

MODERNITY AND THE HUMAN SUBJECT

Von Richard Eldridge

I am going to talk in a broad way about the creation of a new man, or at any rate about the achievement of radical reorientations in conceptions of human interest and in activities that follow from them. I will take up this topic against the background of a radical reorientation of this kind that has already happened once upon a time in the 17th century: the development of the modern subject who carries out mathematical scientific inquiry, without reference to final causes. This development, however it has been either caused or founded, has had both significant benefits and costs.

Among the benefits are, first, that the modern scientific understanding of nature has successfully laid the cognitive groundwork for practices and systems of, for example, medicine, transportation, communication, and industrial production. In doing so, it has, second, helped to form and express a picture of human subjects as shapers of their own lives, according to their own conceptions of their interest and their own choices, rather than as bound within a pre-ordained plot. Buying and selling within the free market, not only of goods but also of jobs and so ways of life, has been an institutional vehicle for expressing this conception of the human subject. For most of us, at least in the developed worlds, life without these two developments would be both unthinkable and undesirable.

But there have also been costs. For one thing, the modern conception of a self-shaping subject affords no clear basis for objective assessment of pursuits of subjective interest, that is, no basis for appeals to justice or fairness that might constrain rapacious or exploitative behavior. It may be that a free market works efficiently to maximize preference satisfaction among traders with relatively equal holdings and stocks of information but with different preferences, and there is therefore good reason at least sometimes to think of free markets as fair. But if imbalances in holdings, power, or information grow too great, or military might intervenes, or free-riding is possible, then this institutional arrangement is likely to prove unstable. Then the guns or lawsuits start. And what then? If there are only individuals who are competing with one another for the material resources to satisfy subjective desires, then it is likely in the end to be guns rather lawsuits. Lawsuits and court verdicts may be construed as themselves covert forms of violence. Plato predicts explicitly that this will happen in a pluralist, subjective democracy that lacks any metaphysically founded conception of justice.¹ Family life and citizenship are all too likely to decay into what

¹ See Plato: *Republic*, transl. by G. M. A. Grube, Indianapolis 1992, Book VII, 557a-563e, 227-34.