

# Towards a Correct Understanding of Freedom and Tolerance

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What is freedom? At a first sight the word freedom seems to indicate a space void of any external intromission. The etymon *dom*, that we meet in other words like *king-dom* or the latin *domus* means a space determined by a border. The word *free* characterizes the absence of an intromission. We can also find the etymon *dom* in the latin word *dominus*, the lord. The space in which all external intromissions are excluded is the space where the *dominus*, the lord, exercises his will.

The phenomenon of freedom seems then to imply on the one hand the absence of coercion, the absence of a foreign will. On the other hand we define freedom in relation to an interior will. An animal is free when it can roam without the restraint of a chain according to the interior impulse of his instincts that exercise in it the function of the will. Shall we say of a human being that he or she is free in the same sense? In the case of man the issue is a bit more complicated. We are inhabited by many impulses and drives and instincts. We possess as personal beings, nevertheless, a specific capacity that is called will in the proper sense of the word. It is a sense different from that we use when we say that a dog is free. A dog is free when it is not enchained. We all know, however, that we can control a dog also without a chain. We can train the dog making use of its instinctual drives so that it responds to our will even better than if it were at the chain. We can manipulate a dog. Is a manipulated dog still free? Here we usually do not make a distinction between a free dog and an unfree dog. We rather make a distinction between a domesticated dog and a wild or feral dog. We think it corresponds to the nature of a dog to be domesticated and therefore a domesticated dog is, in one sense, more free than a dog without a

master. A dog needs a master who takes care of it because it cannot take care of itself. If we think about a wolf instead of a dog our conclusions could be different. We wouldn't describe a wolf as an animal that can be domesticated. We rather speak of a tamed wolf, which seems to indicate that it corresponds more to the nature of a wolf to be savage than tamed. We have here introduced the concept of nature. The way in which a being can be free strictly depends on its nature. A dog is free under conditions that would make a wolf unfree. This concept of nature is not strictly biological. Biological drives and presuppositions are here very important, however there are other factors that are equally relevant. Biologically a wolf and a dog belong to the same species but they are different because of a different historical development.

Shall we consider human freedom in the same way in which we consider the freedom of animals? In one sense yes, in another no. For man as well as for all animals to be free means to be able to act according to nature. We cannot say what is human freedom without considering human nature. Human nature is different. Not only from the nature of any other animal species but from the nature of all other animal species considered together. The difference is so great that in one sense only of man we can properly say that he/she is free. Let us see why.

Like all other animals, man has in himself instinctual drives that incline him towards action. We feel hunger and then look for food. We are afraid and run away from the source of our fear. We are angry and attack those who make us angry. We feel sexual desire and try to copulate with the subject of the opposite sex that arouses our desire. But is this an accurate description of the properly human form of behavior? No, it is not. Other animals behave in that way. Humans do not. At least humans do not always act like this. Whilst we all feel the instinctual drives of other animals we are also subject to another law, the law of conscience. We ask ourselves questions like: is it good, just, proper, correct, to act in this way, to follow the pressure of our instinctual drives? Sometimes the answer is yes, and sometimes the answer is no. Humans have a mor-

al conscience. They are really free when they obey to the inner voice of moral conscience and are not subject to the absolute preponderance of their instincts. Human nature encompasses a quest of the moral good that is foreign to mere animal nature (even if some forms of behavior of higher animals might bear a certain similarity to the humans).

The first one to discover and describe this typical form of humanity was Socrates. He describes the world of values and, in particular, within this world, the value of the good.

Let us make one example, let us consider the sexual instinct. Max Scheler has described how the animal drive is directed towards the sexual organs of the other. The animal concentrates on its own urge and wants to discharge it. With humans it is different. Humans consider the form of the body of the other and are attracted not just by the sexual organs but by the beauty of the form. There is a moment of unselfish purely esthetical admiration in typically human sexual attraction. Scheler continues to describe the phenomenon of eye contact. Through the eye one lover is introduced into the personal intimacy of the other and appreciates the other not just as a body but as a person. That is not enough. Human love has not only a distinct esthetic but also an ethic dimension. I do not only consider my pleasure but also the pleasure of the loved one. I wish to receive pleasure but also to give pleasure. Moreover, I am interested in the true good of the other. I take a responsibility for this true good and subordinate my personal satisfaction to this responsibility. Is it good for her to have a sexual relationship with me? Would her personhood flourish or be impoverished in this relationship? This question cannot be answered without considering not only the couple of the two lovers but the general environment in which they are set. Would, for example, this act disrupt her (his) relationship to other persons, spouse, children etc...? All these considerations enter into a properly human love relationship, giving it an esthetical and ethical dimension that is missing in the purely animal drive. We want, of course, satisfy our drives, but in a way that is compatible with our human dignity and enhances it. We see a

world of values and know that our lives would be qualitatively different if we remain faithful to this world of values. We know also that we have to subdue our drives to the world of values. In the center of the world of values stands the value of truth. There can be no world of values without truth: Try to ask the question: does she love me truly? If her love is not true it is not love at all. A false love is no love. No value is valuable if it is not true. The world of values (the properly human world) is animated by the search for truth. This world of values is not given to us all at once. It manifests itself step by step and we have to follow its unfolding investigating at the same time the sense of our human experience. Truth and good and beauty are the ordering principles of the world of values and they determine what the proper conditions for the satisfaction of our instinctual drives are. St. Augustine calls the faculty to order the world according to the principles of truth, good, beauty and wisdom. We could call it also reason. A human life is a life led according to reason.

Now a paradox arises. Whilst for all (other) animals to be free means to act according to instinct for man to be free means to be able to act according to reason. The instinctual side of man must be convinced to obey to reason. Animal freedom can be defined against external pressure. If I am left to my instincts I am free. For man it is more complicated. Human freedom is defined in opposition to two different kinds of pressure: external pressure but also the internal pressure of the instinctual drives trying to avoid the control and disavow the primacy of reason. Human freedom, therefore, demands the self control of the person, who can do what he or she sees to control his or her own passions.

Immanuel Kant stresses the social relevance of his specific human freedom in his concept of the transcendental I. The transcendental I is the subjectivity in which man acts without the conditioning of passions only guided by the idea of the good (actually for Kant it is rather the idea of duty, but now we cannot deal with the difference between these two ideas). This subjectivity is easily directed towards the common good. Man cannot see anything as good if it is only his own individual selfish good opposed to the good of others. The so called Kan-

tian imperative always tries to preserve the social character of the good. The experience of the value of the person, and in particular the experience of the value of the other person, induces me to recognize that I cannot define my individual good in opposition to the good of the other. Hence the rule: consider always the person, in yourself and in others, always also as an end and never only as a means. A society in which this rule is not acknowledged cannot be a truly human society.

If we consider the complexity of human freedom we are forced to see that there are two ways in which we speak of human freedom. We could call the first the lesser freedom and the second the greater freedom. Luther differentiates in his theological language between the freedom of the flesh and Christian freedom.

In one sense we can speak of the freedom of man in the same way in which we speak of the freedom of animals, meaning the absence of external interferences. If we are slaves of our passions, however, this freedom will not be real human freedom. If we are manipulated by others through the offer of different kinds of pleasure so that we renounce the use of reason and behave as if we did not possess an autonomous capacity for the knowledge and the recognition of good and evil, then we are not free. Aristotle goes as far as to say that for such men it is better to be slaves of other human beings than of their own passions, since they are unable to be free. The specific human freedom arises out of the human capacity to recognize values and to know truth. We could also see that in human beings freedom is ordered to love. When we recognize the value of another person and choose to belong to this person in love than we make the proper use of our freedom and become truly free.

A man who never makes the experience of love leaves this world as void as he was when he first entered into it. His freedom becomes slavery.

A necessary consequence of the nature of human freedom seems to be that our freedom needs to be educated. We are born free, but at the same time we must become free through the control of our passions and the search for truth.

In a certain cultural tradition the control of passions is equated with the destruction and humiliation of those passions. The will is opposed to passions and has to subdue them. I think it is more proper to see the relation between intellect, passion and will rather in terms of education. The instinctive side of man is not bad; the body is not an enemy of the soul. The instinctual drives are not bad. In principle they are aimed at evolving the good of the person. They come nearer to this good through the world of emotions. However, we cannot trust them completely. They have a certain leaning towards the individual self satisfaction and the oblivion of other values at stake in the action. In the moment of passion some values are seen by the soul with absolute evidence and force. In one sense, those values are really there. But the forcefulness of the passion can make us blind to other values that are equally at stake. Passion is like a lens that makes some things more evident but changes the proportions of reality. We must educate our passions by widening their scope according to the real order of reality. This order includes not only the objective hierarchy of values (some values stand higher than others) but also the subjective order according to which they are given to me. All children have an absolute value that I must recognize but my children are entrusted to my care in a way that is absolutely unique. The task of the education is that of making use of the force of passion in the service of the objective good. This demands, of course, also a certain measure of self restraint. Without self restraint there is no self possession and without self possession there is no freedom. Freedom is not only the fact of not being subject to the will of another but also the capacity of making one's own passions obey to one's will oriented by the knowledge of truth. Here lies the paradox of human freedom. On the one hand freedom demands the absence of external coercion. On the other hand it requires the capacity to lead one's own actions according to objective truth. Objective truth cannot be imposed upon the will, it demands according to its inner nature to be recognized and accepted and loved. Without objective truth, however, man cannot be free. Education is such a fascinating task, at the same time necessary and impossible,

because it has to do with freedom and love. It has to do also with credibility. The child enters into the path of virtue (meaning by virtue the habit of searching for truth and acting according to truth) because he or she loves and trusts his or her parents and listens to them when they tell him or her what is good and what is bad and consign to him or her the life experience they have gone through. The word tradition derives from the Latin word tradere and means to consign to the next generation the values that the ancestors have experienced as true. Tradition is not something fixed and unchangeable. The next generation accepts the spiritual heritage of the forefathers as a general hypothesis to be tested in their lives. Through this trial, what is really valuable and of permanent importance is distinguished from what is linked to the specific contingencies of the life of the other generations. A true tradition is continually tested, and challenged and renewed. Goethe tells us that “what you have received from your ancestors you must rediscover yourself, in order to possess it truly”. The critic is not opposite to tradition but is a part of its living body.

Now it seems that this process has been interrupted in our civilization. After the war the generation that had made the war found it difficult, in Germany and in Italy, to tell their children what they had gone through. Sometimes the horror was unspeakable. The generation of the fathers of those who are about sixty today, had earnestly believed in the religion of nationalism and that religion had failed, leading millions of men to war to sacrifice their lives and destroy the lives of others in a massacre without example in history. This has created a spiritual vacuum in which only material values survived. Our fathers worked hard for us and to rebuild Europe but the question on why this was worth the while remained largely unanswered. With the student revolt of '68 this break between the generations became apparent: the older generation could not consign the values they cherished, because they could not explain the reasons underlying those values and could not make sense of their own life experience. And the new generation rejected them without having any idea what could be substituted for them. The living process of tradition was interrupted.

As I said, only vital values survived this devaluation of all values (Max Scheler speaks of the “Entwertung aller Werte” but we have lived this experience in a form that was much more radical). T. S. Eliot explains, that when all values are dead what is left is only “usury, lust and power”.

Under these circumstances it is easy to lose memory of the greater freedom and to reduce freedom to the lesser freedom. We do not feel bound to search for truth and we do not want to live the experience of belonging to a person (or to a community, a nation, a church or a great ideal) in an act of self giving love. We rather want to be left alone and to be able to follow the impulse of the moment. We are concentrated on ourselves and, at the same time, we are completely exposed to the manipulation of our sentiments and ideas (if we still have any) through the media. We do not seek our inner truth and we are prone to assume the imitation of the protagonists of the star system as core of our life experience. As a result, we do not really love our life and we are not really interested in entering into ourselves or to our true happiness. The movie Avatar is an impressive representation of this condition of mind. We live another life that is not our real life and we play the role of the heroes of a legendary saga whilst we become emotionally starved, oppressed and depressed because of the absence of love and meaning in our real life. We have gone so far that it becomes difficult to remember or to understand the true meaning of the word freedom for many people. The indispensable effort of self control has been banned under the name “repression” and the result is the instability and precariousness of “frittered lives and squalid deaths” (T. S. Eliot) in a world in which “the word of God is unspoken”.

I think that what I have endeavored to explain is what Benedict XVI means when he speaks of the “anthropological question”. If we lose the perception of the true meaning of freedom then we lose at the same time the “anthropological difference”, that is the element that constitutes the difference between man and all other animals, the greater freedom based upon the search for truth and the encounter for truth. Immediately linked to the “anthropological question”

is another issue that frequently returns in the speeches of the Pope. It is the “emergency of education”. The only answer to the anthropological question is an education leading to a full and uncompromising experience of true humanity. The chain of tradition may be restored only through men and women who incorporate in themselves the world of values in such a way that they coincide with their own lives. Only in this way values may become convincing and generate a true force for change. In one sense this means that we need saints. Also on other occasions, in other epochal crises, the continuity of our tradition has been challenged and has been restored through the witness and the teaching of martyrs and saints. God never abandons his Church deprived of the witness of martyrs and saints, but not always do people (and first of all the clergy) recognize the witnesses among them.

The idea of tolerance is directly connected to the idea of freedom. Man must seek truth in order to be a man but must be free from external coercion in order to be able to search for truth. The lesser freedom is an unavoidable presupposition for the greater freedom. If I am compelled to act according to freedom, because of the pressure brought to bear on me by an external power, then I am not a free subject but a slave. A world in which people obey the objective truth because of fear and not because of intelligence and love, would not resemble paradise but rather hell. I am bound to act, moreover, according to the truth I have freely recognized. This means that I must obey my conscience, even in case that it be wrong. What is typical of our age is not the fact that we hold as true a lot of false presuppositions. This happens more or less in all historical epochs. What characterizes our current crisis is rather the fact that many of us use their lesser freedom in order to disengage from the moral duty of searching for truth. We think that there is no truth and it is not worth the while to search for something that does not exist. We cannot, of course, coerce the lesser freedom of others in order to compel them to be free according to the greater freedom. The only way open for a recovery of our civilization is the way of witness. This means that we must tolerate error in order not to destroy freedom. Toler-

ance is the simple recognition of the fact that I cannot think truth in the place of another. I can help another to discover truth through argumentation, example and witness but I cannot recognize truth in her or his stead.

In an age, however, in which the idea of truth seems to have been abolished, some may argue that this is not enough. We are required not to be judgmental, that is not to pass any judgment since the distinction of good and evil seems to have been obliterated and has lost its firm foundation in the nature of things. This leads to a kind of tolerance that is different from the one I have explained on the basis of the nature of truth. One is not satisfied with the fact that I recognize his right to error. He does not recognize the right of someone else to think and say that he is wrong. Any judgment based on the presumption of the existence of an objective truth must be excluded from the public square and those who uphold such judgments are labeled as enemies of democracy.

It is apparent that this pretension is self defeating. If there is no objective truth I have the right to my private truth but since there is only one world in which we all live I have also the right to impose this truth on others, if I have a chance to do it and if the balance of power is in my favor. The very expression "right" is misplaced in this context. The lion does not have a "right" to kill a gazelle. It just does it. A world without truth is a world where the words right and wrong have become devoid of meaning. It never occurs, however, that a supporter of moral relativism really thinks his or her intellectual stands coherently up to the last consequences, since this is really untenable in real life.

In current cultural and philosophical discussion the aggressive side of moral relativism is usually set aside to concentrate on the pretension that the non relativist has an inner drive towards the repression of the freedom of those who do not stand in agreement with him/her. We have already explained why this is not the case. The respect for the freedom of the other is a consequence of the reverence for the dignity of the person. I do not need to doubt my convictions to recognize your right to hold a dissenting opinion. It is enough to know that God wants you to come to truth through a free act of your conscience. If I do

not have the right to compel, to coerce, to threaten the dissenters, I nevertheless have the right to argue with them and to try to convince them. In the new mood of moral relativism this is not allowed and is considered as an intolerable offence. I am ready to accept, for example, that nobody has a right to compel gay people to change their sexual preferences or to mistreat them for this reason but I am also convinced that I have a right to think that homosexuality is intrinsically wrong and to argue this conviction in the public debate.

We therefore have two visions of tolerance. One concerns a tolerance without truth. We have already seen how contradictory this concept is. In one possible formulation this may exclude tolerance, in another it implies a prohibition to discuss the behavior of others. A new categorical imperative substitutes the old Kantian ones: the norm of thy action be to collude with the pretension of the other of being not what she or he is but what he fancies to be. There is a bridge between the two possible versions of the principle of tolerance in a society without truth. This bridge is the principle of self preservation and the desire to avoid conflicts that might expose this self preservation to danger. The imperative of the new science of morals is changed thus: collude with the pretension of those who hold enough power to impose their view of things and their interests. The opinion of a grown up who pretends the unborn baby is just a piece of flesh colludes with the position of the child who pretends (although he cannot articulate this thought) to be a human being. If there is no objective truth then force takes the place of truth and those who are more powerful also possess a larger share of truth.

If we connect the idea of tolerance with the idea of truth we have a completely different outcome. Truth exists although I do not possess it and can see it only "as in a mirror". I have the duty to tell the truth I have seen in order to help others to live in the truth. I must always be open to the possibility that others have seen sides and aspects of truth that I have not seen and must be ready to incorporate them in my vision of truth. I must never forget that truth is one but that there are many avenues leading to truth and, in one sense, each

human being has her or his personal alley of truth. I must respect the conscience in good faith of the other even in case that she/he errs. And I must always remember that I can judge only facts but not persons and their conscience. I can say; this action is good and this action is bad. I can never say: this man is (absolutely) good or this man is (absolutely) bad. Action has an exterior side that I can judge but also an interior side in the conscience of the person that only God can judge. But I have a right and a duty to pass a judgment on actions. If we deprive the human being of this right we perform an amputation of the moral dimension of his life. We dehumanize her or him.

Let us stress once again that the right and duty to pass judgments does not imply an attitude of superiority in relation to the (other) sinners. We are not perfect. We know that we are poor and fallible human beings and that we are not better than those whose actions we affirm to be bad. We may easily be equally wrong or even worse on other issues. And we never know if, in a given situation, under the same pressure of circumstances, we would have done any better than the subject whose actions we censure. Nevertheless we know that his actions were wrong, that something has been done that should not have been done and we have a duty to say it in order to help the other to better himself and to better the human quality of our life together. This is also an essential aspect of freedom. This cannot be confused with hate speech. Hate speech offends, demands the exercise of physical violence against the offender, wants to ban her/him from our society. In our case it is quite the opposite. If I am wrong my best friend is not the one who lets me sink in my error (for example taking drugs, destroying his family, offending my friends, etc.). He should be the one who tells me the truth even at the risk of exposing himself to my outrage and my reprisals. This also belongs to the essence of freedom (freedom to tell the truth) and tolerance (we must tolerate the freedom of the other of telling the truth or at least what in conscience she or he thinks to be true).

We have gone a long way towards the complete destruction of the true meaning of freedom and tolerance. We do not want to emancipate ourselves from our

instinctual drives and we have proclaimed the superiority of pleasure over conscience. In this way we have lost the idea of happiness, that is the properly human way of taking pleasure not against the other human being or disregarding her/his dignity but together with her/him in a true community of love. We do not want to accept the self discipline and the virtues that we need in order to develop our potentiality for the greater freedom. The greater freedom is what St. Thomas Aquinas would have called a “bonum arduum” (something very valuable that demands a high price to be won). The reward of the efforts needed to acquire the greater freedom is the possibility to live a great love. As a consequence of our cowardice we, the people of this generation, live only small loves that are not enough to fill our lives, which therefore remain void and tasteless. We say we are tolerant only because we have no passionate interest in the lives of others and only want to be left alone. And we are left alone until our world peters out “not with a bang but with a whimper”.

Can we still have hope? Of course we can. The heart of man naturally longs for love, and for truth and for freedom and this thirst will never be quenched. There will always be martyrs and saints and through their witness the history of freedom can be renewed. We do not know how long the night will be but we do know that it will come to pass.