

November 1979

Liberty and Freedom

Cornelius O'Brien

Follow this and additional works at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/lmq>

Recommended Citation

O'Brien, Cornelius (1979) "Liberty and Freedom," *The Linacre Quarterly*: Vol. 46: No. 4, Article 11.

Available at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/lmq/vol46/iss4/11>

Liberty and Freedom

Rev. Cornelius O'Brien

Father O'Brien is co-director of the Notre Dame Pontifical Institute in Middleburg, Va.

The unabridged *Oxford Dictionary*, that nigh-infallible guide to proper usage, sees little, if any, difference between the words liberty and freedom. They are considered to be practically interchangeable. If true, this is strange. It is a contradiction of a rather basic rule in language development. Fundamental things are expressed precisely in one exact term: love is love, hate is hate, belief is belief, opinion is opinion. Each is precisely itself. The rule governing proper usage of these terms is that they cannot be replaced in a sentence with a synonym without changing the sense of the sentence. If liberty and freedom are interchangeable, we are confronted by an awkward anomaly.

Since English is a hybrid language, we are dealing with words whose roots come from different linguistic sources. Liberty is from a Latin root meaning "unbound." Freedom is from a Welsh or Sanscrit root meaning "love" — hence "friend," meaning one who is loved. The roots of the words liberty and freedom clearly point to decidedly different things.

What we might call the "mood" of the words in common usage also suggests different meanings. Liberty suggests libertine, or uncommitted, or guillotine. Freedom suggests devotion and self-sacrifice. One could almost wish that Patrick Henry had said, "Give me freedom or give me death," especially since that is surely what he meant! It may be, however, that he saw beyond the superficial identity of the words. Then he would have known that although liberty may be given, freedom can only be achieved.

Yet another indication that there exists a real difference between liberty and freedom is found in the fact that whereas freedom is properly predicated of God, liberty never is.

Liberty has the sense of being loose, unbound, unfettered. It is essentially a negative condition. In its better sense it means to be free of external restraint, as when the bird is uncaged or the man is loosed

from bondage. In its worst sense it means to lack all restraint. This latter is its *unqualified* sense. We can call it absolute liberty. It excludes all relationships, all commitments. It denotes a world of mere possibility. To make room for reality, absolute liberty must be curbed.

In the real world, the existence and perfection of each thing involves a rejection of absolute liberty. Elementary chemical combinations shatter absolute liberty by expressing a law of relation. The world of living things, in its magnificent variety, destroys absolute liberty. It is this world and while it is so, it cannot be otherwise. It is, for the moment at least, "committed," not "at liberty." Each thing within the world is also, for the moment at least, committed to its own nature or law. By an inner necessity, each thing reaches for its own perfection and has "appetite" only for that. It fights everything which would distract or impede it. With remarkable concentration and industry, the DNA in each living thing, unique in each individual, conducts the symphony of life, relating and controlling molecules to produce this tree, this tiger, this flower. And if there is a larger symphony of relations between individually perfect things it is only because there is a wider law which is obeyed.

Cause of Beauty, Harmony

Beauty and harmony in things are caused by a tension of relatedness, we might say of commitment — a relatedness not found in the ordinary understanding of liberty. Liberty must be there as the matrix or atmosphere in which the beauty of the individual thing grows. But the formative energy is something other than liberty. It is the inner directed appetite of the thing itself. It is the "love" of its own perfection in being which drives and energizes every existing thing. This singularly non-libertarian passion for being is the law of the universe.

Man's physical life is governed largely by the laws of nature. The DNA works its magic in him as in the flower and the bee. The passion for being has built him to a wonderful perfection before he has a notion in his head of what perfection is. As the philosophers say, man finds himself already in existence. His liberty is limited by the fact that he had no choice in the matter of his coming into being. He lacks the liberty not to be. He is!

The world of consciousness has a beauty and depth compared to which the beauty of the animate world is mere shadow. Anyone who has experienced that resonance of spirit called joy in the grasping of a profound truth knows this. So does the one who has known the exquisite torture of love. It is a world whose beauty is achieved, as in the world around us, by transcending mere liberty. The passion for being throbs here, too, but here it takes the form of will or love. It is an intellectual power, therefore free, which consciously reaches for perfection.

Our ordinary experience is full of examples of the transcending of liberty in the interest of achieving maturity. When a man goes shopping for a stereo, he immerses himself in the vast variety that the market provides. By a process of elimination and decision, he chooses one. Before decision, he is in a state of liberty. Decision terminates that state. A similar thing happens when a man chooses a career or a vocation or a wife. Liberty matures into decision. The very word decision means "cutting off." One thinks of "pruning." Much cutting off is done in the journey to mature perfection. The alternative would be a sick dilettantish immaturity.

The pruning knife of decision is not wielded wildly in the life of consciousness. There is a law which guides it. It is a law written at the very deepest level of our being. The law of our *physical* being is written in the DNA. At the single-cell stage of our life, that law is fully written. Our biological life is a process in which we become what we already are.

Evidence of Transcendent Principle

Could it be that there is in us, from the beginning, a level of identity, a governing spiritual principle, which the DNA but manifests in time/space? Evidence for the existence of this transcendent principle of spiritual identity is available. Reflect on your own past. Remember when you were five. You were smaller then, different in many ways — but you were you! Your years have changed you in many ways, but your fundamental identity remains inviolate. Beyond time and space God spoke your name and you came into existence, in your perfect uniqueness. Your spatio-temporal experience began. You formed a body so that mind and will could grasp the world and yourself. Following the impulse which comes from God's creative act, you will prune and grow until, in quiet moments when the noise of the world is stilled, you will hear faint echoes of God's voice as He speaks your name. Then you will experience the "freedom of the children of God."

The historic life of man is rightly called a project. One might think of it as a projectile, a modern target-seeking missile. With built-in radar it seeks its target, who is God. This is expressed beautifully by St. Augustine when he says: "Thou hast made us for Thyself, O Lord, and our hearts will never rest until they rest in Thee."

Man does not select the goal of his strivings. He is made to walk the paths of truth and goodness which lead to God. Even if he is trapped in something other than God, it will be because he is persuaded that, for the moment at least, the trap is somehow good. St. Thomas says that the will chooses evil only *sub specie boni*, because it mistakes it for good or dresses it up as good.

It is only when God is being sought and means that lead to Him are being chosen that man's being resonates with the perfection of freedom, freedom that will be complete when we see God in the face and all liberty ends. Through real freedom, all the discordant and centrifugal elements of one's nature are brought together in harmony, as the idiosyncratic natures of the orchestra's instruments are united to sing the symphony. It takes much discipline and love, and obedience — and pruning!

The beauty and discipline of art and poetry are admirable in themselves; so are the courage of the hero and the self-abandonment of the martyr. All are admirable in themselves. Yet, they are but copies. They are copies of the Victim Christ Who cast aside all liberty so that He could sing His song of freedom and love: "Father, into Thy hands I give my spirit."

The purpose of this brief essay is to raise the problem of liberty and freedom in the mind of the reader. It seems that there is a very real difference in the meaning of the words. While liberty is necessary in human behavior, its necessity is precisely that of an atmosphere in which freedom can grow. Liberty is for freedom and reaches its maturity in freedom's transcending action. Like the Baptist, it must decrease while freedom increases. Its perfection is achieved in its death, when God is grasped with perfect freedom in the Beatific Vision.

With the genius of the poet, Francis Thompson has summed it all up in two lines:

Hardest servitude has he that jailed in arrogant liberty
And freedom, spacious and unflawed, who is walled about with God.

"Ode to the English Martyrs"

Are You Moving?

If the next issue of this journal should be delivered to a different address, please advise AT ONCE. The return postage and cost of remailing this publication is becoming more and more costly. Your cooperation in keeping us up-to-date with your address will be most helpful.