

ON THE POSSIBILITY OF ABSOLUTE FREEDOM

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I

Absolute freedom is possible in those places where an individual is ‘free to do any act’. In this context, the word ‘free’ means ‘without the bondage or any sense of responsibility, morality, obligation and particular narrower intention’ etc. Such a situation is not possible in this phenomenal world because, whenever we perform any work, some moral restrictions are there, if not others. We are not allowed to do any work as we wish due to having certain moral restrictions. Sometimes, the sense of responsibility or sense of obligation may stand as impediments in the way of expressing our freedom. An individual’s obsession with a particular object and his ignoring duties towards the members of his family and fellow-beings of the society, does not give rise to a harmonious state of being.

When an individual transcends nature, he becomes free from any empirical pressure, agent’s own inclination, passion etc.¹ It is the state of Absolute Freedom. If someone performs some action after keeping a purpose in view, he is not absolutely free; as desire goads him to do so. In most of the cases in the phenomenal level an individual is desirous of performing those types of action by which his purpose is served and hence, the end – in- view or *prayojana* inspires him to do some work and engages him in an activity.² A man’s desire is related to the result as pleasure or the absence of pain. The knowledge in the form- “The orange is good for health” is known as the knowledge of the conduciveness to the desired object. If the attainment of the good is desired, the perception of orange will give rise to the knowledge of the form: “This is conducive to its being desired” (*Idammadiṣṭasādhanam*). So, the knowledge of the conduciveness to the desired gives rise to the knowledge of acceptance from which the action *aspravṛtti* (inclination) follows. In the same way, the knowledge of its being conducive of what is

extremely unpleasant (*aniṣṭasādhanatājñāna*) causes aversion (*aniṣṭa*) which causes refraining (*nivṛtti*). That which does not seem to be conducive to the desired is rejection. Both *pravṛtti* and *nivṛtti* cannot be described as absolutely free as they are due to the empirical pressure and agent's own inclination and refraining.³

II

One question may be raised in this connection. In most of Indian philosophical systems, the law of *karma* is accepted. If our actions are governed by our past actions, our freedom is restricted.

Radhakrisnan has tried to give a solution of the problem. To him, *karma* or connection with the past is consistent with creative freedom. Our freedom is determined by it. The *Law of Karma* asserts that our free actions are under the domain of this law.⁴ These *karmas* make us associated with the active power which is in proportion to its sincerity and insistence. The *Law of Karma* declares one will get return according to energy invested in it. The Nature has some power of responding to the demands of self. For this, an individual has to employ his whole power. Freedom (restricted) is not caprice as it is connected with the past. Hence, an individual's freedom is not 'uncontrolled' rather controlled or restricted by past *karma*-s. Though the self is not free from determinism, it can bring the past to some extent and turn the past into a new future. An individual, though bound by *karma*-s, has the freedom of choice. He is not supposed to surrender himself to the past *karma*-s, but he has the choice to mould the future in his own instead of suffering the past. Life is not bound, but a growth which is described as "undetermined in a measure"⁵. Here, *karma*-s of the past life are taken as 'measure', and present growth or development is described as 'undetermined' since it is determined by an individual's choice. Such a situation has been highlighted by Dr. Radhakrishnan with the help of a metaphor of card-playing. He argues: "Life is like a game of bridge. The cards in the game are given to us. We do not select them. They are traced to the past *karma*, but we are free to make any call as we think fit and lead any suit. Only we are limited by the rules of the game. We are freer when we start the game than later on when the game has developed and our choices become restricted. But till the very end there is always a

choice. A good player will see the possibility which a bad does not. The more skilled a player, the more alternative does he perceive”⁶

From the above it may be decided that an individual always possesses freedom of choice or restricted freedom. An individual can involve himself in an action if he has some sort of restricted freedom without which no engagement is possible. Agency (*kartrtva*) is possible in an individual if there is restricted freedom. The fact is evidenced from the Pāṇini’s aphorism – ‘*Svatantrahkartā*’ (1.4.54). Radhakrishnan has brought the case of agency in grammar because an individual can be designated as an agent if there is freedom of choice. In fact, what an object is extremely wanted by an agent is called object (*‘karturīpsitatamam karma’-Pāṇinisūtra- 1.4.49*). This *karma* or object is possible if an agent extremely wants something. The suffix ‘*tama*’ is added to the term ‘*īpsīta*’ in order to show that something is extremely needed by an agent. If the agent is in the phenomenal stage, he might need numerous things which are of great use to him. If a human being is in the transcendental level, he hardly requires anything because of fulfillment of all desires. That is why; freedom means always a restricted one, which is showed by the term ‘*svatantra*’.

III

Though the prohibitions and restrictions are hindrances of our freedom, they are very much essential, because freedom without restrictions is not possible and neither desirable. In our scriptures we get two types of things- injunction (*vidhi*) and prohibition (*niṣedha*) that are otherwise called affirmative (*sadarthaka*) and prohibitive (*pratiṣedhārthaka*) respectively. The importance of prohibition and restriction lies on the fact that it does not permit an individual to do anything whatever he likes (*svechhācāra*). As this restriction comes in the way of doing any action, it can make an individual balanced by resisting him from performing the unwanted action.

Just as the systematic stroke used in music or rhythm (*tāla*) and tempo or *laya* are essential for the emergence of melody, the prohibitive orders or restrictions in our life make us balanced. Time-measurement is highly important in Indian music because it

‘regulates’ the duration of musical sounds. It bears a regulative value, so that sounds may give rise to melody. The role of restriction may be emphasized if the role of the mother is taken into consideration in a child’s life. The mother is dealing with the nourishment of the child as she shows her affection by taking proper care of him without keeping limit. Hence, the child may be spoiled because of the ‘excessive’ affection shown by her. The father has been entrusted with seeing the all-round progress of the child, but simultaneously he will see that the child is not spoiled by the indulgences shown by the mother. Keeping this purpose in view, he lays down some rules or puts restrictions to the child so that his progress can be assured. In order to check the undisciplined character of the child, the father may apply some methods of guiding and directing principles to the activities of the child so that he can be made disciplined. The distinction between in disciplined and disciplined life can be compared to a wild forest and a decorated garden. A wild forest given by nature can be converted to a well-decorated beautiful garden with the help of some planning and care given to it. The functions of restriction are identical as they promote to the emergence of beautifully soothing experience. Sometimes the rhythmic sound of an engine or rhythmic sound of the waves of the sea may create a soothing sensation.⁷

If we want to have melodious lives, we have to go through such restrictions or prohibitions. If metrical language is required, some signs like pause, semicolon etc., should have to be put forward. Though all these seem to be impediments of language, their application makes the language metrical and melodious and thereby the language becomes pleasant to us. If, in the like manner, a life full of beauty is desirable, some restrictions would have to be put forth on our enjoyment. If enjoyment goes on for an endless period with no restriction or if suffering continues for a long time with no interval, it leads us to the state of mental disbalance. In the case of the absence of any restriction, a man cannot check himself from leaning towards an object or action, which leads him to the world of disbalance. On account of this, an individual loses himself wandering after endless happiness or miseries just as a man does the same following endless happiness or miseries. It is also important to note that discipline follows from

restriction. Without putting chain or restriction in action discipline does not come into being.

If some argue the excessive restrictions might counter our freedom, which is also not supportable, it can be said that both excessive restriction and excessive freedom are not desirable, as the situation cannot bring harmony. The excessive restriction might make our life standstill while excessive freedom makes us undisciplined. Hence, the restriction without freedom and freedom without restriction is not at all desirable. These prohibitive moral codes and restrictions have got a regulative value in our day-to-day life. Just as traffic signal or speed-breaker is highly essential for controlling or regulate the traffic, prohibition or restriction is required for regulating the vehicle of life. 'Regulation' (*niyama*) comes from restriction (*niyantraṇa*) just as regular physical exercise makes a man physically balanced after removing unwanted fatness and leanness. The prohibition or restriction makes us harmonized after removing unwanted growth or leaning.

In another way, it can be justified that absolute freedom is not possible. If every individual is desirous of attaining absolute freedom, the result would be disappointing, because our freedom is conditioned by freedom of others. Hence, the freedom which is restricted can alone give us our stability and progress. For the sake of others' well-being, an individual puts restriction on his own personal freedom in this world. When an individual, being attracted to the object of enjoyment, wants to have them in spite of knowing that it will be harmful to him, he belongs to the former type. Another person may have the same desire, but after thinking its bad consequences on his life he resists his temptation and imposes restriction on his own freedom. The person of this sort belongs to the latter type. The former becomes the slave of desire while the latter conquers the desire after putting restriction on him. The disciplined freedom is real as it is associated with our wellbeing. Imposing restriction on enjoyment may provide us with the inner strength through which an individual is associated with his well-being. What distinguishes a man from the beast is that he recognizes this universal interdependence and orders his life accordingly. He establishes conventions, mutual understanding laws

of conduct for the welfare of the society, imposing restrictions on himself for the benefit of the whole.

This importance of ‘restriction’ in our lives has also been admitted by Rabindranath Tagore.⁸ The fundamental thing for performing high austerity in the entire world is to curb our desire and to curtail the desire of happiness, which is technically called *aparigraha* in Indian Ethics. We should go in such a way so that we do not lean towards a particular side in which there is too much burden or weight without adhering to harmony.⁹ Nothing can be made beautiful if there is no limit and hence limit has a prominent role in beautification. Ugliness lies there where there is no limitation or restriction.

IV

The absolute freedom is possible if an individual transcends this mundane world. A man whose mind becomes purified through performing disinterested actions and who, after realizing the whole universe as his own self, becomes self-restrained, can perform work ‘freely’ for the welfare of the world or propitiation of humankind(*lokasamgraha*) and becomes unattached to it. Such types of action may be free actions. The *Summum bonum* of life is not merely the attainment of spirituality and *mukti* for oneself, but service to all *Jivas* so that they may also enjoy the bliss of divine life. A free man (*Jīvanmukta*) in his *vyavahārika* state works for the welfare of others and his chief characteristic is *jīvakāruṇya* which is the positive gain of freedom. An embodied liberated man performs all the activities like eating, sleeping etc. spontaneously out of his old habit but not intentionally or consciously.¹⁰ Just as a man who knows the falsity on an object produced through magic cannot think that the presented magic- show is real, a *Jivanmukta*, through enjoying something, cannot think them as real and hence, he does not own the self- credit of performing activities.¹¹ That is why, a *Jivanmukta* is called as not having ear through he possesses it etc.¹² In these cases the absolute freedom is possible. Apart from this, all activities performed in the mundane level are restricted freedom, which is also not valueless in the true sense of the term.

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