

THREE KINDS OF LIBERTY IN POST MODERNISM*

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How can we identify "post-modernism" in philosophy? Is it a school of thought, a movement? Is it a period? Not clearly. According to Heidegger, the modern epoch of philosophy begins with Descartes and ends with Hegel. With him, we will consider postmodern the philosophers coming after the great "trinity" of modern philosophers namely: Descartes, Kant, and Hegel. The modern period is characterized by a big optimism in the power of rationality, of a pure conceptual knowledge and of logical demonstrative reasoning. The idea of progress through the guidance of reason remains unquestioned!

Postmodernism may have started with Kierkegaard receiving the admonition of Feuerbach: "Do not think as a thinker... think as a living, real being"¹. Both phenomenologists and existentialists in their affirmation of the subjectivity of man doubt the possibility to reduce it to pure rationality, a "cold" rationality because of their awareness of man's conditioning and uncertainty. Existentialism, with Kierkegaard, specially stresses the dignity of man in freedom, as a subject existing in action, self-positing in his experience with reality. The person's practical truth has lately been called authenticity. This is the truth of an actor rather than a spectator (in this regard phenomenology is more speculative). Thus, the way liberty is understood is essential in postmodernism. If the stress on man's liberty is common to the postmoderns, different dimensions of liberty are manifested if not opposed: and it is at the core of the understanding and behavior of man in society.

1. Freedom of independence

The first kind of liberty I want to discuss with you is one of the most widespread nowadays. The first meaning of liberty for the sixties was to be freed from any constraint or authority: "Neither God nor master" and "It is forbidden to forbid" were the mottoes of the French youth revolt in 1968. I saw it painted high on the walls of the University of La Sorbonne in Paris. The students were stimulated by the well-known philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre. Though we cannot reduce Sartre's

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understanding of liberty to a mere liberty of independence, this dimension of liberty is one of his main features.

For Sartre, liberty is the absolute, it is the self-positing of man as a self-consciousness. In his well-known *Being and Nothingness*, he stressed that only self-consciousness is real being. The external world is a phenomenon, only appearances, i.e. quasi-non-being. Moreover, the world, the other, are determining my consciousness because consciousness is consciousness of something. So it is even an anti-being. I have to negate it in order to be myself. My self-consciousness is the only true being and is non-determined in itself. *Bad faith* is when behavior is modelled by others, playing a role. It is inauthenticity. Truth or authenticity is independence i.e. the refusal of being determined by others, especially by any authority and social pressure. Sartre's freedom is full existence, *being-for-itself*. Affirming one's individuality means to save all my potentialities. Is pre-reflexive self-consciousness not the most radical potentiality? This is a very elaborated will to independence; however, it joins the most immediate understanding of freedom, and so it happens to be very popular. However, can this freedom be a fulfillment? Is self-consciousness, without any influence, capable to be a determination? If it is to save every potentiality of oneself, it is just an indetermination, except when it is opposition. But opposition is relative, still dependent on the opposite; therefore, it is not yet independence! For example, once I asked my students, "When are you free?" A girl answered, "When I am on holidays!" "So, what are you doing?" "Well... nothing." "True, you can do anything you want but you don't know what you want. Is it true freedom?" Let us have another example: a man is in a small boat in the middle of the ocean, and he does not see anything but water all around. Of course, he can take any direction, but he does not know which way to take. Is he free? In a certain sense, he has all possibilities, but, in fact, he is lost; he is a prisoner of the sea!

Nevertheless, even at the first stage, mere freedom of independence is very alluring especially in an adolescent attitude. Opposition, negation is the first affirmation of our alterity, of our identity. And freedom of independence saving all the possibles, freedom of possibles is very seductive for our imagination. Are not our dreams at the level of the possible? At that time, in order to preserve all our potentialities, we refuse any choice and commitment because it implies a renunciation. Did Sartre not say, for example, that marriage is a prison? As a matter of fact, he lived with Simone de Beauvoir without being married.

However, metaphysically, fullness of being is not essence as a potentiality to be, but existence as actualization and determination.

In a certain sense, Sartre would agree with that. Nevertheless, for Sartre, full existence is to preserve one's self-consciousness from all alienation of the determined realities of the world. We remember his famous affirmation in *No Exit*: "Hell is other people". We fear liberty because we have to assume our anguish of emptiness, of nothingness and of absurdity. In a real independence, I have to exist in my self-consciousness without determination and meaning coming from the others and to assume the full responsibility for it.

Can we reduce Sartre's thought on freedom to this aspect? Certainly not. First, because Sartre loved so much his independence that he even refused to be bound to his own teaching! But mainly also because he was an artist and on this point he is very close to Nietzsche and because he was politically very committed, at least to oppose any moralism and authoritarianism. With Sartre freedom of independence is elevated to the level of an art, so it is very much a determination but at a second degree.

2. Artistic freedom

One of the keys to understand Friedrich Nietzsche is to see that he is essentially an artist. For the artist, liberty is at two levels. First, creativity is source of liberty for the artist. And the first dignity of man is in his creativity. Man is a creator. Since Nietzsche does not understand the difference of nature between human artistic creation and divine creation, he sees God as a rival. "Well, what are you doing?" The artist is determined by his inspiration, and he does not want to be limited by anything else. Somebody who is purely an artist can easily see limitations to his activity coming from morality especially when it is social ethics. That is why the artist in a society is most often an independent if not a rebellious man. Moreover, his awareness of his artistic nobility puts him apart from the mass considered as mundane and coarse. Without any inspiration, the artist is depressed, reduced to nothingness. So we understand his eagerness and anxiety to being inspired, considering this as a grace and at the same time as a condition for his existence even though he is a source. Inspiration as a co-operation of intelligence and imagination (so as an activity of the mind) is a very intimate source expressing the richness of the inner self of the artist. This is the reason why it is a revelation of the artist to himself first. For Nietzsche, this liberty of creation is an absolute for the sake of which he was ready to sacrifice everything, even his health and life. The exaltation of inspiration is like a drunkenness and a delirium in which he is at last really himself.

For the artist, there is also a liberty of realization. The *will to power* of the artist is the realization, the concretization of his creativity. Karl Marx is also very impressed by the fact that man realizes himself in realizing his idea through the transformation of matter. And the increase of means through the development of sciences and techniques may lead him to believe that he can change his whole nature, reach immortality and become like a god. According to Pope John-Paul II, this is the great temptation, the great myth, of today's world. Nevertheless John-Paul II himself recognizes the truth of this realization of man through his work, not in his nature but in his growth: man acquires virtues (determination of will, discipline, perseverance, fortitude...), skills, expertise and dignity. It is obvious that in our contemporary society man is first defined and recognized through his realizations. Even if Marxism is less influential as a political ideology, practical materialism is very much alive. The *will to power* of mankind is stronger than ever for the mastery of the world at the technological, economical and political levels. But does not this race to power lead inevitably to general conflicts? The threat of self-destruction of mankind is really proper to our century. The apocalyptic fear of nuclear war is characteristic. This liberty of power is more and more perceived as potentially self-destructive.

Is that liberty a fatality, a condemnation? This tragic grandeur is not absent from Nietzsche. In the same order, we may understand the temptation of the Great Inquisitor of Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazoff*: do we have to suppress man's freedom in order to save him? This temptation comes from a limited notion of wisdom. It calls for a real wisdom. Sartre also is an artist but he wanted to be free even with his works. He was able to destroy his work just to affirm that he, the author, is more than the product and cannot be limited or determined only by it. We may understand why Sartre could not become really a Marxist: he would not accept the affirmation of Marx that men are what their productions are.

Artistic liberty also cannot be really an absolute for man because the artist cannot stop at his realizations; he is always surpassing them in quest of an absolute he can never attain through his art. A great artist is a kind of mystic. It is quite evident with Nietzsche. As a man in society, the artist in the exaltation of his liberty is alone. Nietzsche, despite the affectionate presence of his sister, is a loner, a solitary man. Lonely and unsatisfied, finally ailing, the liberty of Nietzsche is tragic and bitter after all.

The experience of man in his activity of making is not the

experience of an encounter, it is man vis-a-vis matter in the act of transforming it. When man is with things, he is basically alone. Can he be fully himself? Can he be fulfilled? Ethics may be considered as an art when it is human reason that formulates in its subjectivity its own rules of conduct. Starting from the Stoics, then with the Moderns, like Nietzsche and Sartre, ethics becomes an art in which we forge our values and duties. But because duty and values are not yet the encounter of a person, they are just stepping stones for a new dimension of liberty.

3. Liberty in an ethics of encounter

Kierkegaard described the existential condition of man as a struggle from what he is presently to what he ought to be. His liberty is to "realize *existentially his essential self*". For this, man is passing through three stages namely: aesthetic, ethical and religious stage. In aesthetic stage man is not so artistic but passionate. This stage corresponds to liberty of independence. Then, in his understanding of ethical stage, Kierkegaard is still very close to Kant. For him, it is not a personal encounter stage yet: the ethical man deals with responsibility regarding a moral law only. However, he comes to realize that he is incapable of fulfilling the moral law; he is not only weak but also guilty. This contradiction, dialectic in the sense of Kierkegaard, is a call for a higher stage, the religious. According to Kierkegaard, it is only at this level that a real personal encounter appears, and this is the encounter with God.

However, his followers applied personal encounter first to the encounter of man with another man. The encounter is the beginning of a really personal relation with the other: a human person, and ultimately God. This is clear with Karl Jaspers, Martin Buber, Gabriel Marcel, Emmanuel Levinas and Paul Ricoeur. With Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, the personal encounter is simply considered between human persons. They denied being atheists but they do not consider the existence of God because they focus more on the basis of a metaphysical research.

All of the said philosophers emphasized the interiority or inwardness of what is a personal encounter introducing man in a new dimension of his existence. The encounter implies a quality of presence to the other that attracts me. In this encounter, there is a special quality of presence to one another. The discovery of the other as a person, i.e. as unique requires an openness (Heidegger), to come back to a freshness of intelligence like a child's (Jaspers). It needs a

qualitative availability. We can cross many people in a crowd without having any encounter. The crowd is the untruth according to Kierkegaard because it is anonymous, irresponsible, just like a cattle which is acting automatically, by habit, in a word: impersonal. This is nearly common to all existentialists. At the opposite of this quasi non-experience is the very qualitative one, the encounter.

The one I encounter draws me to his subjectivity and because this is a very personal, subjective experience, he reveals my subjectivity to me. With Kierkegaard, we should prefer the term subjectness rather than subjectivity because it is what makes man capable of an encounter. So, the encounter of the other is a revelation (Marcel, Jaspers), an unconcealment (Heidegger) of the other and also of myself. This relation is not fusional because the other is different. This intersubjectivity implies certain objectivity because of the respect of the difference. In this regard, encounter implies the relation "*I and Thou*" and also the relation "*I and It*" (Buber). It implies the physical encounter where the body is involved as medium of the presence (Merleau-Ponty), the body is manifestation of the interiority of the person, the face is *icon* of the soul (Levinas). The alterity is no more rivalry, threat, negative alienation, but what draws to a deeper, greater existence. Regarding this matter, Gabriel Marcel could say that *esse* is *co-esse*, or that *esse* is *inter-esse*. And the encounter is reciprocal so it comes to a *dialogue* (Buber).

This liberty in the encounter is very different from the two former ones. It is a liberty in the commitment of the person in love, commitment to the others. If I love I want to be one with the one I love. For example, two lovers are free when they can get married because they may be more concretely united. It is the opposite of what we saw with Sartre.

Moreover, this liberty is ultimate in the discovery of God. Buber, Marcel and Levinas are leading us to this discovery. In love, the one I love is a mystery. I am attracted by the person in his secret or mystery. When I love, I cannot say why. If I can say "I love you because...", it is an imperfect love because the one I love is considered as a means, no more as an end (Kant). When I love, I love the beloved also as unknown. Of course, I need to know something about the beloved in order to love. But love is more than knowledge; it is attraction. Once I asked some old couple who are still in love: "Do you know your spouse?" I had the answer: "Yes, and...no!" Because the one I love is much more than I know, and if I respect him, I have to recognize that he is a source, a mystery, i.e. a reality always greater than I know. In love, I depend joyfully on the other as a mystery. *Being is a*

mystery (Marcel) especially in the person. It is the richness of being. It is this *objective uncertainty* (Kierkegaard) which is the field of my liberty in the gift of myself to the other. I do not love what I know about the beloved but the beloved in his whole being. In this love, I discover myself because I cannot know myself in my capacity of love without being actuated in love. This capacity to love is also called the will, which together with my intelligence constitutes my inmost personality. Thus, when a man falls in a personal love, he is a new man; he has grown up in his person a new step. But my liberty is complete only if my love is everlasting and unlimited. When I love, I want to love forever. A personal love is beyond time because the uniqueness and autonomy of the person is somehow beyond time. That is why a personal love requires fidelity, a *creative fidelity* (Marcel). Love draws me to infinity (Levinas). So death is always a scandal for love. Man as *being-towards-death* (Heidegger) is forced to care for the meaning of his existence as *being-in-the-world*. In my existential experience, I have to recognize, with Kierkegaard and Ricoeur, that I am a *fallible man*. The ethical man makes the experience not only of his weakness but also of his guilt, especially in love. Basically, man experiences his irreducible selfishness, his incapacity to love. This contradiction, this *existential dialectic* (Kierkegaard) is a way to discover God as the one who enables human love to reach his aim (Thomas Aquinas would say) such because nature does not aim in vain. If the thirst for a personal love is so deeply rooted in man, it cannot desire what is impossible. But human love cannot be everlasting, limitless, unfailing unless it is made such by an everlasting, limitless, unfailing love which is already existing. Those who have discovered this freedom in love know that only this kind of freedom may be a fulfillment for man. It induces a new understanding of man in a society. In that sense, Pope John Paul II calls every man to resist a *culture of death*, consequence of a measureless *will to power* of modern man, and to build the *Civilization of Love*.

Conclusion

In Post-modernism, we have noticed three kinds of liberty. They induce very different behaviors of man in society. The painful story of our century is the illustration of the necessity of a philosophical wisdom on human liberty. In the turmoil of the changes of our world today, man is groping more than ever for a real "authenticity". The questions of man's identity and liberty lead us to a life-long

deepening. Let me quote Pope John-Paul II in his last encyclical *Fides et Ratio*: "They are questions which have their common source in the quest for meaning which has always compelled the human heart. In fact, the answer given to these questions decides the direction which people seek to give to their lives." Karol Wojtila, now Pope John-Paul II, appeared as an outstanding philosopher of late postmodernism with these questions in *The Acting Person*. He enhances the actual trend which goes beyond the opposition of ancients and moderns for a great renewal of philosophy: will it be Nietzsche's eternal recurrence? Are postmodern problems and values the return of those of the Ancients, or the renewal of eternal ones? Isn't it that man is always with the same existential questions? So, what is new with postmodernism? To be concise I would say that it is a deeper intelligence of the conditioning of man; an enhancement of the richness of the subjectivity of the human person; a rediscovery of a philosophy always open to the mystery of being.

This relationship with other persons makes man truly a person. He realizes his dreams and aspirations by being with others. He pursues his goals in the context of the dynamics within the framework of his relationship with his fellow men. Therefore, to go no further just to be himself and no other would be to imprison oneself forever in one's poverty and ignorance. He is himself but open to others. The person is not wholly a person if alone. He is not being itself, but he is within being and sharing in being. It is not a dreamy feeling or a lazy repose but a vigorous commitment toward the fulfillment of himself.

Man is not only satisfied in forming interpersonal relationships. He is so concerned also in attaining order and harmony. Man longs for harmonious interpersonal relations. He endeavors as much as possible to build interpersonal relations that would promote harmony and order in the society. However, no matter how man aspires for such dream, inevitably, there are times that such interpersonal relations will be shaken. There are occasions which would ruin instead of establishing smooth and harmonious interpersonal relations. He is actually impairing it. His lack of knowledge perhaps would be

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 Austin Pagatney, Right and Reason (Saint Louis, C.V. Mosby Company, 1972)
 2. FIDES AND RATIO, p. 165.