

ASPECTS OF THE CONCEPT OF FREEDOM

To this observer, one of the major themes running through the various readings addressed during the term is that of “Freedom”. Immanuel Kant spoke of it in terms of Enlightenment - man's emergence from self-imposed immaturity; which he defined as the inability to use one's understanding without guidance from another.¹ Hans Jonas spoke of the need for limitations on our freedom because of the possible impact of modern science on the global condition of human life and the far-off future, even the existence of the human race.² Jonsen and Toulmin presented a particularized application of it in the context of their discussion of casuistry. The case of John, a married man who wanted to become a woman is, at least in part, about the freedom to make personal choices affecting one's own life.³ Karl Rahner spoke of Freedom in terms of choice. The first basic choice being surrender to the transcendent order of truth and value whose ground is God; the second, the fundamental choice to reject self-love. The work of Habermas, Thompson and Weil all developed aspects of it.

The purpose of this paper is to examine “freedom” from the standpoint of “ethics”; in relation to the span of materials presented during the term. Other materials will be referred to where they can add clarity and understanding to the discussion.

¹ Immanuel Kant, “An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?” in Perpetual Peace and Other Essays, p. 41 in Ethics and Society Course Reader, (Toronto: Trinity College, 2004).

² Hans Jonas, “Technology and Responsibility: Reflections on the New Tasks of Ethics,” in Philosophical Essays, p.10 in Ethics and Society Course Reader, (Toronto: Trinity College, 2004).

³ Albert R. Jonsen & Stephen Toulmin, “The Abuse of Casuistry: A History of Moral Reasoning”, p. 318 in Ethics and Society Course Reader, (Toronto: Trinity College, 2004).

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The dictionary definition of “freedom” is variously:

1. The condition of being free of restraints.
2. Liberty of the person from slavery, detention, or oppression.
3. a. Political independence. b. Possession of civil rights; immunity from the arbitrary exercise of authority.
4. Exemption from an unpleasant or onerous condition: freedom from want.
5. The capacity to exercise choice; free will: The freedom to do as we please.
6. Frankness or boldness; lack of modesty or reserve
7. a. The right to unrestricted use; full access: was given the freedom of their research facilities. b. The right of enjoying all of the privileges of membership or citizenship⁴

The same dictionary defines “ethics” as:

1. a. A set of principles of right conduct. b. A theory or a system of moral values:
2. The study of the general nature of morals and of the specific moral choices to be made by a person; moral philosophy.⁵

On the surface of it there would appear to be little that the two terms have in common. Indeed, it would appear that they are more than somewhat opposed to each other. Ethics is about principles, right conduct and moral values.

⁴ The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language, Third Edition copyright © 1992 by Houghton Mifflin Company. Electronic version licensed from INSO Corporation. All rights reserved.

⁵ Ibid.

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Freedom is about no restraints, immunity from authority and free will. At least, that is what a superficial reading would discover. In our age of unbridled individualism it appears that reading is “au courant”. Indeed, It seems that we are bombarded with increasingly aggressive demands for more and more individual freedom. The general good, it would appear, has been subordinated to the individual’s needs and desires. As Habermas laments, philosophy no longer pretends to have the answers to the personal or collective conduct of life; and ethics has become the melancholy science because it allows only scattered aphoristic reflections from damaged life.⁶ How did we get there from the glorious vision of Kant’s Age of Enlightenment?

As D.D. Raphael has said, “Everybody supports freedom – even authoritarians ...”⁷. He goes on to note, however, that everyone does not agree what freedom means. Plato, Rousseau and Hegel all talk of freedom but oppose what he calls “Liberty Hall” - doing as you please. They thought such freedom was dangerous. Plato believed it would soon lead to despotism, to no freedom at all. To him, complete freedom for all would mean the absence of order, the absence of law, anarchy, chaos.⁸

The thinker that painted the most vivid picture of “Liberty Hall” and its dangers was Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679). His state of nature in which men are free and equal was a veritable hell in the absence of an organized society. He

⁶ Juergen Habermas, “Are There Postmetaphysical Answers to the Question: What is the Good Life?” in The Future of Human Nature, p. 1 in Ethics and Society Course Reader, (Toronto: Trinity College, 2004).

⁷ D.D. Raphael, “Liberty and Authority” in Of Liberty, ed. A. Phillips Griffiths, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 1.

⁸ *ibid.*

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took it for granted that man is inherently selfish; and that life without a system of law, politics and government would be resultingly poor, nasty, brutish and short. His view was that complete freedom for all means little effective freedom for anyone; in other words, it needs to be restrained to be effective.⁹ The question is how does one maximize freedom for all while minimizing state control; that is to say, achieve the classical Liberal philosophy?

For Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), rules and formulas were the shackles of a permanent immaturity. The answer to breaking free of these shackles and attaining enlightenment was simply exercising the least harmful freedom of all - the freedom to use reason publicly in all matters.¹⁰ It alone could bring about enlightenment among mankind. It must be stressed that Kant was talking about the “public” use of reason; the use anyone makes of it as a scholar before the literate world. He differentiated the “private” use of reason that one makes in a post, office or employment as something that could be acceptably restricted in the interest of the community. Indeed, he suggests that in such a context a mechanism is required whereby some members must conduct selves in a passive manner so that government objectives are met. He cites as an example that it would be disastrous for an officer on duty, given a command by a superior, to question the appropriateness of the order.¹¹

⁹ Raphael, 4.

¹⁰ Kant, 42

¹¹ ibid

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In an important aspect Kant would appear to be in agreement with Hobbes. The paradox, he notes, is that a lesser degree of civil freedom provides room for all to expand their capabilities.¹² Some degree of restraint is in order.

John Stewart Mill (1806-1873) did not think of free speech and individuality as rights and things that were intrinsically and invariably good. He believed that liberty had to be judged according to the principle of utility, in the largest sense, grounded in the permanent interests of man as a progressive being. However, he acknowledged that it is essential to the full and harmonious development of society and human nature.¹³ Mills concern was the nature and limits of power that can legitimately be exercised by the state over the individual.¹⁴ He was also concerned about the tyranny of the majority, and noted that it was one of the evils society must guard against.¹⁵ However, he was also aware that some rules of conduct must be imposed by law and opinion if society is to function; noting that a man could cause evil to others not only by an action, but by an omission.¹⁶

In Mill's view, society would be within its rights to compel someone to take action for the benefit of others; such as testifying in court, taking one's part in the common defence, and interposing to protect the defenceless against ill usage – doing one's civic duty.¹⁷ He also believed that the existing generation owed a duty to the generation to come by training them such that they

¹² *ibid*, 45.

¹³ John Stuart Mill, On Liberty, ed. Edward Alexander, (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 1999), 32-33.

¹⁴ *ibid*, 43.

¹⁵ *ibid*, 46.

¹⁶ *ibid*, 53.

¹⁷ *ibid*.

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did not grow up mere children, incapable of being acted on by rational consideration of distant motives.¹⁸

Although Kant is regarded as a proponent of a positive concept of liberty, and Hobbes and Mill proponents of a negative one they share basic concerns about the unrestricted use of freedom; which they all saw as detrimental to the greatest good of the greatest number.

With Simone Weil (1909-43) we begin to see a movement from the general to the particular, from the society to the individual. Her concerns are freedom from injustice, from the childish cry in the heart that Christ himself could not restrain “Why am I being Hurt?”.¹⁹ She was also concerned with having enough freedom to plan the use of one’s time; and the opportunity to reach higher levels of attention, some solitude, some silence, free from physical needs and concerns.²⁰

In the several cases illustrated in Jonsen and Toulmin’s The Abuse of Casuistry, and Judith Thompson’s A Defense of Abortion the freedom addressed is couched in terms of rights – the right of the individual to make choices and decisions that affect his or her own body and life; without reference to an external or third party as any part of the decision-making process. The right of the individual to choice are, in both, paramount.

Jonas and Habermas are both writing in the last quarter of the twentieth century, and have had the opportunity to see a paradigm shift in the nature of

¹⁸ *ibid*, 130.

¹⁹ Simone Weil, “Human Personality” in The Simone Weil Reader, ed. George A. Panichas, p.315 in in Ethics and Society Course Reader, (Toronto: Trinity College, 2004).

²⁰ *ibid*, 321.

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Western society from a 'Christendom' model to one of modernity, perhaps post-modernity, informed by an increasing level of pluralism. The rules and boundaries that govern how individuals and groups interact with each other have substantially broken down in the face of a multiplicity of different origins, life experiences and faith backgrounds. There is no longer much commonality, certainly there is little in the way of shared values, on which to build a new ethical and moral structure that will have widespread support. Our society today perhaps embraces diversity to a fault, and is reluctant to address societal concerns for fear of giving offense. In such a social climate the pursuit of individual rights "rules".

Jonas makes the point that all previous systems of ethics had three interconnected tacit traits in common: that the human condition, determined by the nature of man and the nature of things given once and for all; that human good on that basis was readily determinable; and that the range of human action, and therefore responsibility, was narrowly circumscribed. He goes on to note that these premises no longer hold.²¹ The reason is that Modern technology has introduced actions of such novel scale, objects and consequences that the framework of former ethics can no longer contain them. Nature is critically vulnerable to man's technological intervention. This alters the very concept of ourselves as a causal agency in the larger scheme of things. Now the whole biosphere of the planet has been added to what we must be responsible for because of our power over it.²² No previous ethics had to consider the global

²¹ Jonas, 3.

²² *ibid*, 9

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condition of human life and the far-off future, even the existence of the human race. No previous ethics has prepared us for such a role of stewardship.²³

Indeed, Jonas notes that our new imperative might go like this: 'Act so that the effects of your action are compatible with the permanence of genuine human life.'²⁴ It addresses itself to public policy rather than private conduct.

Jonas is also concerned about quasi-utopian powers that are about to be made available by the advances of biomedical science; issues like: behaviour control and mental control by chemical means or direct electrical action on the brain; noting that the mixture of beneficial and dangerous potentials is obvious.²⁵ This holds even more with respect to the last object of a technology applied on man himself - the genetic control of future men. Perhaps of greater concern, the future is not represented. The non-existent has no lobby and the unborn are powerless.²⁶ Science has, he believes, by a necessary complementarity eroded the foundations from which norms could be derived; and now we shiver in the nakedness of nihilism in which a near omnipotence is paired with a near emptiness of ethical and moral capacity for dealing with such enormous responsibilities.²⁷

Like Jonas, Habermas is also concerned about the limitations of freedom without controls, in particular the abuse of technology, in his case focusing on issues of bioethics. He notes that one aspect of the problem is the challenge posed by the modern understanding of freedom. He comments that

²³ Jonas, 10.

²⁴ Jonas, 13.

²⁵ Ibid, 16.

²⁶ Ibid, 19.

²⁷ Ibid.

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what is placed at our disposal today is the previous uncontrollability of the contingent process of human fertilization resulting from unforeseeable combination of two different sets of chromosomes. The problem is that as soon as adults treat desirable genetic traits as a product they can shape to own liking, they are exercising control over genetically manipulated offspring that intervenes in somatic bases of another person's spontaneous relation to self and ethical freedom. Such powers, he states, should only be exercised over things not persons. Of issue is that later generations could hold the producers responsible for what they, the offspring, consider unwanted consequences of genetic manipulation.²⁸ The problem is that when one person makes an irreversible decision that deeply intervenes in another's organic disposition the fundamental symmetry of responsibility existing among free and equal persons is restricted, even denied.

Habermas is also concerned that globalization of markets has led to a transnational economic regime markedly diminishing the industrialized nations capacity for action. Modernization has generated a secularized society which demands restructuring of the forms of religious faith and Church praxis. Moreover, religious doctrine has to now accommodate to unavoidable competition with other faiths and other claims to truth. Every religious doctrine today encounters pluralism of different forms of religious truth as well as skepticism of secular, scientific modes of knowing. Such diversity makes it

²⁸ Juergen Habermas, "Are There Postmetaphysical Answers to the Question: What is the 'Good Life'?" in *The Future of Human Nature*, p. 13, in *Ethics and Society Course Reader*, (Toronto: Trinity College, 2004).

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difficult to come to a common mind at a time when new technologies make public discourse on right understanding of cultural forms of life in general an urgent matter.²⁹

In summary, it would appear that the wheel has, in a sense, come full circle. Hobbes, Kant and Mills – despite their differences – were concerned with making freedom available as widely as possible; recognizing that to do so meant placing some restrictions so that the greatest number could have the greatest amount of freedom. Their concern was societal abuse – by governments and majorities. Jonas and Habermas are concerned with making freedom and choice available for future generations. Their concern is about the abuse of unrestricted choice without consideration for the society and community. In both instances, the age of Enlightenment and today, there is recognition that unrestricted freedom is not necessarily a positive good. The major difference between the two circumstances is that today we do not have the advantage of homogeneity in our society and culture. As a result, consensus will be much more difficult to achieve, if in fact it can be achieved at all.

²⁹ Juergen Habermas, “A Conversation About God and the World” p. 151 in Ethics and Society Course Reader, (Toronto: Trinity College, 2004).

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