

ON THE CONCEPT OF FREEDOM

Discussion of the concept of freedom in the history of philosophy differs radically from the actual historical struggles in which freedom was the goal. At least at first sight.

The theories of the philosophers appear to apply primarily to freedom of the will, to freedom in the metaphysical sense. According to St. Augustine, the church father whose concept of will is essentially the basis of Lutheran teaching, man, whose nature has been corrupted by the Fall, is by himself incapable of doing true good. All hangs upon divine grace. Man is powerless even to accomplish so-called good works. And inasmuch as grace is granted only to very few, faith alone can save one from despair. Faith is not based on logic or even reason; Luther often said that the beast reason should be dislodged. The strength to act must come through faith. In everyday life men are capable of acting according to their resolves; their capability is expressed fully in their profession, in their private and economic existence, but it cannot gain them salvation. In practical life men are to some extent free, for here the state and economic order govern. One may serve the state and try to improve it. But this has nothing

Translated by Victor A. Velen.

On the Concept of Freedom

to do with eternal salvation. Temporal power may require obedience on earth, but it provides no passport to heaven.

The teachings of St. Thomas of Aquinas, which in Luther's time were propounded by the Dominican Báñez and the Jesuit Molina, go back to Aristotle. According to Aquinas, men are not unfree to do good; however, the will power, weakened by original sin, requires divine help. The *inclinatio naturae*, the natural tendency, is not necessarily evil. Will is not by itself unfree, or incapable of good; it is assisted, but not radically altered, through grace. Earthly life and salvation, nature and the world beyond, the struggle for life and religion, are according to Thomist concepts in necessary relationship with each other, although the nature of their relationship cannot be exactly determined, since human judgment is subject to error. Individual actions, each person's way of life, as well as that of society, are owed to freedom, and are therefore sensitive to the fate of the soul. The verdict of eternity encompasses temporal events; hence worldly events do not concern only worldly things.

German idealistic philosophy may be viewed as an attempt to unify both concepts: Thomistic thought, which attributes so much freedom to man that historical events indeed lead to the divine, with the austere reformist idea, according to which belief in the transcendental consequences of immanent actions almost seems like belief in magic. Like Luther, Immanuel Kant denied the influence of empirical action on the transcendent, on the world beyond, and attributed the connection to lie exclusively in an attitude of mind. However, his work is permeated with the hope that in the continuing sequence of empirical events, the idea would implant itself so strongly that at some future time it would take on the aspect of justice. What is unimaginable to understanding may appear possible to reason. The concept of the earth as a vale of tears, which it will remain, becomes nullified by the idea that good-will and freedom will eventually banish evil. Gradually, within the infinite fabric of cause and effect, moral sentiment may find a new way. Despite experience, we should be confident in our understanding that this is so. Kant's followers have transformed his principle of hope that freedom will really become empirical into a principle out of which the whole may be understood. History is considered the self-fulfill-

ment of the absolute. The self-determination of causes or concepts must be expressed in the necessity to which men are subject and in which they take part as a momentum. The difference with those theological ideas, to which Kantian thought is still tied through the concept of hope, lies primarily in that temporal events, world history itself, are viewed as a process of the absolute. No world beyond, no other world opposes the real order; since both join in the absolute, the absolute ceases to oppose the temporal. The death of an individual becomes a moment of eternity, which, in him, through him, is conserved.

In the actual struggles for freedom the primary concern has been a better life, or life in general. Freedom means that man's torture or murder will no longer go unpunished, as in antiquity, that he will not be chained to other slaves in mines and worked to death, or, as at the beginning of the new era, evicted from the miserable hut in which he slept, forced to beg, and then hanged for begging. Exemption of the powerless from a miserable death existed only for short periods in certain countries, for example in the much-derided Europe of the nineteenth century, a time in which the worst crimes were committed abroad. At that time, when things were going better, freedom meant the abolition of child labor, a wage that made it possible to choose among foodstuffs, aid for the sick and aged. The immediate aims of wars, which originally had served for the procurement of manpower, either by the enslavement of the native populations of conquered lands or by the abduction of people needed in the conquering country, altered, although enslavement or the defense against it, increase in wealth, power and security were still factors as before. The aim was freedom of action, not of the will. To be able to do as one wished, to have the widest choice, to be bound by as few restrictions as possible, this was the freedom that the struggle of individuals, social classes, as well as nations, was to ensure. By comparison, the other concept, the concern of philosophy and theology—freedom in the metaphysical sense—could not be realized through real action. The aim of the actual struggles was to broaden or to defend limits, geographical, budgetary or legislative. One who passes by the endless rows of shop windows in the age of the economic miracle and is really able to choose among all the products, is freer than one who has little

On the Concept of Freedom

money in his pocket, and who may still have to bring the better part of it home. One who can himself determine the time when he shops is freer than one who must procure himself the most necessary goods at a time when the stores are closing, at the height of the rush hour. One who is healthy is freer than one who is sick; one who has at his disposal people and things, even if to a modest extent, is freer than a lonely, retired old man living on a small pension. The latter cannot be magnanimous, but only the object of magnanimity. Prisoners need not be mentioned here, but they should not be forgotten. Recently, a noted lawyer said that he tried to save clients who were entrusted to him, regardless of whether they were guilty, since the punishment is still not in reasonable relationship to its aim, which is improvement. Wherever, in reality, we are concerned with freedom, it is that of action, of movement, or of multiple choice.

Freedom of speech is among these. It has rightly also been called freedom of thought, since thought that cannot be expressed, cannot be measured in contact with others, and cannot develop in exchange with them is as unfree as speech itself and therefore becomes atrophied. A double aspect of freedom of thought, which concerns freedom of action in general, is evident at the present time. First of all, the decrease in restraints and the increase of freedom are not one and the same. I will try to exemplify this with a contemporary illustration. Students who in the past years have fled from the East have reported on their happiness at being able to exchange thoughts with people having the same convictions on the other side of the curtain. A regime of terror tends in extreme situations to produce friendships and fidelity among those who find no place in it. To be able to have a full exchange of views with people thinking the same way becomes an immeasurable boon. When the pressure is reduced, this changes. In the highly developed countries, precisely where the greatest freedom prevails, along with an unbridled striving for success, loneliness lies beneath the surface of the glittering festivities and social occasions. Whatever people have to say to each other becomes more shallow, more noncommittal than in places where need forces a meaning upon human relationships. This indicates in general that positive freedom does not necessarily increase to the same extent that lack of freedom disappears. The quantity

of services and goods on the market determines the desire, adroitly stimulated, to rise as fast as possible and to take along as much as possible. As misery and lack of freedom disappear, so does the luster of freedom as a distant goal.

The history of freedom of thought teaches us that not only the objective possibilities that are gained through the elimination of restraints, but also subjective freedom, the inner disposition of the person who makes use of these possibilities, determine the degree of freedom. For the many thousands who die of hunger in East Asia, and for the many millions whose hunger is never appeased, freedom of thought makes little sense, and on the opposite side of the globe, the contrary is frequently the case. The young people who fled from the East, and who now feel lonely in the West, would probably have more easily found a new meaning to life, if with all the objective possibilities they had encountered more spiritual longing, fantasy and understanding. The more the urgent material needs are satisfied, the more independent awareness, spiritual spontaneity, is required in order to make use of the material freedom that has been attained. True, to be guided by the powerful propaganda and mass media on how best to climb the social ladder requires a certain adroitness, efficiency, perseverance, sometimes ideas, even responsibility for one's own family, and a number of other things. But this is not enough. In view of the tremendously stimulating action of the social apparatus, the above virtues represent no more than a kind of adjustment, to some extent passive. Spontaneity, the will to make the right thing out of the material situation, is still not realized. On the contrary, it is dulled.

In the political arena, where the fate of freedom will not be decided last, the inner contradiction between material and spiritual freedom is dominant. The era of full employment and boom, in which we can participate independently in the organization of our social life more than at any other period, proves at the same time to be a period of political lethargy. The elimination of economic pressures, which had directly fanned political interest, could be extended to the improvement and the spiritual penetration of the institutions, through the use of every sort of means—human resources, the money and goods that flow into the community—for the common good. For some indivi-

On the Concept of Freedom

duals, certainly not a few here in Germany, the new, greater freedom based on material freedom has brought on the greater need to do justice to it. The rule however is the contrary. It is not that people do not listen to the news and take cognizance of which African minister had a conversation with which Asian statesman. Nor is it that businessmen do not keep themselves *au courant* in order to neglect nothing in their enterprises. But concern with the condition of the community, its possibilities, its duties to the outside world and to itself, its role and its future fate is encumbered by a negative attitude. Actual politics arouses uneasiness. Many arguments are raised in this regard: for example, that there is nothing that can be done in any case; that the machinery is too complicated; that it is a matter for the political parties and the experts; and finally that it can only become worse, there will be a recession, the speed of inflation will increase, and threats from abroad will become acute. It is best not to speak about it, but only repeat what one has heard, or to speak of one thing and at the same time think of something else. The reasons given are both justified and fictitious: justified, because they contain an element of truth; fictitious, because the real reason arises from an impotence to overcome the force of circumstances, to understand the situation, to make an effort to arrive at an independent judgment, and within the realm of the possibilities, to exert one's influence, be it ever so modest, to achieve a better future and to avoid a disaster.

Without the vital participation, the spontaneous, serious and active interest of the citizens who should give it its impetus, the political organization must, even with the best intentions of the politicians, remain an abstract, isolated element of society. The efforts of serious commentators, the speeches of politicians, elections are not enough to restore the reciprocal action between the parliament and government on the one hand and the citizens on the other, through which political freedom and democracy acquire real meaning. The uneasiness with regard to politics, which impedes the sense of responsibility to make serious use of political freedom, is, among all the arguments put forward, the most serious.

The fact that subjective, inner freedom has not progressed parallel with material freedom in important periods of history,

that it has in fact tended to recede, cannot be stressed enough at the present time. The resistance of people to take serious trouble to gain political understanding and a knowledge of social matters and to promote a general effort in this direction, first of all in the schools, amounts to the vulnerability of democracy. The one who does not himself try to achieve a better understanding is susceptible to the worst; in fact he develops a proclivity to agree with whatever suits him at the moment. This proclivity becomes all the stronger as the trend toward broadening material freedom, the economic boom, slows down, as everyday life becomes more difficult, and the external menace more threatening. If the point is reached when the indices of danger, which ought to compel people to make a greater independent effort, increase, then many will tend, out of a feeling of individual weakness and powerlessness, to listen to demagogues, to run to those who promise most, not only because they will feel more secure but also more superior as one of their following. But like a businessman who must keep a cool head when times are bad, so must the national community. In the French eighteenth century power and liberty lay in the hands of the Bourbons. They were defeated for many reasons; lack of insight and responsibility was certainly one. In the western twentieth century, the responsibility of each individual citizen of the free nations is still more multifold. The threat to freedom from the outside is evident. Already in the first decade of the twentieth century, William II, who was not otherwise overly endowed with the gift of prophecy, spoke of the menace of the yellow race. Despite the maintenance of economic relations with the East, it should be taken very seriously today. It is perhaps more urgent than it appears, and it is indeed not the only threat. But however pressing the defense of outward freedom may be, the effort to strengthen inner freedom should not abate, if the former is not in the end to lose its historical justification. Whoever speaks of freedom today cannot disregard the fact that it is in its name that the self-determination of the progressive nations has been accomplished, if freedom is to serve as an example to others, or even just to be respected for its originality. People sent from the modern countries abroad to give technical assistance, or for any other reason, even if they have no educational aims, necessarily

On the Concept of Freedom

act upon the imagination of those with whom they come into contact. The more welcome the assistance is, the more those who receive it will be liable to accept the image that foreigners create in every land by the way they behave, their smallest actions and gestures, the way they speak, their patience, their friendliness, and their sensitivity. So long as people are not enclosed, they accept not merely what is transmitted to them such as objects, techniques and knowledge, but, without being conscious of it, also how it is done, the intonation, the inner and outward gesture that has its own sense and immanent logic. This frequently goes deeper than words. If it were determined exactly what the ambassadors of the West were to transmit, not only the diplomats, who usually have to deal with hardened, experienced professionals, but also all those who are in contact primarily with average people, I believe that we could wish nothing better than to convey the image of one who makes his own judgments, who respects the human being in others, and who despises oppression and injustice: the hallmark of freedom. To implant such an image in foreign lands, Western man must be qualified beyond the sincere regard for his country's industry and the double-edged admiration for its wealth. Only when wealth and industry are combined with the spiritual, is assistance transformed into a mission. The same is true with regard to the young people who come from less developed countries to Europe or to the United States as students. Whether they bring back home more than knowledge, facts and know-how is an index as to how the historical task that the Western host countries set themselves is being performed: the dissemination of freedom in the world.

The consideration of actual history leads us back to philosophy. If the spheres of the earthly world and the world beyond are so strictly separated, as in accordance with nominalistic philosophy, or Lutheran theology of the sixteenth century, they must remain, no reasonable ground could be discovered as to why a free democratic order should become general in the world. It is a transitory aim, perhaps a useful one, perhaps a harmful one, according to the circumstances. To speak in the strict sense of the salvation of the whole world is shallow. The individual soul is related to the divine, and who dares decide whether it will be saved or not. It should hold to the Word and trust in it. Its

mode of conduct is set down therein, and not only its mode of conduct but also its strength and courage.—If, however, freedom lies in man himself, in all men, as the pupils of Aristotle taught, then the course of history can have a meaning. The order that best corresponds to man's true predisposition must be established. Finally the problem here is not social organization itself, as perfect as it may be. What does freedom mean, every thinking person might ask, since we must forever die? The infallible zeal of man's lack of freedom is death; it is, like all duress, tied to man's Fall. Only inasmuch as history on earth is a prelude to history in heaven, does it have true deliverance as its aim, and can therefore be considered as meaningful.—The philosophy of German idealism, on the other hand, transposed deliverance into history itself, without considering the finite as absolute. The consolation that Kant claimed to have himself was not the expectation of his own salvation; it lay in his awareness of having contributed, though in an infinitesimal measure, to the order which would at some future time give as much freedom to each individual, and not only to those in his own country, as would be compatible with the freedom of all the others. I can see for the future history of Europe no more valid justification than the Kantian for the implementation of the great philosophies. The concept of nations makes sense exclusively in relation to the concept of individual freedom. If the younger generation were to be taught successfully to seek as its aim the fulfillment of Kant's principle, the new relationships between the West and the formerly oppressed continents would acquire a productive purport. The concrete consequences are obvious. To anticipate them individually is a concern for philosophy, for political and not least for economic science.