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What does freedom look like?

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Anyone who wishes to think about human decision-making must presuppose that it really exists – that is, that man is free. Not without his limitations, of course, but still free enough to be able to make decisions. But saying man is free doesn't get us very far: what, we must ask, does that great freedom of ours consist in? While philosophers may have largely given up asking the question what freedom "is," we can still argue endlessly about what it consists of. But there is yet another possibility: why do we not introduce our own experience into the debate? Our experiences, if we take care to observe them exactly as they are, are not so far from one another: we can easily come to an agreement about them in our daily lives. Would it not be worth taking a closer look at how our own experience of "freedom" actually appears? When do we experience it, when are we ignorant of it – and when, on the contrary, do we know that it is precisely what is missing?

We will start with the simple hypothesis that there are different kinds of freedom, that even freedom can "be talked of differently" (if we may paraphrase Aristotle in this way), and we will try to show three different kinds of experience of freedom, experiences every one of us has probably had many times. If we manage to express well such typical experiences of freedom, that might also give us an idea of what freedom actually looks like. And perhaps it will become evident as well what the space (or spaces) look like within which we make our decisions. We can only briefly mention our points of *orientation* in that space, the mores, morality and ethics, in this short lecture.

As with many other things, one notices freedom first when one feels that it is missing. This usually takes place in puberty, when the young person has to come back home soon and explain to her parents where she has been for so long. Our first notion of freedom is thus fairly simple: to have one's own house keys. That would be it. Such a notion is sufficient to the young person for an amazingly long time. But it is not only the parents and the lack of keys that restrict her. It is also the school, the upbringing, reprimands and all kinds of social customs: the way people dress, arrange their hair, talk and greet one another, perform music and dance – in short, all that people in a society do every day to let one another know they belong to that society. The young person sees these customs as mere restrictions at a certain age, as something she would like to get rid of – or to at least test with regard to how serious her society is about it.

Probably everybody passes through this phase of "pubertal freedom" and this experience marks everyone significantly. Surprisingly many people are content with it for their entire lives and it is persistently advocated even among scholars and philosophers. Many thinkers who have investigated freedom, or still do, characterize freedom as the absence of coercion, as the *elimination of external restraints* on my decision-making and my actions. Freedom is often defined by encyclopaedic dictionaries as "the state of not being under compulsion; liberation or deliverance

from subjection; elimination of external obstacles.” On monuments, freedom is always symbolized by shackles and chains torn apart. That this idea is attractive for the young people can be best documented by advertisements - for those who invent them know more about the real psychology of their “target group” than all of the academic experts taken together. Just look and read: “No fee, be free!”, “Take a sip of freedom!” On billboards, there may be dancing boys and girls in incredible positions, or perhaps a sun-tanned cowboy with a lasso round his neck who is just taking a rest on a rock in the middle of the Arizona desert: no parent nor teacher around to tell him off, emptiness, space. In one word – freedom.

Therefore, there is no reason to doubt the fact that the experience of the elimination of obstacles or coercion is really the experience of freedom. However, a person who has experienced it will naturally want to increase it, to have more and more of such freedom. She will consequently look for more and more “shackles” to get rid of. But even if she eliminates all of them, one will be left anyway: gravity, which ties us to the earth. Only astronauts were able to escape gravity, on their free swim through the cosmic space. But are they more free because of that? Hardly. The freedom of the astronaut, just like the freedom of the cowboy in the desert, has one flaw. Both of them can move really wherever they want, but this actually does them no good: it is the same in all directions. Wherever they may move, there is the same emptiness and void everywhere, there is nothing all around. So this is obviously not the right way.

A second, somewhat more complex form of freedom tries to avoid this limitation: freedom means the *possibility of choice*. A choice among possibilities which are different, among which there is some distinguishing feature. We all know this experience as well, because a department store or any ordinary self-service shop demonstrates it in an almost perfect form. A great many different things and all of them within reach. All you have to do is to choose, to reach out – and they are yours. The self-service shop is a psychologically perfect invention, too. By the way, it was invented by a fellow-countryman of ours who noticed that the counter and the shop-assistant were unpleasant obstacles for the immigrants in America, who spoke poor English. So he put them aside and he had a massive success. That same experience of freedom in a large department store was probably the most effective argument in favour of Western “capitalism” against the communist regimes. People who had experienced this in the West were determined to have it at home as well. And they had a vague feeling that the possibility of choice in a department store is somehow connected with the possibility of choice in elections. Perhaps they were right.

But the experience of freedom as a choice and a selection is such that one wants to increase it as well, and so self-service shops get larger and larger. Hypermarkets have followed supermarkets and shop-assistants now have to scooter their way around. But still, it can happen that one wants to buy a pair of shoes and comes back home empty-handed. “They had nothing there.” That is an obvious absurdity, hundreds of pairs of shoes were available. But one pair of shoes had bad soles, a second one had a bad colour, a third one was too small and a fourth one was too expensive. One gets used to even the largest hypermarket and everything seems to be the same to him there. That is why the goods in such places have to be moved around and shuffled from time to time. Actually, even before the elections, we tend to have the feeling that one ballot-paper is missing: the one we would like to vote for.

So it is impossible to create unlimited freedom if it involves a choice from among given possibilities, perhaps precisely for the fact that one has to choose from among possibilities which have been prepared for us by others. Could this be avoided somehow? Could one not prepare them oneself? One probably could not do that with shoes, but we all know of other occasions where this is possible. One of them is *play*. Play is a very peculiar phenomenon that we have to investigate in more detail. It is characterized by the fact that it produces nothing, it leads to nothing and no one has any profit from it. Moralists have always warned against play and they took it for wasting time, but surprisingly enough, normal people have not paid attention to them and they have played (games) passionately. Children as well as adults. Not even the worst dictators had the courage to deprive them of this form of entertainment; on the contrary, they knew that it is

the only thing people inevitably need besides bread in order to preserve peace in the land. But is there anything that children's play, theatre plays, playing a musical instrument, sport and card games and gambling have in common at first glance? Let us try a detour: what is the opposite of play? What is no play?

"This is not play, life is at stake here." Something really is at stake in life; sometimes life is at stake. But is nothing at stake in play? Only someone who has never played can think that. A player who would not treat the game with sufficient commitment and earnestness only spoils the game and a game "just so" is not a game anymore. But there is still a difference. An actor who dies on stage can die again tomorrow without any difficulty. A person who has lost a chess game will not be executed like an unsuccessful troop commander; he will change his colours and start a new game.

Play is not "life" and life is probably not play either, as romanticists maintained, but the two are certainly connected somehow. Theatre plays arose from religious mystery plays and those showed the deepest mysteries of life and of the world. What characterizes play may be precisely the fact that it in a way displays real life, that it is an artificial model of life and of the world. A musical play also creates a certain "world" of its own which the players and the audience "enter into" for a while in order to get rid of the ordinary world "out there." Not to mention theatre or sport.

Every play is strictly limited, in space and in time, and usually well in advance. This limited space and time is separated from the rest of the world somehow: by the white line or the curtain, by the whistle or the gong. There are many similarities between the "world" of the play and the remaining world, but there are no direct interrelations: a shop-assistant may play a queen and the president a barrel-roller in a brewery. When they finish the play, they will be again what they were. In Ancient Greece, actors wore masks on their faces so that nobody would mistake them for people, and even today, tennis players as well as actors change their costumes in order to avoid wearing "civilian" dress. It was only the television, which showed the actors' faces closely, that disturbed this significant distance; thus the TV actor is a "medical doctor" or a "chairman" from a TV series for us even in the street. When one beats one's boss in tennis or in chess, it does not mean one does not have to obey the boss' orders tomorrow: the results of the play are only valid in its world and are not transferred out of it.

In this way, play separates itself from the rest of the world and stands against it like a mirror. What good is this? What shall we see in that mirror? Already the way in which play differs from "life" demonstrates how we evaluate our life as people, what our priorities are and what we would rather have otherwise. The spatial and temporal separation accentuates that everything can be different here: do not mistake play for life. There is no transition between them. Obligations and duties from the world of play are not valid outside of it and vice versa. The positions and privileges are untransferable. They have nothing in common. Those of the play mean nothing in "life" and the "real" ones mean nothing in the play. That means: if you are at play, do not hesitate to be free. Do not fear trying out what you can do. You will not be responsible for whatever you do within the limits of the game you play and its rules. Whether you become rich or poor in the game, it will have no lasting consequences.

Each type of play or game emphasizes some aspects of life and gives the participants and – if there are any – the spectators or listeners an opportunity to try them out – without fearing the consequences and moreover under suitably idealized conditions. Let us illustrate this with an example that everybody knows: in competitive games such as football, tennis or chess. All of them "model" quite clearly a battle in its simplest form, one against the other or the yellow ones against the blue ones. The advantage of the play is obvious in this case: one hardly ever leaves a real battle with an entire and healthy body. In a game which is to be a battle, one has to fight with body and soul, from the first gong to the last, but when the game is over, nothing has happened. That is why the "battle" games can afford a great luxury, namely rules. In a real battle, all the participants would like to see rules as well, but who would keep them, whether winner or

loser? In a game, life is not at stake, and therefore there can be rules and there is even an impartial judge who oversees them and is always right.

Play distinguishes itself clearly from real life through the presence of rules and the judge. The possibilities are much more limited and therefore more clearly arranged: in chess, there is even a finite (great as it is) number of them. A superficial observer might think that such limits restrict creativity, too, but the very opposite is true: nothing stimulates human creativity more than good limits. That is why experiments with a larger chessboard led to nothing; the tonal system or the choice of possible instruments plays a similar role in music, and atonal music has brought no new epoch either, rather a loss of clear arrangement. The presence of rules and the judge accentuates further the uncompromising effort to achieve justice – another difference from the real world. Under the simplified conditions of rules, some justice is possible and it is interesting to see how essential it is for the play.

Different games also express different ways to understand justice. Thus in tennis the losing player loses all of his successful balls, which are not counted from then on and from the viewpoint of the following game it is unimportant whether he has lost narrowly or “with nil”. The same holds true in the counting of games and of sets. Such a conception of “justice” could not be accepted by any rationalist, for it is obviously unjust: it may happen that the winner is someone who has lost most of his balls. But it keeps the game exciting – all is at stake in each game. It is also very realistic and it teaches the players something that is almost a rule in real life. And it is close to the conception of “justice” in the British majority election system, which is probably no accident.

One of the players always begins and the other responds. The regular exchange is most visible for example in chess or in whist, but it exists in tennis and other games as well. In this way, the game displays something typical for all human behaviour – something that we might call “defined freedom”. The tennis player who serves has the full choice of how he hits, whereas the other player receives the ball, which he has not chosen himself, and has to deal with it. If he manages to do that, he has a certain choice of where he places the ball, what rotation he gives it and so on. Similarly in chess, the white starts the game by the choice of the beginning, but the game is then also determined by the black in each following move. Each of the players has his overall plan and strategy and those clash together so that the active plan of the one is an obstacle for the other, which he has to overcome, and vice versa. Each player sees the game as a continuous exchange of moments of *choice* – within the given possibilities and constantly restricted by the other player – and moments of *response* to the plan opposing his own and gradually revealing the moves of the other player.

Only the first move of the white is completely “free”, all the others are partially compelled by the moves of the other player. The beginning gives a certain advantage to the player – an advantage that is manifest in tennis (the service), where the rules restricting the service are consequently particularly strict. This advantage is then balanced out by the rules in that the players begin the games alternately and sometimes also “in rotation”, such as in volleyball, etc. We have already talked about the conflict of freedoms and about the way people long to assert their freedom against one another or “outdo” one another’s freedom. It is just this aspect of the conflict and fight that competitive games demonstrate, and as their popularity attests, they do it well. Making use of the advantages of the game as such, that is, playing in a just environment and without lasting consequences, people can always experience and be trained in one of the fundamental features of their existence, namely the conflict of freedoms that bounce against one another and limit one another, but also stimulate to better achievements. That is something the players often want more than victory: whoever wants to “play a good game” will choose an equal opponent and not a beginner or a clumsy player whom he would beat easily. Whoever wants to win must certainly know something, but he must be lucky on top of that: this important aspect of the game is manifest in gambling, where one does not play against another player, but rather against “luck” or “fate”.

In three characteristic experiences, well known to all of us, we have seen three typical forms of freedom:

- freedom as the absence of obstacles
- freedom as the possibility of choice and
- play as an encounter and conflict of two freedoms creating and offering one another their possibilities.

We have seen in what ways the first two are restricted. They exhaust themselves and one gets tired of them sooner or later; notice that only in the first form it may seem that the rules are the same as the obstacles. One will want to cultivate freedom according to how one understands it. In the first form, one will remove shackles and obstacles, in the second form, one will increase the possibilities of choice. But only in the third form will one understand the essential difference between obstacles and rules: one cannot play without rules. The better the rules and the better the judge, the better the game will be, too. Without rules, the game would degenerate immediately: imagine football without the offside rule, for example. In that sense, real human freedom is always “limited”, because it necessarily needs rules.

The connection between play and a free society is not accidental and it is not a mere metaphor. It was precisely in play that people learned that when there are good and strictly observed rules, they need not kill nor maim one another, but rather they all can play a good game together. Thanks to the common experience of just or “fair” play, people dared to introduce elements of play even into the hard facts of daily life: rules, impartial judges and the effort to achieve justice. Where life is at stake, this is, however, not easy at all and the society can only be free when everybody understands and strives to accomplish it. Freedom is never perfect and one has to work on it all the time. Every young person must learn to play it again. It is no accident that games, originally present in aristocratic education, have been introduced into English schools and that basketball or cricket are so important in the American school system. It is namely practical education in freedom, at least in its competitive form. But since they are collective games, the players learn to co-operate in them as well, just as human life requires.

The space of freedom, defined by rules, is empty. The fact that we still *make decisions* within it – and that we do not toss a coin instead – shows that it is not arbitrary. It is only here that human actions take place, Nietzsche’s “freedom not from something, but for something”, which naturally cannot be defined by any rules. We orient ourselves here according to various interests – from the completely egoistic and short-term ones to Aristotle’s “search for the best” or “good life”. One needs to know a great deal today for this, too, and precisely in medicine, but no knowledge will ever take the weight of decision-making away from us. But in this lies human greatness: the greatness of a finite being that makes free decisions.