

Review: The Freedom Paradox

Clive Hamilton.
The freedom
paradox.
Towards a
post-secular ethics.

It's been a while since I read a book that was as academic as Clive Hamilton's *The Freedom Paradox*. The book is centred around a desire to construct a philosophical basis for morality, ethics and societal operations that are beyond modernistic rationality but which is not dogmatically asserted or mystically ungraspable. It is a dense book but with a style I came to appreciate – “long words, but short chapters” might be a good way to sum it up.

I am not a philosopher. I cannot critique Hamilton as to the accuracy of his use of the likes of Plato, Kant, and, most frequently, someone I've never even heard of – Schopenhauer. But I'm pretty sure I was able to get a grasp on some of the concepts that he attempts to communicate. And I can bring to these concepts my own considerations as an applied theologian.

So to put myself out on a limb, my take on what Hamilton is trying to say goes something like this:

*Beginning with the age-old philosophical construct of how I, the observer, the thinker, the only thing that I can take as “given” (I think therefore I am), interact with the world, Hamilton takes us through the concepts of **phenomenon** and **noumenon**. Phenomenon relates to the things that I-the-given can see, hear, cogitate about and consider. Noumenon relates to the ideal that lies behind the things that I see. For instance (my example) – if I see another person I interact with them through observation, relational interaction (conversation and the like), and thoughts (rationality) and emotions – these are things pertaining to the phenomenon. But the other person is more than just the conglomeration of my own reasonings and feelings and observations – that person is something in-and-of-themselves. The other person exists beyond*

the phenomenon in the unrealisable but real "noumenon."

Hamilton seizes on this notion of the noumenon and disagrees with rationalists like Kant who assert that the noumenon is unknowable. Indeed, Hamilton says, it cannot be known by rational thought, but only by an "unsensible intuition." And through such intuition we can know not only the noumenal self of others but also our own noumenal self – which are one and the same Self (capital "S"). This possibility of noumenal engagement then becomes a philosophical and post-secular (non-religious) basis for moral engagement, ethics, considerations of the meaning of life and so forth. For instance, I will treat another person differently if I can recognise (intuit) in them a noumenal essence (part of the Self that includes myself as the Subject of the engagement) rather than simply treating them as a (phenomenal) Object.

I hope that's not too much of an abuse of his argument! And there are a number of things to commend that flow out of it, for instance:

- This is one of the more robust engagements with the thinking of postmodernity that I've come across – in tearing down the idol of pure rationality Hamilton does not slip into (de)construction and the like.
- His consideration of true freedom being "inner freedom" that is far beyond the unfreedom put forwarded by populist capitalism and advertising has truth to it. On page 21, for instance, he writes, "Western society is characterised by an ever-devouring conformity flimsily camouflaged by a veneer of confected individuality..."
- He often lends weight to ethics I would agree with – on page 120 he affirms the noumenal interaction of the sexual act and notes, "Sex in porn is not the exploration of one with another; it is an act of relief, like defecation."
- His conclusions embrace some fundamental ideas that I also embrace – the innate (not merely socially

constructed) value of life, for instance, and the recognition of a “noumenal” (what I would call “spiritual”) foundation to our worldview.

The main chasm that appears when you interact theologically with this book is wrapped up in a question asked me once by a young man at an SU camp – “Will, do you believe in Jesus, or in the *idea* of Jesus?” Hamilton presents some ideas and some of them align with the *idea* of Jesus. But without an historical, phenomenal narrative to hang them on Hamilton’s arguments and considerations about the noumenon lack authority or weight – they become ironically, or perhaps appropriately, his *own* intuitions of what noumenally is. This flaw is starkly present throughout but especially in the very last paragraph of the book which contains this sentence:

“So, if we suppose that the noumenon’s manifestation in the phenomenon is not without purpose but that the noumenon is intentioned, creation has a meaning.” (p247)

Hamilton has simply intuited (or *supposed*) that the noumenon is “intentioned.” And despite the fact that I, for different reasons, happen to agree with him on this point, the meaning of life, in his argument, simply rests, frankly, on his own intuitive guesswork.

All Hamilton’s comments on the content or nature of the noumenon rest on such a basis. Because of this propensity to simply rely on some self-revelatory “special knowledge”, and also because of the many allusions to Eastern philosophies and religions, I found myself quickly comparing Hamilton’s arguments to the ancient view of gnosticism – against which much of early Christian (even New Testament era) thought is presented. Indeed a contemporary gnostic website defines gnosticism as “the teaching based on Gnosis, the knowledge of transcendence arrived at by way of interior, intuitive means” which seems to affirm Hamilton’s basic thrust. And, by way of

example, Hamilton's "avatars of virtue" come across as positively (while not literally) aeonic – i.e. be construed, as the website puts it, to "exist between the ultimate, True God and ourselves":

"... the noumenon needs interpreters, individuals who by common consent represent metaphysical empathy in the phenomenal world. These are individuals whose life story embodies a message that echoes powerfully in the consciousness of ordinary people. Whether these figures are secular or religious, their moral selves are closer to the surface and cause them to radiate a kind of moral greatness." (p166, emphasis mine)

And this ancient hue also colours Hamilton's view of Christ, evidenced when he tackles the issue of "Eternal Justice" in which he posits that categories of justice and compassion cannot belong in the noumenon and writes:

"Jesus' appeal from the cross for divine mercy was a moment of human weakness in which he forgot his own teaching." (p173)

Which brings us to the main crux (pun intended) of the Christian engagement with this book. Hamilton can in the end only appeal to his own *gnosis* when he puts transcendence, "unsensible intuition", or some form of engagement with the Moral Self above atonement as the answer to the human predicament. He places his idea of Christ into his own framework of ideas and does not interact with the glorious scandal that it is at the heart of Christian thought and spirituality – that, to borrow Hamilton's words, *the noumenal can and has been made known in the phenomenon* – God made flesh in Jesus Christ. If we are to engage with what truly is we must engage with the one who "was and is and is to come" and speaks to us the words of Truth. We know the noumenon because the noumenon has been made known.

And so this meaty book has bits that can't easily be swallowed. While churches are acknowledged as being "keepers of the transcendent" there is no spiritual significance afforded the church in an implied kowtowing to the age of post-secularism. I would disagree – we are not bastions of dogma, we are the place where, in Christ, ordinary phenomenal people are able to eat, live, work, relate on a noumenal, spiritual foundation.

There is some fantastic exploration in this book. There are some moments where the reader says "mmm, interesting perspective, I hadn't seen it that way before." The man has an intellect and I admire how he has put his thoughts together. But in the end, and perhaps this is unfair as it may not be one of his aims, this book presents us without hope or assistance to those who find themselves stranded in the phenomenon of this fallen world.

