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TABLE OF CONTENTS

FOREWORD	4
FREEDOM AT CORINTH: A CONVERSATION BETWEEN PAUL THE APOSTLE AND LUCIAN, A CORINTHIAN CHRISTIAN Allan McNicol and James Thompson	5
THE DISCIPLINE OF FREEDOM Michael R. Weed	19
“THE DISCIPLINE OF FREEDOM”: A RESPONSE Paul L. Watson	28
FREEDOM IS SLAVERY: THE ESSENCE OF A SERMON Tony Ash	32
BOOK REVIEW: <u>Paul’s Ethic of Freedom</u> by Peter Richardson Don Crittenden	39
CONTRIBUTORS	44

FOREWORD

Since the dawn of history, the human odyssey has in large part been a quest for freedom. In this respect the present age is no different. With varying degrees of success, we continue to explore diverse models of freedom -- political, psychological, religious, and economic.

In the first century the Christian message encountered and joined issue with alternative views of freedom. It is equally important that Christians today join in the ongoing conversation regarding the nature and significance of human freedom.

These essays, originally presented in a seminar conducted with the Administrative Board of the Institute for Christian Studies, are here made available to a wider audience as an expression of the Institute's commitment to the task of encouraging reflection on the implications of Christian faith for life.

I would like to thank my colleagues on the faculty of the Institute for their patience and cooperation in this task. Special recognition and thanks are also due to Mrs. Frances Horn, Institute Secretary, and Ms. Kathryn Pinkerton for their valuable aid in preparing the manuscript for printing.

Michael R. Weed, Editor

THE DISCIPLINE OF FREEDOM

By Michael R. Weed

The word freedom strikes resonant chords deep within the human breast. It designates something we perceive as somehow close to the mysterious core of what it means to be human. Consequently, it is not surprising that the word runs through our language at various levels, ranging from highly charged political rhetoric to advertising slogans and pop psychology's advocacy of being "freed up." Paradoxically, our use of the word freedom is as imprecise as it is widespread.

Still, the underlying view of freedom that informs its various uses appears to be a vision of release from the entanglements of mundane affairs, the engagements of day-to-day life, and the commitments and involvements that characterize life in the human community. This assumption, seldom examined, in many ways makes sense. Most of us become aware of our freedoms only after we feel them somehow threatened or jeopardized. And yet, such a view of human freedom as freedom-from-restraint not only is inaccurate; it is also responsible for much current misunderstanding and confusion.

Edward Engleberg makes the sobering observation that

everyone now wants freedom; it has been sought before. But without recognizing its contingencies imposed not by the corporate society but imposed by the very self for whom that

freedom is intended, there can be nothing but disaster.¹

Currently we are surrounded by those courting disaster through constantly translating freedom into the idiom of anarchy in the quenchless thirst for self-realization. This situation, at least partially, reflects a loss of adequate images of the nature or essence of the human self.

With this in mind I want to focus attention on the problem of freedom by suggesting two scenarios as capturing something of the complexity and essence of human freedom. First, consider this scene: a thirteen-year-old is sitting at a piano. Her fingers move rapidly over the keys to render flawlessly a Mozart sonata. Second, envision an anarchist exhorting a crowd. He espouses destruction of norms, standards, and rules. “Nothing,” he cries, “is obligatory. Everyone should be free to do his own thing.” And yet he finds it necessary, in order to communicate, to have mastered the grammar and syntax of the language he speaks. Without this he cannot proclaim, commend, or defend his views but would simply utter gibberish.²

Now, with these two images guiding reflection implicitly and explicitly, I want to outline in broad strokes two basic structures of human freedom and then bring them within hailing distance of the theological horizon.

Freedom Through Limitation

First, human freedom is finite or creaturely freedom. That is, the human self’s exercise of will and intention depends upon its aligning itself with certain restrictions and contingencies. At the simplest and perhaps most vivid level, this means that I will not be

free to mow the lawn tomorrow, or for that matter, to tell my wife when she asks me to mow it that I prefer to do my own thing, unless I go to bed tonight. The nature of my constitution dictates that I secure nourishment and rest, and that I take account of such matters as the “laws of nature.”

Curiously, when we fail to take account of the nature of human freedom as finite, freedom becomes impotent, abstract, and merely theoretical. True value in life is invariably attained through limitation.

Thinking is limitation of the infinite possibilities of mere imagination; willing is limitation of the infinite possibilities of desire; artistic creation is a limitation by selection; it is a process of elimination.³

Human freedom must be given structure and concreteness by the recognition of its limits. When limitations essential to the nature of the self and its context are ignored, the self does not become free. Rather its nature is distorted and it becomes the victim, not the master, of its world. Consequently, “creaturely freedom is progressively divested of its possibilities as it loses its limits.”⁴

By way of illustration, the artist is not free simply to do anything with her medium. One masters only through considerable difficulty and discipline the appropriate skills and techniques necessary to play a piano concerto--or to sculpt a Michelangelo’s David. Human freedom is unintelligible except in relation to limits that bring it focus and specificity and endow it with the concreteness appropriate to finite selves as agents or actors. It is the freedom to will something rather than the freedom to will anything.

Thus, to state that human freedom is freedom in limitation does not merely mean

that there are boundaries imposed on the extent of such freedom. Rather, it means that certain limits are in fact the very conditions of human freedom. Human freedom is thus freedom through limitation.

Freedom in Community

A second and closely related basic structure of human freedom is that it is the freedom of persons in community. That is, human freedom receives its contours from the unique form of the personal. As John Macmurray states: "To be completely free we have to be completely personal, completely real as persons."⁵ Human persons emerge within communities where they are formed as selves only in interaction with other selves. As the infant depends upon the parent not only for sustenance but also for presence and communication, all truly human existence is thoroughly social existence. Contrary to Sartre's dictum that "hell is other people," the way to truly human freedom lies not in the self but in the other.⁶ "Without love, without recognition and respect for the other, freedom is but an illusion of our neurotic self-preoccupation."⁷

Consequently, the necessary conditions of human freedom, because of the nature of human existence as co-existence, must be sought in appropriate forms of community. Clearly, I cannot have the freedom to "be myself" as a personal self

. . . unless I am with my own people, who will hold me in peace, protect me, save and care for me, and in the deepest sense, love me, and towards whom I behave in a reciprocal way.⁸

Human freedom is not, in the first instance, to be obtained by destroying, discarding, or minimizing various limitations. Nor is society the state of those who have "fallen from

freedom” as they have become entangled with social restraints. We can only be ourselves and realize our freedoms as agents through our relations with others.⁹

Perhaps we can better grasp the importance of the link between the person and others by briefly considering how it is epitomized in the family. For it is in some form of familial setting that human beings emerge within a matrix of personal relationships. It is within the family that I receive my name and my place both socially and geographically. It is here that I learn my “mother tongue.” And the language I learn to employ (even perhaps eventually to exploit) is not “mine” but “ours.” It inextricably ties me to a community of others and the symbols with which our collective existence is understood and bound together.

Thus I find myself existing as a self within relationships which are both necessary and indispensable conditions for realizing and maintaining my personhood. It is within the family that I may initially recognize that the presence and claims of other persons--wife, child, friend--do not simply encroach upon my freedom but are actually the conditions of human freedom. I find that it is this very obligation to attend to these relationships and to act on behalf of certain others that is the essential condition of my own freedom and wellbeing. That is, others create avenues through which I am permitted to become fully personal as I become responsible as husband, father, brother, uncle, and friend.

It follows that human freedom is not to be found simply by abandoning or minimizing restraints but

...by gathering ourselves into...genuinely achieved communion. The true dignity of man is attained only by building forms of life which are held together by the ties which tie freedoms to one another.¹⁰

Accordingly, the isolated individual cannot be free. Human freedom is defined by constitutive relationships. It exists only through the exercise of responsibility to and for other persons. Hence language, which establishes and maintains human co-existence, is a primary means to forms of freedom appropriate to truly human identity.¹¹

Unfortunately, we are all too aware that our various communities seldom embody genuine communion. More often they are groupings characterized by egocentric strife and tribalistic loyalties. So many of our relationships with others prove bitterly disappointing, marred by suspicion, disloyalty, and duplicity. Even our families may become “uneasy armistices” or “demilitarized zones” between adversaries struggling for greater freedom through more advantageous balances of power. Our very words are marked with fear and mistrust; they separate and fragment us as often as they bind us together.

Nor can we be optimistic about the possibilities of such conditions yielding to newer techniques and strategies for attaining freedom. What is needed is a radically different way of being in the world and among others which is more than a strategy of survival--a new heart, new spirit, and new words which voice the true structure of humanity and therefore of human freedom.

Jesus: Exemplar and Guarantor of Human Freedom

The Christian tradition resounds with the affirmation that “Jesus means freedom.” It is the Christian confession that Jesus is the one through whom God both summons us and offers us freedom--and the one who accepts and perfectly exemplifies the offered freedom.

As the Second Adam, he is the Exemplar of a new way of being, the founder not just of a new humanity, but the restorer of true humanity. The first Adam was called to finite freedom but failed to acknowledge his creaturely limits and live in obedience and communion with the Creator. Seeking to gain God's freedom, he forfeited his creaturely freedom. His heirs tragically end in un-freedom, victims of their own ingenious creations and ruled by that which they were created to rule. Through his incarnation the Second Adam affirms the structures of temporality and corporeality and re-establishes the lost Adamic freedom. "Not counting equality with God a thing to be grasped," he accepts and illuminates the limits of creaturely existence as conditions for obedience and service.

In terms of the foregoing discussion, Jesus confers freedom by transforming the boundaries of human existence. The One who bests us through the very limitations of finitude is no longer met as an impersonal or alien force. Rather, he is known as the Creator and Father of us all. It is ultimately his presence and purpose that we encounter in and through every limitation and boundary to life.

Now, rather than resenting or merely tolerating the limitations imposed on me by existence, I am becoming able to affirm them. I am able to praise the One who calls me into existence and grants me this time and this place to be this particular person and not someone else.

The swift and inescapable movement of time which marks me with the pain of an irreversible past and thrusts me into the uncertainty of the future is being transformed. Jesus calls us into community with One who is not indifferent to the time he creates and

guides.¹² He is loyal to his creation and forgiving. And it is this unfailingly faithful and gracious One with whom we deal in every event, whose presence permeates and upholds all reality. It is he who in his faithfulness dispels the uncertainty of the future--promising always to be there. It is he who, as forgiving Father, relieves the crippling irreversibility of the past and enables us to begin anew. As the One who is both faithful and loyal, he enables us to utter, however stutteringly, two words necessary to restore and sustain genuine community and human freedom: "I promise" and "I forgive."

Footnotes

- ¹ Edward, Engleberg, The Unknown Distance: From Consciousness to Conscience (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972), p. 249.
- ² Cf. Stanley Hauerwas, Vision and Virtue (Notre Dame: Fides Publishers Inc., 1974). "The moral anarchist does not live a life that is determined by rules in the same way as a monk does. The difference between the two men, however, is not that the one follows rules and other does not, but is in the kind of rules each follows. The moral anarchist can certainly eschew explicit norms, but that does not mean he can eliminate the idea of rule from the description of his behavior. For so far as he wishes to claim that he has reasons for doing what he does, those very reasons presuppose the notion of rule (p. 17f.)."
- ³ Emil Brunner, Man in Revolt (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1939), p. 267.
- ⁴ David Baily Harned, Images for Self-Recognition (New York: The Seabury Press, 1977), p. 187. Elsewhere in the same volume Harned states: "Limits, rules, boundaries, and possibilities of penalty do not confront the self as its fate. Instead, they are actively embraced, becoming a world of coherent nomoi to which the autonomous self . . . freely obligates itself for the sake of the fulfillment of the self's own possibilities. . . . Freedom is vertiginous, sterile, and abstract until it is endowed with structures and concreteness by the acknowledgment of limits; only then does it become creaturely

freedom, latent with real possibilities, instead of the spurious freedom to do everything that is in fact identical with no freedom at all (36).”

- ⁵ John Macmurray, Freedom in the Modern World (London: Faber and Faber, 1932), p. 203.
- ⁶ It is the experience of the other as truly other, according to Emmanuel Levinas, that liberates my freedom from the arbitrary and invites it to responsibility and justice. The Other thus awakens, promotes, and invests freedom, “arousing my goodness” within an order of responsibility. Emmanuel Levinas, Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), pp. 84-88, 252.
- ⁷ Hauerwas, op. cit., p. 41.
- ⁸ Albert Hofstadter, “Reflections on Evil,” in Freedom and Morality, ed. by John Bricke (Lawrence: University of Kansas, 1974), p. 160.
- ⁹ John Macmurray, Persons in Relation (London: Faber and Faber, 1961), p. 119.
- ¹⁰ Hofstadter, op. cit., p. 158.
- ¹¹ Cf. Peter C. Hodgson, New Birth of Freedom: A Theology of Bondage and Liberation (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), p. 124f.
- ¹² William F. Lynch, Christ and Apollo (New York: Sheed and Ward, Inc., 1960), p. 62.

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