



Freedom

Cormac Burke ¹

Is man free?

Man has always talked about freedom; but never so much as today. If he talks about it more, presumably it is because he is more concerned about it. Is this because there is more freedom in the world? Or is it perhaps because there is less?²

On the one hand, it is very arguable that man's freedom, politically and economically, is *diminishing* (he is more under the power of the State and of state-controlled economic conditions; he is more subjected to taxes, more tied down by red-tape, etc.).

Nevertheless many people would maintain that personal freedom—freedom in personal conduct—is increasing, in both Western societies and in recent months in East European (formerly Marxist) societies. People are 'freer' to do what they like morally; e.g. where sex is concerned. It seems undeniable that people in general accept fewer restrictions in the area of sex than formerly. But it seems equally undeniable that this greater 'freedom' in conduct somehow doesn't seem to have produced greater happiness in life; and most people would agree that there is something unsatisfactory about a greater freedom that doesn't lead to greater happiness.

Others deny the idea of freedom altogether. Man is not free. He is really a conditioned being, and the pattern of his actions is determined by his hereditary traits and his circumstances. Man therefore is only fooling himself in talking about his freedom. Clearly the first thing one must do is to try to clarify this.³ When we talk about freedom,

Is man free? Or is he not free? It all depends on what one understands by freedom. Because there is a certain ambiguity in the word.

¹ This text is a chapter from the book *Conscience and Freedom* (first published: 1978); available on-line at www.cormacburke.or.ke

² "Never before has man had so keen an understanding of freedom, yet at the same time, new forms of social and psychological slavery make their appearance" (*Gaudium et spes*, no. 4).

³ The author feels bound, in justice and gratitude, to say that most and probably all of his ideas about freedom have been inspired by the words and writings of Msgr. Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer, and he recommends the works of Msgr. Escrivá to all those who want to understand what freedom—and especially the greatest freedom of all: Christian freedom—really means.

are we talking about a real thing, however difficult to define? Or are we talking about something imaginary?

Free: and not yet free

Is man free? Or is he not free? I would be prepared to defend both propositions!—that man is free; and that he is not free... It all depends on what one understands by freedom. Because there is a certain ambiguity in the word. When one says man is free, if one means that *man has free will*, that he possesses a power of intelligent choice, I would defend that, as against all determinists. There may indeed be moments in which we feel our free will was lessened, or perhaps completely overwhelmed, by circumstances. No one will deny that this can really occur in certain cases. But no one, I imagine, will deny either that we can easily fool ourselves about such moments, and that when we say we were swept away by passion or temper or circumstances, what perhaps really happened is that with our free will we freely chose an easier course rather than a harder one. It is handy to be a determinist if one is not prepared to choose the harder options; if one is not prepared, for instance, to control one's sensuality, or to restrain one's tendency to criticise others, or to face up to one's responsibilities, or to check one's self-centred ambition.

So, in allowing that there may be cases in which one's free will is lessened or removed by circumstances, I would maintain that such cases, in normal persons, are few. The normal person has only to look back on the actions of any one of his days to be perfectly convinced that he could quite easily (or at least quite definitely) have varied many—most—of them: he could have not got up in the morning, or he could have got up on the dot; he could have written this letter first instead of that; he could have watched a different TV programme to the one he actually saw; he could have had a row with his wife instead of having avoided it—or he could have avoided a row instead of having had it.

In other words, the normal person has only to reflect a little to be quite convinced that each day he has exercised a power to choose in certain directions and that he could have exercised that same power in other directions. And that is to be convinced *that one has free will*.

But free will—the power to choose—is not yet the same as freedom. I can choose this or that: fried eggs or boiled eggs, for instance—if I am given the choice. If I am only offered boiled eggs, I am free to eat or to go hungry, which is not so much of a free choice. No; free will and freedom are not synonymous. With my free will I may choose to go to New York; yet I may not have the cash to do it. Therefore I am not free to do it. The slave has free will. But he has not freedom. So freedom is not just having free will. It is something more. And I would maintain that we do not yet possess that something more, that we do not yet possess freedom in all its fullness.

Is freedom independence?

If freedom is not just having free will, what is it? Is it *independence*? Some people appear to think that freedom essentially means independence. And when they say that

man is free or ought to be free, they are implying that he is independent or is *meant to be independent*.

Now this is something that I would absolutely deny. It seems quite evident to me that man is not independent. He is in fact an extremely dependent creature. One of the obviously false things often said in remarks about freedom is that 'man is born free'. Born free? Can you imagine anything more helpless and dependent than a new-born baby? No; man is born with evident dependences. At the start of his life his dependences are quite involuntary, almost unconscious: air, light, warmth, food... As he grows up he begins to choose things, and very often creates new and *voluntary* dependences or needs. He depends on a train or a car to get around, on smoking to calm his nerves, on aftershave lotion to stop his cheeks itching, on popularity to boost his ego, on newspapers for his views, on a wife and family for affection and so on.

To think, as many people do, that true human development means reaching a state of total self-sufficiency, is false, for total self-sufficiency is just not possible for man. In the truest sense, the more you live, the more dependent—and therefore the less self-sufficient—you become. You become more dependent on few things, or on many things, on important things or unimportant things, on things that make you more of a man or less of a man, things that make you *more free or less free*... The quality of your life is really determined in fact by the type of things you are dependent on. And we are approaching the real problem of freedom when we say it is the problem of the type of *dependences* one acquires in one's life. The man who is dependent on drink or drugs or lust is scarcely free. To crave for sex and to centre one's life on it can be the most abject slavery.

But man, precisely because he is not self-sufficient, must want something. And freedom really has very much to do with wanting and depending on things that raise a man up, develop him, ennoble him. So, to want and long for truth or goodness or love is part of the process of becoming free. Gustave Thibon speaks of a « dead dependence, which oppresses a man, and a living dependence which opens him out and elevates him. » And he adds: « The first of these dependences is slavery; the second, freedom. »

Defining freedom

So far I have deliberately avoided the difficult problem of defining freedom. But perhaps now we can attempt to say what it is. Most people, if pushed, would probably say that freedom is the « power to do what you like. » This is a superficial idea of freedom that just won't stand the test. You can do many things you feel like doing, and be less free as a result; for instance, to use the simple example given by Frank Sheed, you can eat as much as you feel like and the result is that limitation of your freedom we call indigestion.

No; freedom is not the power to do what you like. It is something much more important. It is *the power to be fully oneself*, the power to *become* fully oneself, to *realise fully one's potentialities as a human being*.

Man is not born free. But man is born with the power to become free, to become master of his own actions. More paradoxically still, one can say man is born with the

And we are approaching the real problem of freedom when we say it is the problem of the type of *dependences* one acquires in one's life.

power to become a man... A lion cub just naturally grows into a fully developed lion; it doesn't have to worry about it. But a child doesn't automatically or inevitably become a man. You don't become a man just by reaching the age of 21 or 33.

You may never become a man. Some people don't. A man is not someone who is well developed physically. His physical powers develop automatically. But he also has spiritual powers, and these may not develop, or may develop insufficiently. They may remain underdeveloped. You meet fully grown men, who have underdeveloped minds, and especially have underdeveloped wills; they have little or no will-power. They are not yet men. They are not yet masters of their own selves or their own choices. They are not yet free. Therefore they don't yet properly possess what most distinguishes human nature; and they may end up by losing it completely.

The person who normally acts according to what he feels like doing is likely to be very underdeveloped as regards freedom. He is not really in possession of it. He is largely moved by comfort or instinct or passion—which is to be moved very much like the animals.

So, I insist, freedom is the power to realise one's potentialities, the power to develop, to grow, to become oneself, not to be forced to drift into something else, not to be forced to be less than a man.

This is the paradox. This is why we are free and yet not free—not yet. We are free because we have free will. But we are not yet fully free—because not all of our possibilities or even our wants have been fulfilled. Most people would readily agree that as long as one has unsatisfied desires or wants, one is not fully free. At one stage in

**One can say
man is born
with the *power*
to become a
*man...***

World War II the Allied war aims were expressed in a declaration of Four Freedoms. I forget three of them, but one, I think was Freedom from Want. This properly understood, is real freedom. Not just freedom from hunger or from material want. This is essential, but it is not enough. To be a beggar and suddenly to inherit a million pounds doesn't bring freedom from want. Such a person will still want more: more love, fame, pleasure, companionship, even more money. Real freedom from want is to have come to a state where one *wants nothing further*, not by reduction to Nirvana, where one is satisfied because there is no desire left, but by the full satisfaction of the true needs of human nature. What these true needs are each one has to work out for himself; he has to decide, for instance, whether love is a truer need than sex, or whether a man can be happy and free if he leaves unsatisfied his immense need of goodness and truth and beauty...

If freedom is the power to be fully oneself, it is obviously a power in motion. It looks forward to a state where at last, we hope, we will be truly ourselves, where we will have fulfilled all the potentialities of our nature and possess ourselves fully. Now clearly we do not yet possess that state. When we speak of freedom in this sense we are speaking of some *future freedom*—of the ultimate goal of our life towards which we try to tend and away from which we try not to drift.

Choices matter

But let us look more closely at that *present* freedom which is our free will, our power to choose between different alternatives, our power to say 'Yes' or 'No'. This is

the freedom that characterises man and forms the basis of his dignity and makes him someone who can carry personal responsibility. He is free and responsible *because he can choose*. What makes imprisonment such an indignity is that it deprives a man of so many choices. His freedom of choice is brutally narrowed. He can walk the prison yard, but not the city streets outside or the countryside. He can eat the food offered him or go hungry. He cannot go out and buy a 'Big Mac'. From this it is very evident that the extent to which a man has no real choice, he is not free. He is only free when he can choose this or that, when he can say 'Yes'—or 'No'. If he can only say 'Yes', he is not free. We will return to this point.

Another point is that some of our free choices develop us more, some develop us less, while others hinder our development. We are not static personalities. We are changing all the time—whether we want it or not, or like it or not. In part, circumstances *force* us to change. But what basically affects our changing personalities is our own free *choices*—whether we say 'Yes' when we could have said 'No', whether we say 'No' when we could have said 'Yes'. We are like men constantly on the road, coming to crossroads all the time (every choice means a crossroads)—and *choosing*. Very clearly, therefore, it is important to know what sort of things one chooses, and how they affect one's own development as a person, as a personality. Because choices, like roads, are not indifferent. They tend to lead you somewhere—uphill or down, to your goal (if you have one) or away from it. They may lead nowhere; they may be dead ends, tracks that sink into a swamp or run out in the sands of a desert.

Underdeveloped people

If we look back at any stage in our life—say over the last four or five years—if we look back at our own personal history, we see that we have chosen certain things, and we are conscious that we could have chosen different things: and that we would be different persons today if we had chosen differently. My own personal history could have been so different: for better or for worse. If, with hindsight, we could relive those years again, I imagine most of us would vary some of our choices. Because we see they were poor choices, they didn't help us; and we feel that some other alternative would probably have been better. Of course, we can't change the past. But we can try to learn from past experience, so as to judge our *future* choices better.

We hear a lot today about underdeveloped countries. Generally one is speaking of countries that are making great efforts to develop, and perhaps are showing more signs of life and vitality than many 'developed' countries. But what a great lot of underdeveloped *people* there are around: people whose lives move in very narrow circles, whose horizons are limited to small personal interests and satisfactions, bored at work and bored at home; living for their golf or bingo or telly...; and who are making practically no efforts to *develop*.

Free and easy choices

How do people get into such a state of apathy? Generally by their own free choices: by their free and easy choices; by systematically choosing the easy options, the more attractive or smoother road, at every crossroads that comes up. And the result of

using one's freedom that way is, at best, a rut; perhaps a dead end; at worst, it is a desert or a precipice. A rut is simply a conditioned way of choosing, an unfree way of choosing. Sometimes a person gets into such a rut *without being aware of it*. He always says 'Yes' to the same things and never thinks of the fact that he is not really living as a free man—making deliberate choices—but simply drifting. Sometimes a person is aware of the rut, or becomes aware of it. Then he would like to get out of it. But he finds perhaps that it is not that easy. The habit has taken hold of him and he can't break it. If he really can't, then he is not free. The person who can't help sliding into an armchair whenever he sees a television set switched on... or the person who realises that he is smoking too much and wants to quit altogether, but who can't, has, at least in relation to these matters, lost his freedom. He can no longer say 'No'. And to be free it is essential to be able to say 'Yes' or 'No'. *To be free it is essential to have at least two choices*. If you have only one choice, if you can only say 'Yes', you're not free. (One choice is of course not really a choice at all. When, in fact, a person finds himself with only one choice, he says afterwards, 'I had *no* choice'. He is right.)

Freedom and sex

I feel that a note of urgency could well enter here into our consideration of freedom. We are free, free to choose, and we are constantly exercising this freedom of choice, choosing roads that take us somewhere. *Where?* A man is completely at sea about his own life unless he can say where it is leading him. He is not really in charge of his life unless he has set himself a goal, and is using his choices—his free will—to attain that goal.

It is only if you have a goal in life, a goal of personal development, that you can use your free will intelligently. You can use it intelligently in a *positive* exercise: to choose things that help your development, that can enrich your personality and your life. And you can use it intelligently in a *negative* exercise—to avoid those choices which can limit your development, to avoid choosing things which keep you small and underdeveloped, which set you in a rut; and, much more important and urgent, to avoid those choices that are really dead ends—or worse: to avoid choosing things which are capable of enslaving you more and more, and perhaps of finally destroying you.

Take an obvious heading: 'Sex and Freedom'. Take the person who practises some form of restraint in sex, who chooses to observe the restrictions of a traditional morality, who believes therefore that sex is for marriage, and who believes that sexual thoughts should be controlled, and that certain types of books and films or shows are to be avoided. Is he less free than, say, the man who follows his every instinct, who acknowledges no restraints, who does what he likes?

Restrictions and freedom

Is a person less free because he accepts restrictions? Do all restrictions imply a loss of freedom? Yes? Reflect well on it... No! I would not agree that all restrictions necessarily involve a loss of freedom. Certain restrictions are in fact a safeguard of freedom. A man may accept them because he is personally convinced that they help to keep him free; and convinced that if he doesn't observe them, he can lose his freedom.

The cabin of an airliner is definitely a restricted area, normally in fact a rather cramped one. Yet the man who wants to get to New York, has the cash, buys a ticket, and enters the cabin, is not likely to step out of it in mid-flight in order to assert his freedom! The freedom that interests him is to get to New York, and the restrictions of the cabin (air-pressurised and heated, when outside there is scarcely any oxygen and the temperature is -45°C; and travelling at 600 miles per hour) help him to exercise his freedom to the maximum advantage.

**I would not agree
that all restrictions
necessarily involve
a loss of freedom.
Certain restrictions
are in fact a
safeguard of
freedom.**

A road is a restriction. It has a certain paved width; it has curves and cambers. But the man who suddenly decides he will no longer be a slave to these restrictions and who, instead of following the next curve, drives straight on, will probably find that this assertion of his freedom leaves him at the bottom of the ditch or wrapped around the nearest tree. A motorway illustrates the point even more clearly than a normal road. It has more restrictions; it is fenced in, has limited entrance and exit points, maximum, and sometimes minimum, speed... Yet no man in his right senses, when he chooses to travel by motorway, thinks of these restrictions as limiting his freedom, but rather as helping him to make better use of it.

If a man loves a woman, if a boy loves a girl, he wants to love her truly (to love her *purely*, if one may be old fashioned but clear), he wants to be *free* to love her. And if he is normal and sincere, he knows that his sexual nature—which can be *directed* towards serving and expressing his love—*has* to be *directed* towards that end. It has to be controlled, so as to be subordinated to his love. And that is something it doesn't easily accept. It tends to accept no control. It wants its own satisfactions on its own terms. And if it is left unrestrained, it takes over, it destroys love and enslaves.

'I chose slavery'

Those who acknowledge no restraints in the matter of sex, are in danger of losing their freedom to love, of losing their freedom altogether. By saying 'Yes' to such an imperious instinct as sex, as often as it makes itself felt, they are losing their ability to say 'No'. And—the point needs to be repeated—a man is not free *unless he can also say 'No'*. 'I can resist anything except temptation', quipped Oscar Wilde. He wasn't free. He was a slave (though at least he realised it). And there are many people around today who are deliberately and quickly forging their own slavery (even though—perhaps—many of them do not realise it).

I Chose Freedom was the title of a famous book some 30 years ago. Someone, I forget who, objected to the title; that it didn't make sense, that you can't choose *freedom*. Oh, but you can. And you can choose the opposite of freedom. I fear that the autobiography of many people today may sadly have to be entitled *I Chose Slavery*.

A person's choice in doing this, in seeing or reading that, may indeed be a free choice; there lies its responsibility. But, in so many cases, it is by no stretch of the imagination a choice for freedom. It is a choice for slavery.⁴

⁴ In this sense we can say that while to sin is a sign of the existence of freedom in the will, it is not a

Freely to choose slavery!... This may sound absurd. And in a sense, yes, it *is crazy* and irrational. But no more absurd or impossible than the case of the people, in one country or another, who freely and democratically vote themselves into a Communist regime. They have freely chosen slavery.

I feel there are lots of people today who talk loudly about their freedom, and who are in fact riding a runaway car, hurtling down a road which ends in a precipice; and they just don't know how to stop. So perhaps they boost their own morale by pretending they have made a break-through into a new dimension of freedom. And they haven't. They have simply and sadly lost control over their own lives. Their choices are becoming more and more determined and predictable. They are heading for total destruction or total captivity.

genuine expression or assertion of freedom, but rather a cause of its weakening and decline (just as the fall into error is a sign that the mind is made to know, but to err is not an act of true knowledge, but just the opposite).