

REFLECTIONS ON SOME IMAGES OF FREEDOM

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I

Some of the most profound philosophical insights have been conveyed through imagery. Indeed, this was the ancient method of concealing as well as revealing truth. The image both invites and demands reflection. Let us remind ourselves of some images of freedom for man.

An ancient symbol of man was the Sphinx. The Sphinx at Thebes had the head and breasts of a woman representing the divine nature, and the human nature was depicted by the body of a bull or dog, the tail of a dragon, the wings of a bird, and the claws of a lion: earth (physical), water (emotional), air (mental), and fire (spiritual) respectively. Accordingly, human nature was conceived as four-fold. As what constitutes freedom will differ with respect to each nature, let us reflect on some images of each.

II

The lowest nature of man is that which he shares with the animals: this is the bull or dog nature, the appetites, needs, and drives. Animals seem to be guided by an inner wisdom, called "instinct," which can be counted on, generally, to regulate their behavior. Man, to the contrary, appears to have lost or, at the very least, mollified this inner guidance during his evolutionary past, such that civilized man shows little of the inward constraints which we find in the animal kingdom. Suffice it to remind ourselves of the individual who has eaten himself into ugly obesity or the person who will not stop smoking until and, in some instances, even when he contracts emphysema and cancer. In what does freedom consist with regard to the appetites? Certainly not merely satisfying them!

A classical image of the appetites is found in Homer's *Odyssey*. At the beginning of this epic, the house of Odysseus is being besieged by suitors all of whom are vying for the hand of Penelope whom they would marry against her will. Odysseus' son, Telemachos, speaking before the Council at the marketplace of Ithaca, says: "It is our house they visit regularly every day, kill our cattle and sheep and fat goats, hold high revel and drink my sparkling wine, quick reckless: that is the way it all goes."

When an old soothsayer claimed that Odysseus would return and reap destruction and death upon the suitors, Eurymachos replied: "Off with you, old man . . . Odysseus is dead. . . . We care nothing for your prognostications . . . They will come to nothing . . . Yes, his wealth shall be wasted

and consumed, and there shall be no retribution . . ." Little did Eurymachos or the rest of the suitors know that Odysseus would return and kill everyone of them.

"Whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap" (Gal. 6:6). This the suitors failed to realize. Their leader, Antinoos, whose only name means "Irrationality," was the very first killed in the battle in the great hall. Such is the nature of the appetites: they would, if left uncontrolled and unchecked, consume all the goods of one's person. Or, what is equally tragic, the appetites would transform man into a beast, a minotaur! Hence, it is ill advice to counsel, as some hedonists do, the satisfaction of the appetites. Rather, freedom would dictate that the appetites be checked. Indeed, without utter control of these "runaway horses," to use a Platonic metaphor, our freedom, indeed our very life, is imperiled. Freedom is not the freedom to satisfy the appetites, but rather freedom from the appetites.

Homer's *Odyssey* provides us yet another image of him who thinks that freedom consists in satisfying desires. Like Odysseus' foolish fellow journeyers who were bewitched by Circe and transformed into swine, he is a pig! And what is true of the appetites is equally true of certain emotions. For Circe had changed other men into wolves and lions. But the world is filled with people whose animal nature has enslaved them. As Sullivan tells Jonathan in Richard Bach's beautiful story, *Jonathan Livingston Seagull*: "Do you have any idea how many lives we must have gone through before we even got the first idea that there is more to life than eating, or fighting, or power in the Flock?"

Plato, reflecting an Oriental image, likens the soul's nature "to the union of powers in a team of winged steeds and their winged charioteer."

With us men, in the first place, it is a pair of steeds that the charioteer controls; moreover, one of them is noble and good, and of good stock, while the other has the opposite character, and his stock is opposite. Hence the task of our charioteer is difficult and troublesome (*Phaedrus* 246).

Freedom comes only when one gains control of the appetites and passions. Not to do so is to turn to a way of life "ignoble and unphilosophic." But to gain control is to insure the victory:

And so, if the victory be won by the higher elements of mind guiding them into the ordered rule of the philosophic life, their days on earth will be blessed with happiness and concord; for the power of evil in the soul has been subjected, and the power of goodness liberated; they have won self-mastery and inward peace (*Phaedrus* 256).

And what of emotional freedom? The classical symbols of the emotions are the sea and its god, Poseidon, and his children, the Cyclops, and the creatures which dwell in water, the Hydra, the dragon, and serpent. What do these images reveal about the nature of the emotions?

That these symbols of mythology suggest a relationship between the emotions and wisdom is indubitable. It was the serpent which was coiled around the forbidden tree of knowledge of good and evil in the Garden of Eden, and it was the same serpent which counselled: "Ye shall not surely die: For God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil" (Gen. 3:4-5). "The woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree to be desired to make one wise" (Gen. 3:6). Indeed it was not until Adam and Eve had eaten of the tree that "the eyes of them both were opened" (Gen. 3:7). Hence, the counsel of the serpent, the Egyptian symbol of Wisdom, was correct: it was only by tasting the fruits of experience of the emotions that one learns what is necessary to become a god.

The experience is similar with Odysseus. Poseidon, the god of the sea, is his constant nemesis. The sea is symbolic of the Astral Plane, the plane of emotions. Through his imagery, Homer is suggesting that it is only by struggling with the emotions that one achieves wisdom. After leaving Troy, Odysseus encountered many adventures. When the *Odyssey* begins, we find him on Calypso's island, "in the very middle of the sea." Zeus speaks of Odysseus as a "fine fellow," "almost one of us," "wise beyond mortal men." And how did he attain his wisdom? Through contending, successfully, with the plots and ploys of Poseidon, the Earthshaker.

Also illustrative of the relationship between the emotions and wisdom is the god Apollo. "Pythian" Apollo, he was called, for he had slain Python, "a monstrous serpent which arose from the mud left by the deluge . . . and which dwelt in the caves of Mount Parnassus." Only by killing the watery pythian nature can one attain the light of wisdom.

Two other images disclose the nature of the emotions: the Cyclops and the Hydra. First, the Cyclops, children of Poseidon, whom Homer describes in the following way:

We came next to the Cyclopians, the Goggle-eyes, a violent and lawless tribe. They trust to providence, and neither plant nor plow, but everything grows without sowing or plowing . . . These Cyclopians have no parliament for debates and no laws, but they live on high mountains in hollow caves; each one lays down the law for wife and children, and no one cares for his neighbours (*Odyssey*, Book IX).

This description is endemic to the emotions, which know neither reason nor law, but which seek to be laws unto themselves, single-minded in their undivided intent to pursue invariably one course, irrespective of consequences.

And the hydra? This was the monster which Heracles encountered in one of his twelve labors. For every one of its nine heads which Heracles severed, two grew in its stead. It was only by cauterizing the wounds that Heracles was eventually successful in defeating the serpent. This myth illustrates the insatiable nature of emotions and appetites. As Kierkegaard pointed out, the aesthetic life is doomed to failure; for dissatisfaction is inextricably a part of pleasure-seeking and of the life of emotions.

Perhaps the wisest of counsel concerning emotional freedom comes from the Stoic tradition, which made freedom from the emotions a central conception in its philosophy. Their term was *apatheia*, indifference or non-attachment. He is the freest who is free from attachments. Xenophon reports Socrates as saying: "To have no wants at all is, to my mind, an attribute of godhead; to have as few as possible the nearest approach to godhead."

As Ken Keyes reminds us in his *Handbook to Higher Consciousness*, "no one has yet found happiness by using emotion-backed desires as guides. Flashes of pleasure, yes; happiness, no." Why? Basically, because emotions and desires lead one to behave compulsively and addictively; and when his compulsions and emotions are thwarted, he becomes unhappy. To behave in this way is to pre-empt one's freedom. Equally important, he is not generally free to escape his situation so long as he erroneously thinks that freedom or happiness, for that matter, consists of the satisfaction of desires and appetites.

Nor, sadly enough, is one free to love. Love is one of the most important—if not *the* most important—ingredients in happiness; yet he loves only conditionally whose love is based upon the fulfillment of his emotions or desires. From her long experience with persons who have clinically died and been resuscitated and with those at the door of death, Dr. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross reports that her patients virtually all agreed, upon reflection after the death trauma, that two purposes make human life meaningful: first, to serve others, and, second, to give love unconditionally. Those whose service to others and love for them is dependent upon what they can do in return, what emotions they can satisfy and what desires they can fulfill, will likely have regrets when they reflect upon their lives at their end.

One reason why freedom is not found in the satisfaction of desires and emotions is that one has limited control over the very conditions of their satisfaction.

Of things some are in our power, and others are not. In our power are

opinion, movement toward a thing, desire, aversion; and in a word, whatever are our own acts . . . And the things in our power are by nature free . . . Remember then that if you think the things which are by nature slavish to be free, and the things which are in the power of others to be your own, you will be hindered, you will lament, you will be disturbed, you will blame both gods and men (Epictetus, *Encheiridion*, I).

Epictetus reminds us that wisdom calls us to concern ourselves with only those things within our control: ourselves, our attitudes and desires, our feelings and appetites, and our judgments. Then, nothing is able to dispel the tranquility and calmness: nothing disturbs our freedom of emotions and mind. For as the Roman slave so beautifully put it: "Men are disturbed not by the things which happen, but by the opinions about the things . . . When then we are impeded or disturbed or grieved, let us never blame others, but ourselves, that is, our opinions." (*Encheiridion*, V).

There is another image of great wisdom which Epictetus offers us whose end is freedom of the emotions—the image of a guest:

Remember that in life you ought to behave as at a banquet. Suppose that something is carried round and is opposite to you. Stretch out your hand and take a portion with decency. Suppose that it passes you by. Do not detain it. Suppose that it is not yet come to you. Do not send your desire forward to it, but wait till it is opposite to you . . . and you will be some time a worthy partner of the banquets of the gods (*Encheiridion*, XV).

Perhaps the most concise advice which anyone could offer concerning the attaining of emotional freedom comes from the same author: "Seek not that the things which happen should happen as you wish; but wish the things which happen to be as they are, and you will have a tranquil flow of life" (*Encheiridion*, VIII).

But more than this is required for freedom. It is necessary to see the nature of things as they are. And for this, we need to use our mind. Let us, then, turn to a consideration of mental freedom.

IV

In what does mental freedom consist? There are many answers which would ask our reflection. Epictetus suggests the necessity of seeing the nature of things:

If you love an earthen vessel, say it is an earthen vessel which you love; for when it has been broken, you will not be disturbed. If you are kissing

your child or wife, say that it is a human being whom you are kissing, for when the wife or child dies, you will not be disturbed (*Encheiridion*, III).

But how can one see the nature of things as they are? How can one free himself from being

imprisoned in the prejudices derived from common sense, from the habitual beliefs of his age or his nation, and from convictions which have grown up in his mind without the co-operation or consent of his deliberate reason (Russell, "The Value of Philosophy," *Problems of Philosophy*)?

Russell's answer lies in philosophy, whose value "lies in its very uncertainty." Descartes' answer is likewise: "I would have to undertake, once and for all, to set aside all the opinions which I had previously accepted among my beliefs and start again from the very beginning" (*Meditations*, I).

To be mentally free we must doubt all that we have been taught or all that with which we have been indoctrinated. Unless we do so, we will be bound and imprisoned by these prejudices. Whether the doubt be Russellian or Cartesian, unless we doubt, unless we question, and unless we give up our former convictions, we will not be free to think our own thoughts or to see the world as it really is.

"Whoever must be a creator always annihilates." In "On the Thousand and One Goals," in his *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, Nietzsche gives us the image of the iconoclast. "I am *that which must always overcome itself*." This is the nature of life, but of man as well. To be free to become oneself, one must break the old idols of worship, his old beliefs and indoctrinations: he must overcome his old self!

This overcoming is the nature of reality. From ancient Greek mythology we are reminded of Kronos (Chronos) devouring his children. Nietzsche reflects that "Everything passes away; therefore everything deserves to pass away. And this too is justice, this law of time that it must devour its children" ("On Redemption," *Thus Spake Zarathustra*). So too must the free man devour his children, those products of his past. Only then is he free to rise above them, to the level of the *Urbemensch*. Whereas doubt frees the mind from its former convictions, breaking the idols is but the antithesis of the thesis, and as such is dependent, parasitical, and predatory upon it. Higher than reaction is action: there are stages beyond doubt and idol-smashing.

There is a beautiful Zen story which illustrates what one must do to achieve mental freedom. It goes like this:

Nan-in, a Japanese master during the Meiji era (1868-1912), received a

university professor who came to inquire about Zen.

Nan-in served tea. He poured his visitor's cup full, and then kept on pouring.

The professor watched the overflow until he no longer could restrain himself. "It is overfull. No more will go in!"

"Like this cup," Nan-in said, "you are full of your own opinions and speculations. How can I show you Zen unless you first empty your cup?" (1. "A Cup of Tea," *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones*).

To be free, then, once he has doubted and broken his idols, one must empty his cup. For an empty cup is calm and serene, not spilled by the turbulent contents. A mind as clear as an empty cup is easy to control; but a filled mind is like a tempest. Homer imagines the mental energies as winds:

We came next to the island of Aiolia. There live Aiolos Hippotades, a friend of the immortal gods, in a floating island. . . . He gave me the skin of a nine-year ox, which he flayed for us and made into a bag; and in this he bottled up the blustering winds. For Cronion had appointed him to be manager of the winds, to hold them or to let them go as he liked. On board my ship he tied up the bag with wire of shining silver . . . , but he left the west wind free to blow, that it might carry our ships along.

Nine days we sailed all day and all night: on the tenth day our native land came in sight . . . Then the men began to talk to one another, said there must be gold and silver in that bag.

. . . They opened the bag, the winds leaped out; at once a gale caught them . . . The ships were driven by the gale back to the Isle of Aiolos . . .

"Get out of this island at once, you miserable sinner! It is not permitted to comfort the enemy of the blessed gods! Get out of this! You are the gods' enemy come to my doors!" (*Odyssey*, Book X).

The mind, which is the gateway to the soul and the door between the divine nature and the animal in which it is imprisoned, must be used wisely if it is to direct us home. Otherwise, it becomes a partner in crime with the animal nature and will cause us, as it did Odysseus and his men, to repeat again and again what has already been encountered. The mind which can lead us within sight of home can, when its forces are unleashed, drive us into unwelcome and dangerous harbors, into eddies far from the straight and narrow path. To avoid such disastrous excursions, the mind must be held fast in attentive concentration.

V

But where are we going on our journey? Mythology calls the goal "home." But in what direction do we find home?

Mill suggested that freedom consists in seeking "our own good in our own way." But what is our own way? Is it even ours? Shakespeare reflects the ancient wisdom when he says that the world's but "a stage" and

Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more. It is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury
Signifying nothing (*Macbeth*).

Besides reminding us of the spiritual truth that the free man "takes no thought for the morrow" (Matt. 6:34) and rather concerns himself with the present; these words of Shakespeare echo much which preceded him. Dante had thought of life as a Divine Comedy, and the ancient philosophers and poets had spoken often of Fate and Destiny. Epictetus wrote, "Remember that thou art an actor in a play of such a kind as the teacher (author) may choose . . . For this is your duty, to act well the part that is given to you; but to select the part, belongs to another. (*Encheiridion*, XVII)."

Epictetus knew what many knew before him and many after him: life is a play, replete with its script, a script which can be read, as Teiresias read Odysseus' for him when the hero visited the kingdom of the dead. Plato in his "Myth of Er" also describes the script which the soul chooses before its next incarnation. Leibniz realized that each monad had its own script and acts from its own internal nature: "monads have no windows . . ." What looks like causation between individuals is really a coincidence of occasions of simultaneity, or "universal harmony" between individual monads, each of which is "a perpetual living mirror of the universe." Such is freedom in its perfection.

So what is freedom? The flower unfolds according to its inner nature: are we less? Everything in its season. So too man. But where, then, is freedom? Is there no place for human freedom? Imagery suggests that the age-old question of freedom and determinism is a pseudo-question. Not, as Schlick thought, because it is a linguistic confusion, but because it is a metaphysical misunderstanding. "Heaven (God) is blameless," Plato reminds us in *Republic* 617E, as each soul chooses its next script and passes before the three Fates.

VI

As we began with the Sphinx, let us complete the serpent circle with the

same image. The philosophical injunction, written over the portals at Delphi, was "O man, know thyself." Oedipus solved the riddle of the Sphinx, whose answer was man, and thus temporarily saved his city. But the pollution of his murder of his father and intercourse with his mother caused further plague to Thebes. For though Oedipus knew the nature of man, he did not know himself. He did not comprehend mankind's crime: to have killed the Father (God, the Spirit within) and to have married Mother (Matter). Likewise, it is not enough to know what constitutes man's freedom. Rather, one must become it.

According to *Jonathan Livingston Seagull*, "a seagull is an unlimited idea of freedom." So too is man! And yet man alone is capable of knowing his nature. But it is not enough, to be free, to know one's nature. One must become it: the unlimited idea of freedom. The penultimate step is symbolized by the image of the cross, on which the Lower Nature, the animal nature and the mind, called "ego," must finally be sacrificed. Then and then only will man attain the freedom of which he is capable.