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…the man who’ll live correctly ought to allow his own appetites to get as large as possible and not restrain them. And when they are as large as possible, he ought to be competent to devote himself to them by virtue of his bravery and intelligence, and to fill them with whatever he may have an appetite for at the time. (491e-492a)

The good life, for Callicles, is synonymous with setting our appetites loose, indulging them in turn, and, of course, having the power to do so. The life of a tyrant is bliss par excellence.

Now, there is an assumption built into Callicles’ belief that Plato spends much of the Gorgias, and many of his other dialogues, trying to combat. Namely, that our souls are formed, in toto, out of desire qua appetite; that is, out of our hungry impulses, passions, or cravings. Any suggestion that we also have an inborn desire to place our appetites before the bar of intelligent judgment is, for Callicles, a product of shame or envy; a ruse on the part of the weak to control the strong; an expression of resentment ending in a slave morality, as Nietzsche later says of Christendom.3

In essence, for many of Plato’s (or Socrates’) interlocutors, happiness is synonymous with giving free play to our appetites, since we desire nothing else. To discipline these drives only means that we lack the power, courage, or expertise to indulge them. “Authentic” freedom, then, amounts to avoiding or overcoming all other tyrants—either internal or external—who threaten to shackle us to our own weaknesses or subjugate us to some subjective morality cloaked in power.

As usual, Plato proceeds to develop his own position both indirectly and directly, showing why Callicles is probably wrong and why his alternative view is more plausibly right.

First, Plato has Socrates demonstrate that a life lived for the sake of our appetites would be an enervating, joyless affair, in which we condemn ourselves to the life of a “leaking jar,” through which much is poured, but nothing retained—forever scratching a ceaseless itch.4 All we would eventually feel is the pain that our pleasures can momentarily numb, but never satisfy.

The point, here, is that happiness is undone by a life of unmixed appetite. Happiness can only be realized if we live “a life that is adequate to and satisfied with its circumstances at any given time instead of the insatiable, undisciplined life.”5 Temperance is thus neither a weakness nor a ruse, but a genuine virtue: a disposition of true self-government. “Authentically” free persons have the courage to set responsible limitations on their otherwise tyrannical compulsions.


4Plato, Gorgias (1997): 493b-494d

5Ibid.: 493c-d
But wait!—Callicles protests—are we to have our little pleasures and nothing more? Wouldn’t we then end up living most of our lives “like a stone”?6 No, for our desires extend beyond our appetites. We are also rational animals, endowed with a love of wisdom and a mind capable of apprehending the ideals of goodness, truth, and beauty. Plato’s dialogues seek to methodically demonstrate the fact that allowing these immutable ideals to govern us is not to live under a tyrant, but to accept the dispositions which, under Socratic examination, we would come to will for ourselves; that is, to admit what we already know, albeit hitherto unconsciously.

Ignorance, then, is the first among tyrants, and the “authentically” free are ruled by knowledge. If we are generally inclined toward intrinsic value—not just pleasures, but good pleasures—then we will not fill ourselves up and become a stone. Rather, we will find fulfillment. Deliberately harmonizing our appetitive drives with wisdom—like mixing honey and water together to form a nourishing drink7—is, for Plato, a necessary part of inner happiness; or, eudaimonia.

II.

This has been, admittedly, a crude summary that probably obscures more than it clarifies. And yet, this general line of thought is essential to understanding the message of Laudato si’.

Pope Francis groups the environment together with “life, sexuality, the family, [and] social relations,” and suggests that the damage we have done to all of them stems from “the same evil: the notion that there are no indisputable truths to guide our lives, and hence human freedom is limitless.”8 However, this so-called freedom is a lie: it promises power, but instead turns us into “masters, consumers, ruthless exploiters, unable to set limits on [our] immediate needs,” leaving us enslaved to the “blind forces of the unconscious,” “naked and exposed in the face of our ever-increasing power, lacking the wherewithal to control it.”9

Alternatively, when we open up our hearts to “awe and wonder,” to the intimate unity of “all that exists,” in short, to the “good, [the] true, and [the] beautiful,” then “sobriety and care will well up spontaneously,” restoring us to the freedom of self-control; the power to choose wisely; to refuse to “turn reality into an object simply to be used and controlled.”10

The guiding ideas here are quite familiar.

6Ibid.: 494a
8Pope Francis, Laudato si’: p. 6-7
9Ibid.: p. 11, 78
10Ibid.: p. 11, 151
Like Plato, Pope Francis believes that a rapacious lifestyle is defined by its “obsessiveness and weariness,” whereas a temperate lifestyle, “when lived freely and consciously, is liberating,” for it permits us to “enjoy more and live better each moment,” to “appreciate each person and each thing,” to achieve happiness by “knowing how to limit some needs which only diminish us, and being open to the many different possibilities which life can offer.”

Indeed, the irony of equating the good life with complete gratification, and thus equating freedom with power, is that we thereby render ourselves powerless to take full stock of any choices which require us to willingly disempower ourselves. If satisfying our every impulse is the idealized pinnacle of human power, we will become, at our full strength, powerless to forgo power. The need to act however we so choose, and get whatever we so choose, whenever we so choose, is not only the blueprint for acquiring an unquenchable thirst, but a sure-fire guarantee that we will fortify our will against our deepest human desires.

Take friendship, for instance. For Pope Francis, our need to retain absolute power over our lives logically entails the power to “choose or eliminate relationships at whim,” thereby undermining what is, perhaps, the most important component of any genuine friendship: sharing a trust or bond which cannot be abdicated without just cause. Accordingly, unhappiness ensues: “a deep and melancholic dissatisfaction with interpersonal relations.”

Just like Callicles, we have become enslaved to the “internal logic” of power and, by extension, whatever promises to increase our power, e.g., technology: a blessing when the servant, but an exacting, finicky master:

> It has become countercultural to choose a lifestyle whose goals are even partly independent of technology, of its costs and its power to globalize and make us all the same…Our capacity for making decisions, a more genuine freedom and the space for each one’s alternative creativity are diminished. (80-81)

The freedom to use technology or not—the “authentic” freedom to accept any power or not—involves knowing what it is to live well, or happily, which does not include the chaotic madness of “dipping here and there, always on the lookout for what [we] do not have,” but relies, instead, on an “inner peace,” derived from an openness to goodness, truth, and beauty, and grounded on a resultant will to “cultivate other pleasures and find satisfaction in fraternal encounters, in service, in developing [our] gifts, in music and arts, in contact with nature, in prayer.”

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11 Ibid.: p. 162-163
12 Ibid.: p. 33
13 Ibid.: p. 80
Indeed, there is a belief threaded in and out of *Laudato si’*—strongly felt by the Ancients—that *true* (natural) human development—and thus a fulfilling human life—involves the cultivation of our unique faculties and capacities. We do not need to be human in order to live a life of wanton self-indulgence; the “Charadrios, a greedy and messy bird,” does this excellently well.¹⁵

As human beings, we have the power to find “[true] wisdom, as the fruit of self-examination, dialogue and generous encounter between persons;”¹⁶ to “acknowledge the value and fragility of nature” and “our God-given abilities;”¹⁷ to “interpret the meaning and the mysterious beauty of what is unfolding;”¹⁸ to “reason, to develop arguments, to be inventive, to interpret reality and to create art, along with other not yet discovered capacities;”¹⁹ to develop “an integral improvement in the quality of human life;”²⁰ to “acknowledge our deep dissatisfaction, and to embark on new paths to authentic freedom” through an “openness to what is good, true, and beautiful”²¹—each of us “transcends the spheres of physics and biology.”²²

These roads to a uniquely human fulfillment exist not despite, but *because* of our limits and the rules and limits of reality. Our uniqueness *demands* rules, limits, barriers, and obstacles to work through, with, out from, against, over, etc. What would Morphy be without the rules of chess? What would Einstein be without the speed of light? What would Hendrix be without six strings? What would Monet be without a two-dimensional canvas? What would our self-development be without goodness, truth, and beauty? Our human potential unfolds via necessity.

Freedom demands, at the very least, an active, creative encounter with life and its possibilities, born from its limits. Freedom as power, then, stands in stark contrast to an “authentic” human freedom, as it reduces us to passive recipients of whatever desires or goals suggest themselves. For “if much is to run in, much must necessarily flow out, and there must be large holes for it to

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¹⁶Pope Francis, *Laudato si’*: p. 33

¹⁷Ibid.: p. 57

¹⁸Ibid.: p. 163-164

¹⁹Ibid.: p. 59

²⁰Ibid.: p. 110

²¹Ibid.: p. 151

²²Ibid.: p. 59-60
escape by.” The more we objectify the world around us, the more we, too, will become objects in it; greatest in terms of brute power, perhaps, but, as Kierkegaard says, no less inert than:

…men who, so to speak, mortgage themselves to the world. They use their capacities, amass money, carry on secular enterprises, calculate shrewdly, etc., perhaps make a name in history, but themselves they are not; spiritually speaking, they have no self, no self for whose sake they could venture everything, no self before God—however self-seeking they are otherwise…

Out of mere possibility, we become nothing at all: “Thus possibility seems greater and greater to the self; more and more it becomes possible because nothing becomes actual.” The tyrant, here, is our need, born of despair, not “to be oneself,” “to do away with oneself.”

There is no greater necessity, and thus no greater source of despair for the power-hungry, than the interconnectedness and symbiotic nature of everything that is. If everything we do matters, either directly or indirectly, if we are necessarily locked in the position of a butterfly flapping its wings (to borrow from chaos theory), then it is easy to feel overwhelmed and paralyzed; to close off any sense of responsibility; to feel cramped, confined—indeed, unfree.

But if we listen to Pope Francis carefully, we can become attuned to our mistake. The necessary and infinite significance of our lives empowers us to find fulfillment in the use and development of our uniquely human gifts:

We are free to apply our intelligence toward things evolving positively, or towards adding new ills, new causes of suffering and real setbacks. This is what makes for the excitement and drama of human history, in which freedom, growth, salvation and love can blossom, or lead towards decadence and mutual destruction. (57-58)

The “authentically” free perceive possibility in necessity, and, along with Pope Francis, find happiness, comfort, and strength in the potential for a truly meaningful life: “How wonderful is the certainty that each human life is not adrift in the midst of hopeless chaos, in a world ruled by pure chance or endlessly recurring cycles!”

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23Plato, Gorgias (2004): 494b


25Ibid.: p. 36

26Ibid.: p. 14

27Pope Francis, Laudato si’: p. 47
In the final analysis, our need for power is, ultimately, our desire to be like God, which is not only the essence of original sin, and not only impossible, but something which—if we are being honest with ourselves—we do not actually desire: a “false” suggestion of the unreflective will. Possessed of godlike power, our ability to, say, defeat Morphy at chess, or decipher the mysteries of the universe like Einstein, becomes a matter of pure will, i.e., we will not have successfully done anything at all, for that would imply the conditions under which we could have failed.

Unlimited power divorces us from the satisfaction of actively realizing our goals and desires, which can only come from our willingness to create possibilities by uniting our human powers with the power of necessity: “A fragile world, entrusted by God to human care, challenges us to devise intelligent ways of directing, developing and limiting our power.”\textsuperscript{28} It is not the “faint-hearted” who will most adamantly reject a “Promethean vision of mastery over the world,” but, rather, those who understand that true dominion necessitates “responsible stewardship.”\textsuperscript{29}

IV.

All this, and still a world in such turmoil? The better question is, should we be surprised?

For Pope Francis, along with Plato, all of our mistakes and wrongdoing result from ignorance, which is always our starting condition. Our failure to come to the truth, open our eyes to what is at stake, and embrace a more “authentic” freedom all stems from the supreme difficulty of curing our initial blindness.

As Pope Francis says: “Everything is related, and we human beings are united as brothers and sisters on a wonderful pilgrimage, woven together by the love of God has for each of his creatures and which also united us in fond affection with brother sun, sister moon, brother river and mother earth.”\textsuperscript{30} The trouble is that, like Saint Francis, we must “fall in love” with reality before we can live in a state of “awe and wonder,” and express “the language of fraternity and beauty in our relationship with the world.”\textsuperscript{31}

The solution to the problem—that is, reclaiming our genuine power to choose—requires us to perceive the very thing that has blinded our power of perception: the “cult of unlimited power,”\textsuperscript{32}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{28}\textit{Ibid.: p. 57}\\
\textsuperscript{29}\textit{Ibid.: p. 87}\\
\textsuperscript{30}\textit{Ibid.: p. 68}\\
\textsuperscript{31}\textit{Ibid.: p. 10-11}\\
\textsuperscript{32}\textit{Ibid.: p. 90-91}
\end{flushright}
our “self-centered culture of instant gratification.” Must we first obtain a culture of “authentic” freedom before we can recover a culture of “authentic” freedom?

If we equate freedom with power, we will become self-indulgent toward nature. If we deify the natural world itself and thus cower before it, we will practice self-abnegation—less problematic than the alternative, but still removed from Pope Francis’ ideal. If we believe that the world is a creation of God, entrusted to us with His divine imprint, we will find the right balance between indulgence and abnegation: self-control. However, as Pope Francis makes clear, both implicitly and explicitly, the protection of our environment cannot depend on religious arguments. The secular world must be addressed on its own terms.

So, what is left? Pope Francis answers: the desire for and value of freedom. And thus the future of the world may indeed depend on the outcome of one of our oldest philosophical debates. The challenge for Pope Francis is to convince others that the freedom one comes to through God is the same freedom that one comes to through philosophical wisdom.

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33Ibid.: p. 120