

Farewell to the Rickshaw: Reflections on Autonomy and Automobiles

by Theodore Plantinga

Perhaps you saw it on the news or read about it: the rickshaw will soon be consigned to the museum. Calcutta was the last holdout in terms of keeping the rickshaw on the road, but it appears that thousands of men who eke out a living via the rickshaw will have to find other means of support.

The news reports usually include a small explanation as to why the rickshaw must go. Part of the answer is that these man-powered carts keep motorized traffic from flowing at a proper pace. But included in the explanation is also a statement to the effect that it somehow just doesn't look right to see one human being tugging another one around.

Now, in Canada, where I live, we don't have the rickshaw. We have the automobile instead. We also have autonomy. There is a connection between autonomy and automobility, a connection worth a few moments of exploration.

The automobile is to be distinguished from the horsemobile: it moves under its own steam or horsepower, so to speak. The source or energy behind its mobility is not something external to itself. Hence it is an example of automobility.

Autonomy has to do with law -- the source of the law by which I live lies within myself. One might wonder what other possibilities there are. Some thinkers distinguish autonomy from heteronomy. The latter term means that the law by which I live, the law which functions as the condition for my existence, is external to my own being. We could also try theonomy, which would mean that the law originates with -- or is grounded in -- God. Unfortunately, the term "theonomy" is taken: it stands for a way of thinking that is also called "Christian reconstruction."

The Humanist impulse is to declare that any subordination of one person to another is somehow objectionable. In all sorts of ways, the same theme comes through in our culture as we are told that we must conceive of free persons as autonomous. Just when this sentiment begins to sink in, we are shown pictures of a rickshaw in operation. It doesn't sit right with us. The one person (usually a smallish-looking man) is obviously serving the other person by pulling him around. Yet we are not offended by the sight of a sleek car, its engine working hard under the hood, propelling a human being down the street. Automobility is compatible with autonomy.

Yet it is not only the rickshaw that bothers people. Other forms of work -- especially work done conspicuously for others -- is regarded by many as unsettling. Take this business of the "chain gang." Of late, various states in the USA have revived the chain gang, and quickly they came in for criticism and even ridicule. We were told that they were "returning" to something-or-other from the bad old days.

What was the problem? That convicted criminals were forced to work? That they were chained to one another and conspicuously guarded while they were outside the prison grounds? A combination of the two, I suppose. The notion that able-bodied welfare recipients should engage in work of some sort that benefits the community has likewise stirred up the ire of many critics. In all such reasoning I see something unhealthy.

Christian thought, in its approach to work, wants to articulate something about the beauty of mutual subordination. When I work for you, or on you, I am, in some sense, subordinating myself to you and to your needs. Now, I might still look rather lordly, e.g. if I am a dentist repairing a cavity in your tooth. But many forms of work for others have the appearance of the lowly about them. We may recall that Gandhi made a big issue of the need for leaders to engage in such humbling tasks as cleaning the communal latrine. (Couldn't we get an auto-dohickey of some sort to take on this task?) Gandhi had read enough of the Bible to recognize the value of loving service.

Why are we on this earth? What are we supposed to do while we are here? The law of love comes to mind: we are to love God and our neighbor. What does it mean to love your neighbor? Does it suffice to wish him well? No, we are to do more: we are to *work* on his behalf. Should we pull him around in a cart to get him from one place to another? How about a wheelchair?

My feeling, in short, is that anti-autonomy symbols like the rickshaw have a value that might not render them irreplaceable but will leave us missing them in

some sense. It's not that I will miss the rickshaw personally; I've never had the privilege of riding in one; neither have I pulled one. Perhaps we need to work at designing and building public symbols of our interdependence, of our ultimate dependence on God, and of our willingness to subordinate ourselves to the needs of others.