

CHAPTER 35

Freedom and Responsibility

Ask any person if he wants to be free and he will say yes. But what is freedom? How free are we?

Nobody is completely free to do anything that he or she may wish. Freedom is always limited in different ways that are important to consider.

- ✗ I may decide that I would like to launch myself into the air, spread my arms and fly. I may have dreamed of doing so, but my physical body is, and always will be, incapable of unaided flight. To overcome that limitation, I must resort to technology.
- ✗ I may wish to be a famous and highly talented artist, musician or gymnast, but my freedom is again limited. It may not be physically impossible for me to achieve these things, but it requires a sustained investment of training in order to develop natural ability. Therefore, my chances of achieving what I want are limited to the quality of training that I can acquire.
- ✗ I may wish to take all the money in a bank, but I am likely to be arrested.

These are some examples of the way that freedom is limited, whether by physical laws, natural abilities, or legal and social constraints. What do we think of a person who protests against such situations, complaining that his freedom is limited?

Freedom of will

There is an important dimension to freedom that is often forgotten: freedom of will. Although our freedom may be constrained and our choices limited, in the moment when we choose, we experience freedom. We feel that we could have made a different choice. But how free are we, really?

If you decide to do something but then give up, are you free? If you find yourself doing something you really don't want to do, and know you will regret it later but cannot stop yourself, are you free? Do you have the freedom to follow your conscience? Do you ever give in to temptation and do what you know is wrong? Do you



have the freedom to forgive someone, or do you sometimes say, “I cannot forgive that person”? Do you have the freedom to apologize?

Often we sense that there are powerful forces within ourselves pushing us in different directions. Sometimes people say that they are not free, that their behavior is determined by their biological and social makeup. Yet in the moment of making a decision, we mostly feel confident that these choices are ours to make. This confidence is in our sense of being a free agent.

True freedom is closely linked to self-control. Only a self-disciplined person can decide to do something and accomplish it. A person who cannot control his emotions is blown all over the place by impulses, spurious thoughts and desires. For example, is an alcoholic free? In one sense, yes, because no one is forcing him to drink, but in another sense he is a slave to his insatiable desire for alcohol. How about a person who wants to give up smoking but cannot? If we cannot redirect our desires, our will is not free.

A person who is internally free is naturally creative. He is always growing, creating and developing in every dimension. Freedom of the spirit can never be taken away. Such a free spirit is continually, spontaneously and unconsciously good, giving to others in a creative and life-affirming way.

Viktor Frankl, a survivor of a Nazi concentration camp, wrote in his book *Man's Search for Meaning* in contemplation of the ultimate human freedom:

We who lived in concentration camps can remember the men who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number, but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken away from a man but one thing: the last of human freedoms — to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way.

And there were always choices to make. Every day, every hour, offered the opportunity to make a decision, a decision which determined whether you would or would not submit to those powers which threatened to rob you of your very self, your inner freedom — which determined whether or not you would become the plaything of circumstances, renouncing freedom and dignity to become molded into the form of the typical inmate.

True freedom is the freedom to follow one's conscience and maintain one's personal integrity. However, it is often quite a struggle, and it takes a lot of courage to follow one's conscience and be good. True freedom is not license — the freedom to do evil and be selfish. One cannot defend being rude and selfish as an expression of true freedom.

Freedom of action

Besides freedom of will, freedom also includes freedom of action. As social and political freedoms developed, the opportunity for free action was expanded. Often this was due to the efforts of people who wanted the freedom to worship God in their unique way; the freedom to hold beliefs different from those of a powerful majority; the freedom to discover truth; and the freedom of speech and the press so as to discover and disseminate truth. Good people never campaigned for the freedom to lie or mistreat others.

People also wanted the freedom that comes from the rule of law — that is to say,

From the forces that all creatures bind,
who overcomes himself his freedom finds.
— Johann Wolfgang von Goethe
German writer

Freedom! A fine word when rightly
understood. What freedom would
you have? What is the freedom of the
most free? To act rightly!

— Goethe



There is no spirit without freedom and there is no freedom without spirit. Freedom cannot be received from outside. Free science, free art, free society can be achieved only by free spirit. Souls that are enslaved cannot create anything free.

— Nikolai Berdyaev

they wanted to be able to live, act, and work as they chose, and pursue their dreams within the protective boundaries of the law. Creative people such as artists, writers and poets wanted to be free from the arbitrary coercion of others. Finally, people campaigned for the freedom to own property.

Freedom of will and freedom of action should go hand in hand. However, when there is freedom but people do not follow their conscience, the result is crime, social collapse and anarchy. If we have freedom but no purpose in life, we may experience psychological disintegration. A free society in which people have few morals soon collapses, and even that freedom is lost as order is reimposed on society. Thus there cannot be a genuinely free society that is not at the same time a moral society, a society made up of mature, responsible people and institutions. Edmund Burke, an 18th century British philosopher, showed clearly the link between internal and external freedom.

Men are qualified for civil liberty in exact proportion to their disposition to put moral chains upon their own appetites; in proportion as their love of justice is above their rapacity; in proportion as their soundness and sobriety of understanding is above their vanity and presumption; in proportion as they are more disposed to listen to the counsels of the wise and good, in preference to the flattery of knaves. Society cannot exist unless a controlling power upon will and appetite be placed somewhere, and the less of it there is within, the more there must be without. It is ordained in the eternal constitution of things that men of intemperate minds cannot be free. Their passions forge their fetters.

Freedom and responsibility

People who avoid taking responsibility for their lives, avoiding clear moral commitments and choices, often pave the way for someone else to control their lives. Thus, their freedom actually diminishes. Of course, if we surrender our responsibility to someone else, we cannot complain that we are no longer free.

The Irish playwright George Bernard Shaw once wrote, "Liberty means responsibility. That is why most men dread it." People like freedom because it gives them a sense of mastery over things and people. They dislike responsibility because it constrains them from satisfying their desires. Thus an immature person wants to take the credit for anything that goes well, but finds someone else to blame if something goes wrong. A mature person by contrast takes responsibility even for those things that are not his fault, and shares any credit with others.

Everyone wants to be free, but there are times when we are terrified by the decisions confronting us. We feel relieved (or at least part of us does) when someone else makes the choice or, better still, when "fate" steps in and decides for us. We try to



escape from freedom. Then if something goes wrong, we can blame someone else. When we do this, however, we are acting like puppets.

Freedom cannot be separated from responsibility. When we are young, we have little freedom, and thus little responsibility. As we become more responsible, we gain more freedom and can take more and more of the decisions that affect our lives. We want the freedom to be responsible, the freedom to make mistakes and to learn from them. If a person interferes in our responsibility, we feel violated, because it is our freedom that makes us human. This freedom, though, means not only that we have the opportunity and burden of making choices, but also that we must bear the consequences of our actions and receive praise or blame for them.

If you make a mistake or do something wrong and others treat you with pity, you will probably feel uncomfortable. This is because each of us wants to be respected and treated as a moral person responsible for his own actions. It would even be better to be punished for our sin than to be forgiven because we cannot be held responsible for it. To hold people responsible for their actions is to treat them as moral agents.

If an action is made under duress or circumstances of extreme coercion, then our culpability for its result is less. If someone physically forces us

to commit a crime, we are not held responsible for it. We may still feel bad about committing it, but we are not blamed or punished by others. In any case, we can only be held responsible for our own actions. To be responsible for everything is to be responsible for nothing.

We are answerable not just for the things we do but also for the kind of person we become. Every thought, word and deed in our lives is recorded in our character. We create our own character by the decisions we make. If we react well in a particular situation, it sets a good pattern for future responses; and correspondingly, if we react badly, we will begin a pattern that is hard to break. Thus you have the ability to decide your own destiny in terms of the quality of character you develop.

Freedom and law

We have seen how freedom can be limited by laws. Many people think that since human beings are free, they should not be restricted by any laws or norms. However, if everyone could do whatever he pleased without law and order, the inevitable result would be that the strongest would rule and the weakest would be destroyed. Freedom itself only exists under the rule of law, laws that apply in the same way to everyone, regardless of who they are.

True freedom exists in willingly observing laws. Freedom that ignores laws and tries to avoid responsibility for the consequences of one's actions is license and brings nothing but destruction. Freedom exists only within a framework of rules. Imagine playing a game of chess. Are you free to move the chessmen however you wish? Is a game with no rules more fun and sophisticated than one with many rules? Rules help

to make other people more predictable. They prevent any arbitrary moves by either player. And finally, it's the rules that create this or that game.

How about society? If there are rules against stealing or murder that apply to everyone, everyone can feel safe. Without such rules, no one is safe, and no one has the freedom to walk the streets without fear. So the purpose of laws is to protect people from criminals.



A train, as long as it remains on its tracks, can run rapidly or move slowly, go forward or move backward. In other words, the train has freedom only insofar as it remains on the tracks. If it is derailed, it will be damaged and may also cause damage to people and property.

Hence, man's conscience and moral law restrict his freedom, but they are working to protect him from going in a self-destructive and evil way. They do not restrict or disturb him in the development of goodness. Actually, man's conscience, moral laws, and society's laws exist in order to achieve the unity, order, harmony, freedom and happiness of the total society.

True freedom, therefore, always brings results that are good and true. We want the freedom to love and to use our creativity to make ourselves and others happy. With love, the things that laws require seem natural. True love inspires a sacrificial attitude in a person. When you love someone, it is natural to think, "I will ignore my own needs in order to make that person happy."

*Only by following
the way of love and goodness
can we become truly free*

*Something to
think about*



- Have you ever made a decision that was entirely your own? Describe it.
- Is freedom necessary to live a good life in a good society?
- How free are you? What are the chief restraints on your freedom?
- What is the difference between freedom and anarchy?
- Are there any freedoms that you are willing to die for? If so, what are they?
- At what point do people become responsible for their actions?

*For Your
Journal*



Imagine that you are unjustly accused of a serious crime and put into prison. You have no one to talk to and your freedom is restricted to your cell. How could you make yourself free within the space of your own mind? Do you think it is possible to do so without becoming crazy?

It Is Difficult to be God

by A. Strugatsky and B. Strugatsky

"Do you really consider this world perfect?" Rumata asked in surprise.

"But certainly, my young friend! I don't like many things in the world, I would prefer many things to be different, but what can I do? In the eyes of the Supreme Power, perfection looks otherwise than it does to me. Of what use is it for a tree to complain that it cannot move, although it may have been glad to run from a woodcutter's ax?"

"And what if one's ultimate destination could be changed?"

"No one but the Supreme Power is capable of that. ... "

"But imagine you are God. ... "

Budach laughed.

"If I could imagine myself God, I would have done it!"

"And if you had the chance to advise God?"

"You have a rich imagination," said Budach with relish. "It is good. Are you literate? Marvelous! I would gladly give you some lessons. ... "

"You are flattering me. ... But still, what would you advise God? What do you think he should do in order for you to say: Now the world is good?"

Smiling approvingly, Budach settled back in his armchair and folded his hands on his stomach.

"Well," he said, "it would be this. I would say to the Almighty: 'Creator, I don't know your plans; maybe you don't want people to be good and happy. Then, do want it! It is so easy to achieve. Give people enough bread, meat and wine; give them shelter and clothes. Let hunger and need perish, and everything separating people, too.' "

"Is that all?" Rumata asked.

"Do you think it is insufficient?"

Rumata shook his head. "God would answer: 'This wouldn't help people because the powerful of your world will rob the weak of what I have given them, and the weak will remain poor.' "

"I would ask him to protect the weak. 'Make cruel rulers listen to reason,' I would say."

"Cruelty is power. Having lost cruelty, the rulers will lose power and other cruel people will come to replace them."

Budach stopped smiling.

"Punish the cruel," he said firmly, "so that the powerful wouldn't be cruel to the weak."

"Man is born weak. He gains power when there is no one around him stronger than he. When cruel rulers are punished, their place will be taken by the strongest from among the weak. They will be cruel, too. Eventually everybody will have to be punished and I don't want that."

"You know better, Almighty. Then make it so that the people get everything and don't need to take things away from one another."



"This will be of no use either," Rumata sighed, "for God would say 'when they get everything gratis, without having to work, from my hands, they will forget work, lose the taste of life and turn into domestic beasts whom I will have to feed and dress forever.'"

"Don't give them everything at once!" Budach said hotly. "Give gradually, little by little!"

"Gradually people will take everything they need themselves."

Budach laughed uneasily.

"Now I see it is not so simple," he said, "I've never thought of such things. ... We seem to have tried everything. Oh, no," he leant forward, "there is one more chance. Make people love work and knowledge most of all so that work and knowledge became the only things in their lives!"

"God could do it," Rumata said, "but is it worthwhile depriving mankind of its history? Should this mankind be replaced by a different one? Won't it be the same as wiping this mankind from the Earth and making another in its place?"

Budach thought silently, frowning. Rumata waited. Outside there was the wistful squeak of the carts again. Budach said quietly,

"Then, Lord, wipe us from the Earth and make us anew, more perfect ... or better, leave us to go our own way."

"God's heart is full of pity," Rumata said, "He could not do that."

The Legend of the Grand Inquisitor

From The Brothers Karamazov,
by Fyodor Dostoyevsky

The action takes place in Spain, in Seville, during the most terrible time of the Inquisition, when fires were lighted every day throughout the land to the glory of God... (In the crowd Jesus) appeared quietly, inconspicuously, but everyone – and that is why it is so strange – recognizes him. The people are drawn to him by an irresistible force, they surround him, they throng about him, they follow him. He walks among them in silence with a gentle smile of infinite compassion. (He raises a little girl to life on the steps of the cathedral)...At that very moment the Cardinal himself, the Grand Inquisitor, passes by the cathedral in the square. He sees everything... and his face darkens. (He has Jesus arrested)... and so great is his power and so accustomed are the people to obey him, so humble and submissive are they to his will, that the crowd immediately makes way for the guards and, amid the death-like hush that descends upon the square they lay hands upon Jesus and lead him away...

(In the night the Grand Inquisitor pays a visit to Jesus in prison.)
“Why did you come to meddle with us? For you have come to meddle with us, and you know it. But tomorrow I shall condemn you and burn you at the stake as the vilest of heretics... You rejected the only way by which men might be made happy. You preached freedom which men in their simplicity and their innate lawlessness cannot even comprehend, which they fear and dread – for nothing has ever been more unendurable to man and to human society than freedom!

But in the end they will become obedient. They will marvel at us and they will regard us as gods because, having become their masters, we consented to endure freedom and rule over them – so dreadful will freedom become to them in the end. Man, so long as he remains free, has no more constant and agonizing anxiety than to find as quickly as possible someone to worship. But man seeks to worship only what is incontestable, so incontestable indeed that all men at once agree to worship in together. For the chief concern of these miserable creatures is not only to find something that I or someone else can worship, but to find something that all believe in and worship, and the absolutely essential thing is that they should do so all together. I tell you, man has no more agonizing anxiety than to find someone to whom he can hand over with all speed the gift of freedom with which the unhappy creature is born.

Instead of taking possession of men's freedom you multiplied it and burdened the spiritual kingdom of man with its sufferings for ever. But

did it never occur to you that he would at last reject and call in question even your image and your truth, if he were weighed down by so fearful a burden as freedom of choice? But here too your judgment of men was too high, for they are slaves, though rebels by nature. I swear, man has been created a weaker and baser creature than you thought him to be.

We have corrected your great work and have based it on miracle, mystery, and authority. And men rejoiced that they were once more led like sheep and the terrible gift which had brought them so much suffering had at last been lifted from their hearts.

With us, however, all will be happy and will no longer rise in rebellion nor exterminate one another, as they do everywhere under your freedom. Oh, we will convince them that only then will they become free when they have resigned their freedom to us and have submitted to us. And what do you think? Shall we be right or shall we be lying? They will themselves be convinced that we are right, for they will remember the horrors of slavery and confusion to which your freedom brought them. Freedom, a free mind and science, will lead them into such a jungle and bring them face to face with such marvels and insoluble mysteries that some of them, the recalcitrant and the fierce, will destroy themselves, others, recalcitrant but weak, will destroy one another, and the rest, weak and unhappy, will come crawling to your feet and cry aloud, "Yes, you were right, you alone possessed his mystery, and we come back to you - save us from ourselves!"

Something to think about



- Can you refute the following claims made in this passage?
 - Human freedom leads to conflict and destruction
 - Obedience and loss of freedom brings true happiness
- Do human beings have a need to worship?
- Do human beings have the capacity to use their freedom correctly?
- What is the 'correct' use of freedom?
- What do you think of the view of human nature put forth in this passage?