

THE ANTINOMY OF FREEDOM AND IDEALS

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Both freedom and ideals are valid and necessary for individuals and society, and for humanity in general as, in a sense, the macrocosmic whole within which the individuals interact and gain a meaning (and even a reality) which they do not achieve as discrete, unique and merely self-regarding monads. Yet, in the very nature of life itself, the two stand in antinomial relation, in a state of rising and ebbing tension. The result is an intriguing, even recurring problem for both the individual and society and for individuals in their intercourse with one another. In a significant sense, history may be interpreted as a record of the workings of the antinomial tension between the two necessities and validities. The most momentous events and forces in history are those deeds and movements that are impelled now by freedom, now by ideals. In certain periods and under certain circumstances one or the other has surged or ebbed, giving to those times and conditions their prevailing marks and problems.

Today in many lands, societies and communities ideals are on the defensive and, in some places, even threatened with dissolution. The disenchantments and the "vital devastating doubts," caused by the two World Wars and by the failure of systems to match and manage the "vitalities of life," have rudely shaken men's faith in the validity, utility, and power of ideals. Having thus lost their trust in ideals, men naturally turned to freedom in the belief that only through existential freedom can they achieve not only an escape but even redemption from their malaise

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and their predicament.

So we see freedom manifesting itself with aggressiveness in practically all areas and interests of private and social life. More particularly, freedom assumes the following forms:

1. freedom of belief and action in personal living;
2. freedom to voice and spread one's thoughts and to follow one's own judgments and feelings in social affairs; and
3. freedom of self-expression and pursuit in art, literature, science, philosophy and religion.

And in all these forms there is the underlying assumption that freedom should be untrammelled by any principle or consideration except perhaps what might sooner or later destroy freedom itself. Let us now examine the gains and losses resulting from thus exercising freedom in the various areas.

In the area of private living, the chief gain has been the emancipation of the individual from the strictures of excessive Puritanism in men's behavior and beliefs. In the area of social life, freedom to voice one's honest thoughts respecting the individual's relation to social groups or institutions has given us the rich fruits of democracy. Fresh and untrammelled ideas have stirred men to a vivid awareness of the defects and evils of certain political and social systems and has inspired movements for reform. In the realm of literature and art, the uninhibited freedom of expression has created newer and more compelling artistic and literary forms. In the precincts of science and philosophy, freedom to

"Seek the truth wherever found,
Be it on Christian or heathen ground"

has led to profounder and vaster insights into the truths and mysteries of existence. In the domain of religion and morals, there have been impressive gains in the form of

healthier and more rational attitudes regarding the individual's relation to religious systems and to the Ultimate Ground of being and of reality itself.

On the debit side, in the confines of personal living, there have been, in so many cases, irrational freedom and the consequent corrosion of the moral fiber. In the social field, one effect of exaggerated and unchartered freedom has been the weakening of the cohesive and regulative influence and authority of legitimate social systems, including even democratic institutions, thereby exposing them to the insidious onslaughts of subversive systems. In the realm of literature and art, we have reaped a harvest of confused interpretations of life and of the true function of art and literature, resulting in the loss of a proper sense of decency and in mental and emotional bewilderment. In the field of religion and morals, we have produced skepticism, nihilism, and even atheism and the consequent anarchy and frustrations in the innermost springs of life.

A more than superficial analysis of the problem points to the basic and central error, which, in effect, is the "falsehood of extremes," — a false disjunction. For it is not really a question of "either" . . . "or," — of mutual contradiction between freedom and ideals. Rather, it is a sort of dialectical relation in the Hegelian sense, — an antinomial interaction. The only rational hope of resolving the problem lies, therefore, in an attempt at a reconciliation which is not only possible but intrinsically valid, resulting in a dialectical synthesis in which the essential truth of each is preserved, modified, and fused with that of the other, a synthesis that can be traced back and returns to the antecedent and ultimate ground of both, which is personality. It is futile to expect human beings to give up freedom entirely or in too great a measure. It is equally futile to ask men to live without ideals as counterpoise and directing force, without some restraining and guiding element that has the power of enlightened authority. As Dr. Georgia Harkness has put it,

"Man cannot live with hope and courage unless he has worthy ideals to regulate his life with an

inner authority." (2)

Let us then subject the possible solution to a critical examination.

At the outset, the fundamental principle is to bring into the problem the philosophic point of view — to see the problem in the context of life as a whole, that is, to arrive at a consistent and valid view of the meaning of life in its complex totality. To put it in another way, it is to determine the proper part and function of freedom and ideals in their organic relation as intrinsic, dialectical attributes of life as a whole.

Freedom, obviously, is indispensable. Without freedom, there can be no activity, no achievement, no hope of eventual self-fulfillment, no mission of service to accomplish; in existential terms, no being, much less, authentic existence. Being and existence are unthinkable apart from freedom. In the philosophy of Berdyaev precedence belongs to freedom over being. "Does not the final mystery of being," he asks, "lie in the fact that freedom is more primary than it and precedes it?" (1)

I cannot, however, go as far as the existentialists do in giving precedence and primacy, temporal and otherwise, to freedom and in asserting that all other attributes of being are mere derivative products of primordial freedom, and therefore, of necessity, subordinate to and contingent on freedom. For it is precisely such conception of freedom, when translated consistently into practical living, that accounts for numerous instances of disillusionment, turmoil and wantonness in both personal and social experience. If freedom were the pre-eminent and overruling attribute of being and of reality, how could we explain the compelling and irrepressible need for reason and intelligence, for decency and restraint in personal conduct and in social intercourse? If personal life and institutional enterprise are to have meaning, order, guiding light and rational direction, other attributes of being and of reality must be brought into play and given their due weight. Certainly, being cannot be merely, wholly or even primarily freedom,

for freedom is only an attribute of being. Reason, order, self-limitation, ideals, love and the urge to achieve higher and higher levels of development — these, surely, must be recognized as among the genuine and vital attributes of being and of reality itself.

What, then, is the true and unique function of ideals, and what gives validity to them?

First of all, in the sense in which the term is used here, ideals are principles which serve as sublime goals for progressive approximation. Now, it is the nature of a goal, when it is passionately regarded, to inspire and yet regulate action; in other words, to energize freedom and also to guide it toward the purposed end.

In the second place, ideals function as standards. As standards, ideals have the force of authority. They require obedience, discipline, sacrifice and glad acceptance of the goal that ought to be desired and striven after. Freedom without the vision and authority of ideals will work havoc, frustrate the pursuit of ideals, and ultimately destroy even itself.

Of course, not all ideals are valid. And as has been said, false ideals can be even worse than none at all. Nor are all ideals unchanging and absolute. The ideals that serve as genuine antithesis to freedom are valid ones; but as freedom itself suffers changes in the course of its movement as an element of life, so ideals may likewise undergo modifications, giving rise to still more elevated forms as the human personality enlarges itself and ascends to higher levels of existence and achievement.

It is ultimately in personality, then, that we are to look for any promise of resolution of the antinomial tension between freedom and ideals. In personality alone is to be found the truth of each of the antinomies. Only in personal selfhood can the two “dwell and keep house together.” Outside of personality freedom and ideals, as thesis and antithesis creatively interacting to produce still higher syntheses, are unthinkable and meaningless categories. Only persons can manage both freedom and ideals

rationally and effectively in such manner that the dialectical tension between them will give rise to loftier syntheses.

But finite personality developing in an imperfect universe needs culture and the impulsions and guiding light of the Infinite Person. Hence the vital need for social order and for education and religion.

Social order is necessary to regulate and protect the freedom of individuals to develop their own personality and pursue their own ideals. But as Barbara Ward has pointed out, without authority, there can be no social order, and yet men who exercise authority are exposed to the special temptations of power (5).

Furthermore, it is not mere authority or just any authority that is called for. What is needed is an authority based upon law. But, again, it is not just any law; rather, it is a law that "goes back to ethical principles that existed prior to its codification" (4) Otherwise, we have no defense against what McGuire calls the "Monstrous State," and "if law is merely what those in power choose to impose, how are we to judge the justice of any given constitution or statute?" (3)

Ideals, then, that is, valid ideals, are necessary as foundation and rationale for social order and for the law and authority which are its sources and support.

Education is necessary to develop the intelligence, reason, self-control and emotional and moral powers and other attributes of personality, to their maximal ranges. But, again, it is not just any kind of education. It must be education based on sound philosophical and religious insights and on due recognition of the vitalities of life.

And religion, as man's "ultimate concern," is a necessity, for it is the final source and ground of freedom and ideals. It is also the secret and inexhaustible spring for those more-than-human powers that man needs when his own resources have reached their "intrinsic limits" and are inadequate to help him out of his predicament.

Let me take up some of the concrete problems caused by the tension between freedom and ideals.

First, there is the problem of the individual within himself — the conflict between his need of freedom and his need of ideals. The way out is to give priority and authority to ideals but to allow freedom sufficient range to enable the self to strive for the progressive realization of its ideals. In this manner, the self retains its authority over both its freedom and its ideals and thus maintains its integrity and potency to carry on its work of developing its possibilities toward ever-ascending levels of existence.

There is, next, the problem of the individual with other individuals — the tension arising from conflicting needs and differing concepts of freedom and ideals.

The suggestion for solution to the problem first came from the way the great Greek theorists — Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, met the challenge posed by the principle which the Sophists taught, that “Man is the measure of all things,” i.e., every individual is the judge of what is right and what is wrong. It will be remembered that Socrates based his solution on three points: (1) Not man the individual but Man the universal is the true measure of truth, for truth is “in us all.” (2) Individual opinion is not to be confused with truth, which is universal in nature. (3) Truth will issue from the mind of the individual only through free expression of ideas in a truth-seeking dialogue (4) it is not individual opinion, which divides, but truth that should be the bond of unity among individuals and the source of authority and order in society.

Plato's contribution was his efforts to define the nature of truth, which Socrates failed to do. But Plato's solution was too abstract to be functional among beings of flesh and blood. It did not take into account the material and biological realities of life.

It remained for Aristotle to remedy the deficiencies of the ideas of Socrates and Plato. Aristotle rightly conceived that truth (and ideals) become functional in the temporal world only in living flesh. He intimated that that

is possible only in personal selfhood.

The third problem is the tension between the individual or individuals, on the one hand, and social institutions, on the other hand. This tension is unavoidable but is not wholly prejudicial to the parties involved. Social organization of some sort is necessary for collective action, for the protection of the individual, and for creating conditions necessary for the personal self to exercise freedom within the bounds of law and of decency and mutual concern. But it should not be forgotten that, like the Sabbath, institutions and systems are made for man and not man for them. The ultimate primacy must be given to the individual. On the other hand, individuals being finite and subject to the biological drives need the restraining and coercive authority of institutions. The main requirement is that those chosen by the individuals to manage the institutions should be persons of enlightened minds and imbued with goodwill and the spirit of stewardship. For their own part, the individuals should conscientiously do their duty and should be ever vigilant lest those whom they have elected as custodians run away with the power entrusted to them. This makes democracy the best and most valid both as a philosophy and as a social system. For democracy, especially one built on the Christian gospel, has legitimate place for both freedom and ideals. Only democracy as theory and system adequately meets the demands for freedom for the individual and for the authority of ideals.

The task, of course, is a never-ending one. Every individual and every new generation must carry on the work, utilizing the settled values and sure lights achieved by their forebears, improving the ways and means and acquiring deeper and true insights as well as greater powers in the movement of individual and institutional life toward sublimer syntheses of freedom and ideals.

The danger is that men may lose their vision, may become weary or impatient and resort to irrational and inhumane means, or may become so frustrated that they will abandon either freedom or ideals, or both, for the sake of

comfort, security and peace.

Obviously, there is no short-cut way out of the problem. The limitations imposed by matter and time and by the finitude of human life and human systems must be recognized as inescapable facts of experience. Yet the limitations must be viewed as, on balance and in the end, necessary conditions as the spirit of man strives to transcend the circumscriptions of space, time, and finitude.

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Needless to say, it is not the scientists who are causing the world's difficulties and miseries. Unlike the oppressive creeds of the past, science is not to be fought by enlightenment or counter-propaganda. It is enlightenment. It has no propaganda. There is in pure science nothing to fight. On the contrary, there is a treasure to preserve. But there is around it an institution to understand and to control. If we postpone the task or fumble it, we may wake up to find that the pressures accumulating within mankind under its present unendurable strains will explode into a chaos where, for a longer or a shorter time, neither science nor social order will find a place.

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