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# THE CONCEPT OF FREEDOM

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**H**ISTORY records various occasions where man strove hard to obtain freedom, or to maintain what he already possessed of it. Every man desires to be free though not all men agree about what constitutes freedom. Too often, freedom is attached to and influenced by political ideologies or religious beliefs.

When we ask: 'What is freedom?' we must bear in mind that this concept is predicated in different ways of beings of very different types. Many misunderstand this concept as a 'free-for-all' principle. Others reduce freedom to a choice between good and evil. Ethics, or moral philosophy, insists that human actions can only be so considered provided that such actions result from man's free will. At the same time, ethics goes into the problem of freedom versus determinism.

What do we mean by freedom? Two points may be very useful in discussing freedom (a) freedom of choice: the ability to choose this or that, selecting from various objects/values; (b) freedom as constituting a basic right of man (e.g. the French Revolution sought to present freedom as such. This does not imply that freedom was not a fundamental human right before the American or French Revolutions). This freedom covers the freedom of expression – to express reality as one sees it, the freedom of worship, and the freedom to follow a particular career or state of life. It constitutes man's right to live out his life as he wants to.

As a fundamental human right, freedom has two aspects: (a) negative – freedom from . . . any unnecessary interference from others. This in no way implies the removal of authority. To be free, man needs authority to guide him, and public order has to be respected; (b) positive – freedom to . . . man should not be manipulated, but he has the right to live according to his desires. True freedom helps man become what/who he is. Thus, freedom should be attached to the concepts of man's self-realization and self-expression.

Freedom leads man to construct a positive relation with others. Paul Ricoeur believed that morality should begin from man's desire to fulfil himself. Henri Bergson contrasted freedom with obligation, while Ricoeur posited a free spontaneous kind of morality together with the idea of obligation

or law.

Bergson saw a static-legalistic morality in religion and insisted that freedom is something dynamic. Ricoeur agreed with Bergson that freedom should be the starting point of moral life, but at the same time he saw a progress of man in freedom to the idea of law. Ricoeur was concerned to reconcile freedom and necessity (law).

One should also pay attention to the negative aspect of freedom – freedom from ourselves or from things that are outside us. We have to be very critical, in the sense of being aware that we have to fight for our freedom, that is to be constantly aware of the need to free ourselves from what is enslaving us. This critical attitude incorporates the political, economic, and social levels as well. Such an emphasis on the negative side of freedom is meaningful only in relation to the positive aspect of freedom: to become what one should be in reality.

St Thomas Aquinas dealt with human freedom after dealing with divine freedom. About the latter he supposed the existence of the three realities (God-man-world) in the mentioned order, which were not doubted in his time and before. The freedom of man is modelled on God's freedom. In his *Summa Theologica*, I, *secundae partis*, Aquinas refers to God as the Immanent Trinity (God in Himself) and as the Economic Trinity (God out of Himself). In the first instance, God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit accept each other equally, even though they are distinct. Self-expression is here total. For man, it means that if he wants to reflect God more and more, he should try to communicate with the other in a total way, even though man is not yet complete (*in toto*).

Reflecting upon the Economic Trinity, Aquinas envisages God communicating Himself to a being who is not God and who knows his existence from God Himself. Man's response to God's call implies the acceptance of Christ as the perfect man. If Christ is perfect, the rest of mankind should be like him, to become the true mankind. This idea of freedom in Thomas Aquinas is essentially based on the idea of 'becoming a true man through freedom'.

Man's self-becoming through freedom takes place in time and involves the whole person and the development of man's abilities as an intelligent being who can love and trust others. All this requires a proper education. Freud insisted that this development starts from the womb. Man is a creature who is always growing and has to do so freely: this freedom belongs to every living human being.

What are the actual possibilities of freedom? Is it really possible for man to become really himself, and which are the conditions?

There are many obstacles which come both from within and without

man. Traditionally, ignorance and instinctive impulses were considered as obstacles to human freedom: they hindered man from taking the right decisions. From outside, there is always the coercion factor (intimidation) which does not allow man to act freely, but out of fear. This last factor is that which hinders freedom most. Fear as a result of coercion could be antecedent to the human act or it could come after. The degree of fear/coercion also has to be considered in each particular case, when passing moral judgements, or analysing freedom from a philosophical/ethical viewpoint. However, fear can never be quantified.

The Thomistic viewpoint depicts man's freedom as 'situated freedom'. Man could not simply decide what he should be. He has both possibilities and limitations. Human freedom does not imply man creating new energies, but guiding the possibilities that he has. The idea of freedom therefore implies the perfection of man as a being in the world (use of things and property), and as a being in relation with others (justice and power). Aquinas talks of man as achieving human freedom in society. Freedom is an unhindered search for those things which satisfy man to be what he should be, to be himself, and let others be themselves. Unfortunately, the concept of freedom in Aquinas is bound with a static view of the world.

Moral theologians before Aquinas gave a lot of importance to acts themselves, and lost sight of the agent (human being) who performed those acts. The importance of freedom was thereby diminished. Aquinas, however, elucidated the agents' freedom in a proper human act. With Kant as well there was a concentration on the agent: the morality of the human person. His morality revolved round the will of the individual. The will is the only thing which can be termed good or evil. Kant was very much concerned to develop an autonomous morality – the awareness of reasoning to do this or that. He restated the irreplaceability of the human person. For him, this should not create chaos, for what I do is that which others would do in similar circumstances: but what if this does not occur?

There is one big problem in Kantian philosophy as noted by Marx and Marcuse. Kant has a reduced concept of freedom and a distorted vision of it, because of his insistence on autonomous morality, and his insistence on the individual to emancipate himself from all kinds of authority. Marx remarked that Kant was so concerned with individual freedom that he forgot that the individual could be perhaps living under an unjust government. Kant, so to say, was considering human freedom like the freedom of a prisoner – in spite of being arrested in a limited space, he can still be free. One must not forget that Kant was a Lutheran, and Luther himself had a similar concept of human freedom. This model of freedom reduces and

distorts freedom.

According to Marxists, freedom is the ability to free oneself from what is hindering one, one's growth, one's relation with others. We are free when we are able to express ourselves before any authority, speaking on what is harming us, and making our lives better. The Marxist view of freedom may be correct, though there is a danger in losing sight of the fact that man is irreplaceable, neither by the State nor by society. Like others, we have to plan our systems and structures, but the person should continue to occupy his place, and the power that belongs to the State should create those requirements which any person or association needs to fulfil himself or itself in order to realize himself or itself in the highest possible degree.

When talking about freedom, we should continue to regard the person as irreplaceable (Kant), and at the same time we should accept the fact that we are free in so far as we are able to speak on what is hindering us (Marx) and change these things. In totalitarian States, people have this last problem and they are trying either to adapt themselves or get rid of the whole system.

Talking about freedom is one thing: putting it in practice is quite another. One doubts whether one can really define systems of freedom or freedom itself by any sentence or traditional definitions. More than words, freedom is a life-style whereby man, independently of his own and others's limitations, is allowed and allows himself to become what he was created for.

What is freedom? One may suggest an old dictum as a guideline: 'Freedom is not the right to do what one wills, but the will to do what is right.' This statement in turn gives rise to many other philosophical considerations about freedom.