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Crisis of Freedom

Cormac Burke¹

Free for what?

A large part of the present-day confusion about freedom is because we think of freedom as being free from external restrictions; and we forget that it is much more a matter of being free from internal restraints, from self-imposed or self-sought restrictions which hinder our development as true personalities. It is a matter essentially of having, and being able to exercise, an internal and personal power, a power which includes self-dominion, self-possession and self-realisation in intimate relationship.

‘Free a man’, the Civil Rights leader, James Farmer, has said, ‘and he is not yet free. He must still free himself.’ And Nietzsche wrote: ‘You call yourself free? I would hear of your master-thought, not of your escape from the yoke. Are you a man that should escape from the yoke? Many have cast off all their values when they cast off their servitude. Free from what? How does that concern Zarathustra? Let your eye answer me frankly: Free *for* what?...’

Modern man wants to be free *from*. But he doesn’t know what he should be free for. And as a result he is in danger of losing or abandoning his freedom, even if simply because he is less and less capable of seeing any really worth-while use to which it can be put.

Stuck at the crossroads

In the end freedom is of little use to the man without values or ideals, just as it is of less use still to the man who is afraid to commit himself. And it so happens that modern man is both very unsure of his ideals and very suspicious of almost any real commitment.

Freedom is of little use to the man lacking in values or ideals, for if he has no worth-while goals to his life then his choices can mean little to him; fundamentally his problem is that he *cannot respect the things he chooses*. Even if it were true that there is more freedom in the world today, of what use can this be to a world with a lessened sense of values? It is sad to boast of at last having all the roads open and unrestricted before one, if at the same time one has a growing feeling that none of them seem to lead anywhere...

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

And what is the point of having all the roads open before one, if, deep down, one is afraid to choose any of them, or afraid at least to make more than tentative and very temporary choices; ready to take a few steps along one road, but even readier to retrace those steps as soon as one gets bored with it or finds the going tough; and then to try another road (another job, another cause, another husband, another wife...), and another, and another?

Man today is so suspicious of committing himself that he is in danger of voluntarily paralysing his power of choice, his own very freedom. For every choice is a commitment. And those who are afraid to choose, or exercise tentative choices and quickly revoke them, contradict and annul their own freedom. Modern man, like the men of all ages, stands at the crossroads of choice. But since modern man is afraid to commit himself, he remains at the crossroads.

Progressive paralysis

This progressive paralysis of freedom, this growing inability to make a real and lasting choice of anything that demands ‘sticking power’... this is not just the ordinary difficulty inherent in the power to choose, the difficulty which derives from the simple fact that the choice of any alternative *involves the exclusion of all other alternatives*.² This has always been true, and that is why any thinking man has always hesitated before a serious choice, before marrying, for instance. In choosing this woman, I am excluding all the rest; in committing myself to one girl, I renounce all the ever so many million other girls. There is an evident risk in this; and so there should be. Freedom has always been a risk for man. But in the past most men have, sooner or later, preferred to accept the risk. In the case given, they have preferred to put the question – with the idea, moreover, that it meant a life-long commitment! As it used to be put popularly, they preferred to ‘take the plunge’ rather than risk remaining ‘high and dry’.

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This is changing today. That a man is no longer prepared to buy a washing machine or a car without a twelve-month warranty may be no more than a sign of reasonable caution. But that more and more men are not prepared to enter into marriage without a proviso –perhaps a very implicit or even unconscious, but a real proviso– for the possibility of divorce, is a sign of a deep-rooted mistrust and a fear of commitment, which is ultimately a fear of love.

It is true that the advertiser-dominated world we live in does not encourage trust. We are told so much about the incredible qualities and extraordinary good value of practically everything that we end up believing in the real value of practically nothing.

² Mgr Escrivá puts the point with typical clarity, and adds a thought that those who are afraid of a Christian commitment would do well to ponder: ‘The choice of one thing; means that many other things which are also worthwhile, are excluded. This, however, does not imply a lack of freedom; it is simply a necessary consequence of our limited nature, which cannot embrace everything. Nevertheless, if, in each moment, one chooses God –who is the ultimate end also of the natural order– *in him one somehow possesses everything*’ (Italics mine).

But if we can perhaps blame the advertisers for our mistrust of the quality of so many man-made goods, we have only ourselves to blame if we mistrust such God-given goods as social relationships, friendship, love or marriage. We have abused so many of the good things God has given us that they no longer work in our service. We no longer trust them because we have deformed them and made them what they were never meant to be.

Commitment and love

It is clear that if a man is not free (does not possess himself), he cannot love (which is to give oneself). But it should also be clear that if he does not love, he cannot ever truly be free. Freedom is really meant for love, and freedom, without love, makes little sense and is practically worthless.

«We are told so much about the incredible qualities and extraordinary good value of *practically everything* that we end up believing in the real value of *practically nothing*».

To choose things that one cannot love, or that one cannot at least respect, is to choose a life without values; it is to degrade one's human nature. Pushed to the limit, it is hell, for hell is a state where one only chooses what one hates. The will that can only choose what it hates is not a *free* will; it is absolutely enslaved. So, every choice that is made without love is, at best, a poor exercise of freedom – so poor an exercise that, at the worst, it can be a step towards a total loss of freedom.

One has to love –and to love something worth loving– so as to be really free. Then one will freely commit oneself, and all of one's commitments will be commitments of love, for the essential need of love is *to commit itself to the loved one*.

There is a necessary interconnection between freedom, commitment (choice) and love. As Mgr. Josemaría Escrivá puts it: 'Any opposition felt between freedom and commitment is a sure sign that love is weak for *freedom resides in love*. For that very reason I cannot conceive freedom without commitment, or commitment without freedom; one reality underlines and affirms the other.'³

Doing what you like...

Earlier on we rejected the idea that freedom is 'the power to do what one likes'. As we pointed out, this is an idea that won't stand examination. If it has nevertheless always enjoyed popularity as a notion of freedom, this must be put down either to superficial thinking, or else to a desire to propagate a libertine idea of freedom, to bestow the noble name of liberty on what is simply uncontrolled impulse. And it is clear, from what we said earlier, that when a man is not in control of his impulses –when he is controlled by them– he is not free, and the end of such runaway selfishness can only be the submergence of self in total slavery.

³ Italics mine. Cf. Chesterton's remark in *Orthodoxy*: 'I could never conceive or tolerate any Utopia which did not leave to me the liberty for which I chiefly care, the liberty to bind myself.'

It is interesting to recall St Augustine's dictum: 'Love and do what you like' (*Ama et fac quod vis*), which in other times, when libertines were more cultured, if not more sincere, was a popular classical quotation among them. 'Love and do what you like'... Yet it wasn't in his libertine period, but after it - after he had fully experienced how freedom without real love can enslave - that St Augustine formulated this striking phrase. A little reflection makes his meaning clear. The love –the liberating love– he refers to is the love of God. The person who tries to make love for God the motive of all his actions, wants what God wants, he *likes* what God wants. Therefore, since it is always possible to do what God wants, he can always do what he likes, and will be the freest of men. Freedom, for him, is indeed the power to do what he likes; and, as long as he keeps on loving, he will always be doing what he likes.

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We might add, incidentally, that the person who tries to live this way has solved one of the major problems of morality: that of *liking what one ought to do*. He will do what he ought, what God wants of him (or at least he will try to do it), because he wants to do it, because he likes to do it.

Roads to freedom

Freedom, as we said earlier, is the power to be fully oneself. There is the goal: to become what one has the potentiality to be. That is why many roads freely chosen are not roads to freedom. They are roads that prevent man from becoming fully a man. They are roads of self-limitation, self-frustration, or self-destruction. A man is limiting himself or destroying himself if he chooses the road of pride or lust or self-pity or insincerity or meanness.

The road to freedom is an uphill road, and the difficult steps by which a man follows it are truth, justice, service, humility, chastity, love... The more a man fights his way uphill along this road, the freer he becomes. And the freer he becomes, the more he possesses himself, the more he exercises full possession and control over all his faculties. His is the freedom of having one's lower faculties or instincts properly and dynamically subordinated to one's higher faculties –lust to love, anger to justice, for instance– and of having one's higher faculties joyously related to higher values: love to goodness, knowledge to truth. It is along this uphill road that a man must struggle if he wants to find freedom.

And yet two facts seem to make his quest vain. The first is the fact of death. No matter how free a man may become, no matter how much he possesses himself in the realisation of his possibilities, if death ends all, he loses all in death.

The second fact is that full self-realisation seems a necessarily impossible goal for man, that he is destined to the frustration of never being able fully to realise himself or fully to satisfy all his wants; destined therefore never to be fully free. After all, if, as we indicated earlier on, freedom particularly implies freedom from want, it seems clear that man is destined never to be fully free in this world, for no matter how much he possesses he will always want *more*. And the man who is conscious of some unsatisfied desire does not feel fully free.

Man's desire for pleasure or for goods can perhaps be fully sated. Yet the fact that man can actually come to a point of feeling disgust at pleasure or boredom with

consumer goods, is a sure sign that his self-fulfilment does not lie along the path of these desires. However, there are two needs of man –precisely his greatest and noblest needs– that can never, in human experience, be fully satisfied.

These are man's need for truth and his need for goodness, his need to know and his need to love. These are man's greatest needs. They are needs that may be dulled or deadened. But it has remained a constant of human history that, if they are kept keen and alive, nothing, on earth, can fully satisfy them.

Man wants God

Man wants to know all truth; he wants to know truth without limit. And he wants to find and possess goodness, and still more goodness, and still more. He wants eternal and infinite goodness, and eternal and infinite love. In other words, *he wants God*. This is why, even on the natural plane, it is clear that *man is made for God, and nothing less than God can satisfy him*. Only in the possession and enjoyment of God can man be truly himself and truly free.

Those who do not believe in God can seek perfect freedom, but they will not find it. If they feel themselves called to be Messiahs, they can promise full freedom to others, but they cannot give it. God is the only Messiah who can do that.

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Salvation and self

One finds one's self, or one loses one's self, in finding –or losing– God. And the finding or the losing of one's self is what, on the natural level, is implied in the terms salvation or perdition. Salvation, on the natural plane, means to save one's *self*, to achieve real *selfhood*, to possess one's self fully, in full and free exercise of all one's powers and faculties.

And perdition or damnation is to *lose* one's real self, to end up as a being without any unity or consistency or direction, a personality (if it can still be called that) that is no more than a battlefield between conflicting forces and desires, a being that has been reduced to torn and scattered remnants of bitterness and frustration and hatred and pride.

The difference between salvation and perdition is really the ultimate difference between freedom and slavery. The process of becoming free (of gradually conquering one's freedom), or the process of losing one's freedom (of gradually degenerating into a slave), is a process that is worked out here on earth, during the lifetime of each individual. But the final result of this process, the *state* of final freedom or of final slavery, is lived forever in eternity.

We can never therefore possess full freedom here on earth. All we can achieve here are 'freedoms', possibilities and capacities to act freely and move and realise ourselves: the freedom to fight one's way forward, to battle and over-come self-centredness, to learn to love. We have to fight constantly to exercise these freedoms, we have to fight even to maintain them, since they are freedoms that are in constant danger and can be lost.

For we can also fall into slavery here on earth; into one or many slaveries: the slavery of a proud self-centredness, the slavery of a resentful or envious spirit, the slavery of lust, or of drink, or of drugs. And yet, while we are still travellers on this earth, these slaveries are not yet final, and can be shaken off or at least fought and prevented from getting more than a slippery and troublesome –but ineffectual– hold on us.

It is only when our journey has reached its end, when death has cut short for ever the struggle (or the lack of struggle) and terminated the process of development (or of degeneration), it is then that man ‘sets’ in his definitive and eternal self, in the glorious and joyous expansion of his freed self, or in the enslaved remnants of his lost self.

The gift of God’s freedom

Two further things must be mentioned. Man cannot save himself on his own. Only with God’s help can he find salvation. If he neglects or refuses God’s help, he will lose himself. Man has always hoped for perfect freedom –to be fully master of his own nature, in full possession of all his faculties, and to be able to exercise all of them without restraint. But only God can give man this freedom.

The Christian, however, does not stop there, in this question of freedom. For God, who loves man, has not stopped there. God’s plan, in Christ, is to give man infinitely more than he could have ever hoped for. It is to give him not only the full possession and enjoyment of his own human nature, with all the freedom this implies. It is to give him the possession and enjoyment of the *divine nature*. It is *to put him in possession of God’s own freedom*.

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So God’s plan is that man, in the end, should not just find and possess himself. It is that he should find much more than himself, that he should possess infinitely more than himself. Only the Christian realises what the fulfilment of man’s potentialities can mean in the plan which God has revealed in Jesus Christ. For God has made man *capable* of God. He has made man capable of knowing and loving God –infinite Truth and Goodness– not only in a natural fashion, as a rational creature, in his natural fulfilment, might come to know and love God, *but in a supernatural fashion*. He has made man capable of knowing and loving God as God knows and loves himself; capable, that is, of living divine life and divine freedom.

This freedom is of course a free gift –a grace– of God. Grace, for the Christian, means just this: the gift which God bestows on man to enable him to live divine life and become an heir to divine freedom.

Freedom then, for the Christian, is something quite unique. It is the freedom which Christ himself has won for us (cf. *Gal 4:30*). The Christian vision of freedom is of a totally different order to any mere human dream of freedom. What the Christian looks forward to is, in St Paul’s ecstatic words, the *glorious freedom of the sons of God* (cf. *Rom 8: 21*). And that freedom, as God’s very own, is both eternal and infinite.