

Agency and Charity

(The engine that drives society, and the glue that holds it together)

By Michael Josie

There is a fundamental philosophical divide between those who would build society determined to sustain and promote legal equality versus those who would build society determined to sustain and promote socioeconomic equality. We can strive for both, but we can NOT enforce both. We must choose one or the other, and we do so at the express expense of the other. We must stand with the enforcement of legal equality, because this is the stance that is compatible with the exercise of human agency, and I have it on good authority that the God we believe in considers agency to be ... kind of a big deal.

Our God holds agency to be sacrosanct above all else - above even life itself - above even the worth of a soul. After all, this principle - the defense of human agency - is the principle over which the grand council of heaven was convened; it is this principle over which the war in heaven was waged, and we are informed that a third of the hosts of heaven were lost.

I think I have understood this concept for most of my life, but I will admit that during the early part of that development, I thought of it strictly as some sort of an aesthetic ideal - something encapsulated in a mantra like, "A life without freedom is a life not worth living." That idea still resonates with me, but over the years I have come to understand that there is much more to it than that.

I have come to understand that what God knew then - what we might say God has always known from before the foundation of this world - is that the defense and promotion of human agency is a prerequisite for human flourishing. THIS is how we motivate and inspire. THIS is how we motivate people to action. THIS is how we inspire productivity, creativity, advancement, and progress.

How I did get there? I think most of us understand that the defense of agency is necessary to guarantee freedom, which we all agree should be present in that ideal society we are trying to build. But why am I claiming that the enforcement of legal equality is a prerequisite for the exercise of human agency? And, why am I claiming that the exercise of human agency is a prerequisite for human flourishing?

To understand this, I have to take you back to when I was in my 20s. I was serving as Priest's Quorum advisor in our Colorado ward, and I had just finished teaching a lesson on the topic of agency to the members of the quorum. The bishop of our ward, who just happened to be in attendance for the meeting that day - and who just happened to be a seminary teacher by profession - asked a question at the end of my lesson that left me wondering if I even knew the meaning of the word agency.

How could this be? I've been taught about agency my whole life. I must have heard a hundred lessons on this topic. Well ... yada, yada, yada ... I went home that day and looked agency up in the dictionary for the first time in my life, and let me just say that I was surprised by what I found.

In the decades that followed, I have looked this word up many times, in numerous dictionaries, and I can tell you in all that time I have NEVER found the words "freedom" or "choice" in any dictionary definition of agency.

The definitions I did find that day left me unsure I could even use the word in a sentence. In fact, earlier this week I looked up agency using Google - just to make sure my claim was still holding true - and the dictionary reference that it provided contained an example sentence that read, "The canyons were formed by the agency of running water." Is that the way *you* would use "agency" in a sentence?

If you do look up the word "agency" in the dictionary, the definitions you will find contain words such as "an active force or power", "an action or intervention". Agency - as it turns out - is "the means by which an end is accomplished".

Now, I don't want to overdramatize this point. It isn't as though "freedom of choice" is an incompatible definition for agency; it's just an insufficient definition. And, I believe, because of this insufficiency - when we understand agency to simply be freedom of choice - we miss much of what there is to learn from the message of the premortal existence provided to us in the scriptural account found in the Book of Moses.

The truth is that agency is a word with a great deal of meaning behind it. It is a word frequently used in the field of praxeology, which is the study of human action – something of a conflation of philosophy and economics.

In the years following that seed being planted by that bishop, I have searched for a greater understanding of agency, and I can tell you from what I have discovered – both from doctrinal study and "ponderizing", as well as gleaning thoughts from the field of praxeology - that the exercise of human agency requires 3 things: there must be law; there must be knowledge; and, there must be freedom. So, we see that freedom is there in the equation; it just isn't the whole equation.

The law is what dictates the causal relationship between actions and consequences. If I perform Action A, I can expect outcome X; if I perform Action B, I can hope for outcome Y; and, so forth.

Knowledge - understood beforehand - enables us to make use of these causal relationships to achieve the ends we desire. In the absence of knowledge beforehand, we are relegated to learning the hard way - through difficult experience - what these causal relationships are.

Lastly, we must have freedom to choose for ourselves our own actions - but NOT our consequences; consequences must follow from our actions according to the law.

I believe that because we are often taught that agency is simply the freedom to choose, we well understand that agency can be destroyed through force and coercion. But, how many of us properly understand that we can do just as much - if not more - to destroy one's agency by confusing or obscuring their understanding of the causal relationship between actions and consequences?

How is this accomplished? The most obvious and dramatic example is the absence of law. The absence of law seeds chaos, and in a chaotic system, we cannot exercise agency. If we have no idea which actions lead to which consequences, we cannot exercise agency. I would point out that, in this situation, it doesn't even matter that we have the freedom to choose. That having been said, nature abhors a vacuum, and such an absence of law is seldom ever experienced in the real world. Someone will always come in to fill that void, and it won't be anyone we would want doing so.

Much more likely is the situation we see all around us, even in our own society today, where we HAVE laws - they simply aren't enforced. Or, they are enforced unpredictably - they are enforced unequally across the population, and inconsistently over time.

Anything that is done to diminish our understanding of the causal relationship between actions and consequences, diminishes our agency.

Anything that is done to diminish the predictive power that we have to know which actions will lead to the outcomes we desire, diminishes our agency.

Any society that feigns to promise outcomes regardless of inputs is, by its very definition, a fairytale, incapable of being sustained.

Any would-be societal leader that feigns to promise outcomes regardless of inputs is a LIAR, patterning his or her words after those of the father of lies, who spread such narratives during our premortal existence.

We must protect and defend agency at all costs. This is the engine that drives society. This is how we maximize the mean societal outcome. But admittedly, this does result in a disparity of outcomes.

If we take a million people, and we educate them as to the laws that govern society – if we teach them what actions lead to what outcomes – and we let them choose for themselves what their actions will be, and we apply the law equally across the population and consistently throughout time, we will end up with a million different outcomes – many of them highly disparate. This is the guaranteed result of the exercise of human agency.

If, on the other hand, we focus on reducing the disparity in outcomes - and we choose to do this through systemic enforcement - we will have to restrict choices; we will have to apply the law

unequally and inconsistently. These actions destroy agency, and *any* reduction that may - or may not - be realized in the variance of outcomes, will *only* come at the expense of the mean.

So, what are we to do? None of us would accept poverty as a descriptor for any society worthy of being called "Zion". And, too great a disparity in outcomes breeds animosity and disillusionment. Zion surely can't be a place characterized by greed and plagued with resentment?

This is where charity comes in. Charity – true Christian charity - is a powerful tool. Every time a charitable act takes place, a miracle occurs. There is a voluntary transfer of time, talent, and/or treasure, and - somehow - both parties are edified and uplifted.

Now, it's no surprise - in this scenario - that the *receiver* is uplifted. We find ourselves in a difficult situation - either as a consequence of our own actions, or as the result of circumstances beyond our control - and we know that we can legally claim no right to anyone else's time, talent, or treasure. We feel desperate, with seemingly no recourse. And yet, someone chooses to step in and voluntarily fill that need. It is natural for us in that position to feel gratitude. This is something we all recognize, having all been there at one time or another in our lives.

The miracle of charity is that even the *giver* is edified and uplifted. This would come - perhaps - as a surprise to anyone who has never participated in the act. Anyone who has, recognizes that feeling when we see that we can actually have a positive impact on someone else's dire situation - and we see their response - and we experience that "Grinch" moment, where our heart grows two sizes, and we start "leaking".

This is the miracle. Time, talent, or treasure is voluntarily transferred, and yet both parties are edified and uplifted. A bond is formed, and society is strengthened one small act at a time.

The counterfeit to this - forced redistribution - feigns to serve the same purpose, yet results in the opposite outcome. Ironically, the same time, talent, or treasure may even change hands, yet no one is edified or uplifted.

In this scenario, it is no surprise that the *giver* is brought down or reduced; something is involuntarily taken from them, and they watch the majority of it be thrown into a woodchipper, and the rest disappears in search of a cause with which they may not even agree.

The "unintended" consequence of forced redistribution - the "anti-miracle", if you will - is that even the *receiver* is brought down. The transfer is no longer seen as a gift - it is no longer seen as generous. It is now an expectation, and it is human nature in this circumstance to wonder, "Where is the rest? Why isn't there more? Am I not owed?" Time, talent, or treasure is involuntarily transferred, and both parties are reduced. No bond is formed. Animosity and enmity enter in, and society is diminished one foul swoop a time.

In conclusion, 2 key principles, upon which I am confident we must build a society worthy of being called "Zion", are agency and charity. Agency drives the engine. Charity compensates for the shortcomings and imperfections; charity insures against the unforeseen.