

Freedom, Reason, Ethics and Aesthetics

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Man's enterprises in knowledge and action cannot but be regarded as founded in freedom for, if it were not so, they would not be 'human'. Yet, they both have in-built constraints in them, the constraint of reason and that which is designated by the term, 'good' and 'bad', or 'right' and 'wrong'.

There is a third restriction also, though that has generally not been articulated as such. The distinction between the 'beautiful' and that which is not so is known but whether it functions as a constraint on freedom or is 'felt' as its 'fulfilment' is not clear. Nor have its relation to reason and morality—the other two constraints—been deeply explored in philosophical thought up till now.

The 'demand' in all these three dimensions is for a self-imposition of restrictions by freedom on itself so that it may 'create' something or bring into 'being' that was not there, 'doing' something which God itself is supposed to have done at the beginning of creation with the act of creation. But the constraints on the act of God's creation, in case there were any, could have been only 'internal' or those inbuilt in it by the notion of 'Being' itself as if something was 'to be'. It had to have some particular kind of being giving it an actuality which was distinct from pure possibility on the one hand and necessity on the other.

The radical contingency of both the act, which is only another name for 'freedom', and of that which was brought into being for—if it were not so—will become 'necessary' and destroy the freedom of that which is supposed to have brought it into 'being' and which limits, determines and constrains all that does or does not happen after that.

In contradistinction to whatever may be meant by all this, 'human freedom' is limited, fundamentally as also radically, by the 'freedom' of other beings, without which it would neither be conceivable, nor have any meaning. The requirement of 'inter-subjective

objectivity' is inbuilt and writ large on all the enterprises of man in all the realms he creates, whether it be in the field of knowledge, action or anything else.

Not only this, whatever be that which is brought into 'being' by the 'freedom' which it presupposes, it restricts freedom itself, for it has to take it into account in 'creating' anything further. The successive acts of creation, thus, not only go on restricting freedom and increasing the constraints on it, but also bring into being or weave a net of inter-relationships between the 'beings' so created and the 'freedom' that is said to have brought them into 'being', as it is supposed to be their presupposition.

The relation between beings that are so brought into being may itself become that of creation as in the case of human beings or, at another level, in the case of 'living being' in general and, in case one believes in 'causality', in the case of all beings, whatever be their nature.

The deeper, and more intransigent problem created by all this is that it affects freedom itself, as it increasingly 'feels' the 'constraints' on it imposed by the 'feeling' aroused in it by what it has brought into being in the three dimensions we have pointed out earlier, i.e., that which arises in the context of 'knowing', 'acting' and 'feeling'.

'Creation', or the effective exercise of 'freedom' is impossible without what Kant called 'constitutive rules', without which nothing can be 'built', as it has to be distinguished from others that have been 'built' differently or, rather, according to different rules. But, as far as we know, Kant did not distinguish between the 'rules' governing the activity and those 'constituting' what is 'built' by it. The 'morality' of the creative exercise of 'freedom' is different from all that which may be brought into being through that 'activity'. 'Knowledge' or 'knowing' or 'understanding' is perhaps the clearest example of this as, even in the Kantian framework, the 'knowing activity' as constituted by the unifying of the manifold of that which 'appears' as 'given' through the categories of understanding in the form of a 'judgement' is, and has to be different from any specific example of knowledge, or knowledge of a particular field or domain usually designated as 'subject' or 'discipline' or *śāstra*, all of which differ from one another.

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The idea of a 'constitutive rule' bringing a 'reality' into being becomes even clearer if we take 'play' or 'game' as a paradigmatic example of it. All games have constitutive rules as they make a game 'this' game and distinguish from others. This is fairly well known, though not quite reflected upon for its significance, even for reflection that considers itself 'philosophical'. The deeper question, however, relates to the constitutive modality of that particular exercise of freedom that manifests or embodies itself in 'play', or 'game' or sport. To use a Kantian phrase—which may appear to many as 'philosophically blasphemous' in this context—what are the transcendental *a priori* conditions that make a play a 'play' and distinguish it from, say, 'knowledge' or that which is moral or a sensibility that 'senses' the beautiful in nature, or that which finds meaning and fulfilment and, a feeling of richness in all positively felt emotional relationship with the 'other', no matter whether it be 'human', 'non-human' or otherwise, i.e., that which is 'in itself', be it Nature or God or anything else, as the *Nāsadiya Sūkta* in the *Rgveda* said long ago.

But 'play' is not 'playfulness' and, though 'rooted' in it, it constrains and limits itself by 'rules', something which becomes explicit in what are called 'games' or 'sports'. There have to be 'constitutive rules', as Kant saw long ago, to make a 'game' or 'sport' this game or this sport as distinct from all the others. The 'rules' have to be 'accepted', 'observed' and even 'obeyed' if one wants to play the game, even when one plays alone or 'solitaire', as in the card game called 'Patience'. When others are involved, as in most other games, there has to be a 'referee' or 'umpire' or a 'neutral observer' who knows what is right according to the rules and what is not and whose decision in this regard is accepted as 'binding' on both the parties.

The proliferation of games constituted by different rules and the way they have been modified over time would reveal the inherent necessity in freedom to restrict itself to build something, specially when others are involved. The acceptance of the 'restriction' by 'freedom' on itself, however, is voluntary or free in all such cases, as one may or may not play a particular game or even any game at all.

The distinction between the desire to build or create with others, or without others, and not to want to do so is crucial to the

'understanding' of the notion of freedom at least at one level which, if not the most fundamental, is at least one of those that has to be regarded as fundamental.

For some strange reason, however, this 'freedom to build or not to build', 'to create or not to create', 'to want or not to want' has not only been seen as the very definition of 'freedom', but also identified with only one of its fundamental 'choices', i.e., the choice of 'not wanting anything at all' as that alone can be the state of freedom, the other, or, rather 'others', seen only as 'bondage' or 'bondages' of different kinds. This is the classical position of Indian thinking on the subject where *nivṛtti* alone is seen as 'freedom', 'real freedom' and, by this simple twist, all enterprises of man in the field of knowledge or art or morals or the realisation of other values are seen as signs of bondage, rooted in some fundamental mistake or error called *avidyā* or *mithyājñāna*, as the *Nyāya Sūtra* calls it, designating all *pravṛtti* as *doṣa* by definition.

But the distinction between *mithyājñāna* and *jijñasā* is presupposed, just as that between *vidyā* and *avidyā*, and the *jijñasā* to 'know' the one and pursue the *puruṣārthā* needed to 'realise' it.

But 'knowledge' is a strange thing and if some 'action' is needed to 'realise' something or bring it into being, then it cannot already be there and, what is worse, shall, when realised or actualised, be a correlate of, or relative to, the 'type' of action undertaken to achieve it.

That this, however unpalatable it may seem, has actually been the case, is evidenced by the proliferation of *sādhana* or yoga or spiritual practices claiming to give the aspirant or the seeker or the *jijñāsu* that 'ultimate' truth or knowledge or liberation not only in the Indian, but in all traditions.

Yet, paradoxically, even this search or seeking for something that is regarded as 'absolute' and 'final', is said to require for its attainment, a 'discipline' that seems the very opposite of that which was sought, i.e., 'Freedom' or 'Liberation'. The 'willing acceptance' of restrictions on freedom seems, even in this case, the very precondition for the 'exercise of freedom, as was the situation in other cases. The monk or the nun does not seem very 'happy' examples or 'exemplars' as they exemplify restrictions bordering on the impossible for a 'biological being' who, in order even to

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remain 'minimally' as such, has to breathe and eat and do what every one else does, unless he chooses, as the Jain *sādhus* are supposed to do, *Santhāra*, i.e., voluntary abstinence from everything, till one 'dies', i.e., 'ceases to live' and is 'freed' from the basic bondage that is 'life'.

The seeking for freedom as freedom from all restrictions leads, thus, to the questioning of those very conditions that seem to make 'freedom' possible, at least at the human level. But if 'to be' is to be a particular kind of being, then the 'freedom' of that being is bound to be limited by the very defining structure of what it means to be that type of being. The *svarūpa* and *svabhāva* would provide the restrictive structural conditions within which alone freedom will be able to function and get its specific modalities concretised just because of those conditions that constitute it as it is just that types of being and not any other.

But, is freedom necessarily restricted by the type of being one 'finds' oneself to be? Or can one conceive of a being who is 'free' even in respect of the choice of what type of being one would like to be?

Recent existentialist thought has flirted with the idea that man is this 'kind of being', forgetting not only the pre-determined biological structure that he necessarily has to have in order to be a human being, but also the psychological, social, economic and cultural preconditions, including both language and gender differences, without which man, as we know him, cannot even be conceived.

But a human being, about whose freedom we are trying to think, is not only a particular kind of being, but has also 'others', like him, in his/her environment. The 'restriction' on freedom that this involves has seldom been the focus of attention of those who have written or thought about the problem of freedom. The socio-political thinkers who have thought about this problem in Western tradition have been faced with the dilemma that a human-individual in such a situation can only become free by forfeiting his freedom and mortgaging it to society and polity so that these may 'ensure' and 'insure' the freedom that they consider it 'advisable' for him to have. The large, collective ends of humanity cannot be achieved except by a collective effort which involves, by definition,

a subordination of the will of each to rules, regulations and laws without which such collective effort and action over a long period of time by diverse individuals and groups of individuals cannot be conceived at all.

The paradox that such a 'renouncing' of one's freedom by each is the very pre-condition of its enhancement, if correct, should be seen as revealing something about the nature of freedom which, perhaps, would not have otherwise been revealed.

The individual's feeling that any constraint on one's freedom is its denial would, then, be seen to be an 'illusion' generated by the illusory self-sufficiency of the monadic self-consciousness as it 'feels' and 'perceives' itself to be.

Yet, though large parts of traditional religions and spiritual thought, as also the secular thinking of 'modern' and 'post-modern' thinking is based on this, it shows the inner self-contradiction involved in it, by its own endeavour to 'actualise' and 'realise' this freedom through unbelievable disciplining, constraining, rule-making processes and institutions such as *sangha*, church, state, with their diverse law-enforcing machinery, to see that this 'freedom' is at least minimally preserved to ensure not only that its 'exercise' does not become 'self-suicidal' but also that it enhances the area of 'inner' and 'external' freedom for everyone, as far as possible.

The notion that 'freedom' may be 'increased' or 'lessened', or that it has an 'external' and 'internal' dimension, or that it may have various 'modalities' even within these, may sound paradoxical or even a contradiction-in-terms, but this is only because one does not realise that one is talking not in a vacuum, or of a vacuous kind of being, or being-as-such, or being-qua, being, but of a specific kind of being which, at least in the case of human beings, happens to be not only biologically alive with all the constraints and opportunities that it involves, but is also not only conscious, but self-conscious about it all, including this very fact that it is self-conscious, and that it cannot but be so.

The self-consciousness, however, reveals to it that it is not only a 'biological being', but also a 'mental being' with all that it involves, and not just this, but a 'thinking being' as well with all the 'doubts' and 'uncertainties' that it involves and, what is worse, a being plagued with the perpetual burden and the necessity of making

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the distinction between 'right' and 'wrong', 'good' and 'bad' and giving rise to a perpetual suspicion that one may perhaps be really guilty, even when one is not.

But the realm of 'values' is not exhausted by the moral or the ethical distinction alone; it pursues one relentlessly questioning and asking if 'what is', is as 'it should be', for if it could be otherwise, it might not only be different, but also more 'satisfying' to oneself and others in more ways than one.

Dr Mukund Lath has called this *aucitya-bodha*, meaning thereby, that the inalienable and intrinsic property of self-consciousness which 'sees' all that it is aware of in terms of what 'it is not', detached from the 'pleasantness' or 'unpleasantness' or even the 'neutral' feeling that all consciousness-qua-consciousness usually has towards it.

The term *aucitya* does not convey the 'negative centrality' of this aspect of self-consciousness which finds itself perpetually dissatisfied with 'whatever is' even if 'what is' has been brought into being by its own activity. This is what gives rise to that 'angst' or 'alienation' or 'entfreeming' or 'being banished from the Garden of Eden', about which existentialists and some other modern thinkers have spoken. But though there has been much talk about it, it has not been adequately appreciated that intrinsic negation involved in self-consciousness not only gives rise to that dialectic, about which Hegel and Marx spoke in recent times, but also to this nagging, perpetual doubt about one's own 'authenticity', 'honesty' and 'sincerity' in talking about it all, as one is never even sure whether one has done all that one could to meet the challenge posed by this awareness that something 'should be' or 'ought to be' and the obligations that it imposes on oneself is realise it or bring it into being.

The 'negative critique' that 'self-consciousness involves' may, thus, turn on itself and lead not just to the desire to 'know' oneself, but rather to change or transform oneself. 'Know Thyself' or आत्मानं विद्दि is known to everybody, but the deeper problem of 'changing' or 'transforming' oneself into that which one 'ought to be' and which one is not, has seldom been articulated, or the axiological and ontological problems it poses, squarely faced. 'Transforming the world nearer to one's heart's desire, or the values that one holds

and make it better' is known to most human beings. But it is seldom asked how the world can become better, if the human beings constituting it do not try to also become 'better'. The facile assumption of all reformist and revolutionary thought has been that a human being is a function of the socio-cultural environment or the political-cum-economic-cum-legal institutions and that unless these are changed, it is Utopian to think that the individual can change himself, however much he may try to do so. Not only this, it has been argued that 'private vices may lead to public good' and that 'individual goodness may stand in the way of development and progress of societies, politics and civilisation'. Greed and ambition, competitiveness and the lust for power, aggrandisement and war lead people not only to do their utmost to achieve their goals, but also promote heroic virtues of sacrifice, discipline, thrift, abstinence and a spirit of adventure, entrepreneurship and risk-taking, which the pursuit of 'good' at the individual level can never give.

The argument, though seemingly decisive, proves—if it proves anything—just the opposite as it justifies all these seeming opposites not by what they are, but by what they lead to, and that which they are said to lead so, is supposed to be 'good'. The notion of 'instrumental goodness' is not unknown to 'ethical thought', but it is generally not appreciated that it is parasitic on the notion of that which is 'intrinsically good', or at least not on the denial of its possibility as if there were some 'self-contradiction' involved in it.

The 'self-contradiction'—in case there is one—seems to be at a deeper and more fundamental level. It is involved in the very 'self-realisation' of freedom through its exercise, which necessarily imposes not only restrictions or rules so it may be actualised, but also 'dependent' on others without whose help and cooperation, or even competition as in sports and many other fields, it cannot be 'exercised' at all.

At a still deeper level, the problem is posed at the ontological level, whether the idea of *Pure Being* makes any sense at all or, in other words, Being in order to *actualise* itself has to accept the limitation of being *this being* and, what is surprising, also simultaneously, being different from what 'this being;' is. Yet, if this is not to be an extensionally finite, denumerable set and if the possibility

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'Freedom' a situation of 'knowledge' unchangeable at the human level always ends so much freedom of the situation, but results, of ability'.

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of 'new' beings' is to be there, the entire thing would have to be essentially an 'open' one, destroying the usual metaphysical formulation at its foundations.

Time is usually thought of in this connection, but the question of 'openness' now has invaded the heart of mathematics itself which, in its earlier formulations, was supposed to be, at least in principle, a 'formally closed system', as Euclidean Geometry was supposed to be.

The relation between 'openness' and 'temporality' is not easy to formulate but, at least on a *prima facie* view, 'openness' in the field of knowledge, at least as it has revealed itself in mathematics, seems to lead backward and not as in action, forwards. The 'Backward openness' leads to an ever-expanding horizon in the past, as in physics, in an infinite regress that does not affect the validity of what has been proved or established up till now in any way whatsoever, as in mathematics. The Big Bang, as everyone knows, postulates the outer limit of this backward movement in physics which perhaps distinguishes physics from mathematics because there is no 'external' check on it, as there is in physics. But physics too is at the mercy of this 'externality' and if a Penrose talks of "Before the Big Bang" no one says he is saying something which cannot be said, just as physicists who are trying to find if the so-called constants of Nature are really 'constant' are told that what they are trying to find cannot be found as it is a contradiction-in-terms.

'Freedom' that this 'openness' brings also brings an 'uncertainty', a situation never faced by man before as, earlier, both the notions of 'knowledge' and 'reality' had the idea of 'essential unchangeability' about them. Yet, both 'freedom' and 'openness' at the human level, whether in the field of 'knowledge' or 'action', always encounter an 'unexpected limitation' or 'obstruction' not so much from the 'given' nature of things or structural constraints of the situation, though they do continue to be effective to some extent, but rather from 'acceptability' or 'unacceptability' of the results, of one's actions, or even of their 'desirability' or 'undesirability'.

This has been known both in mathematics and physics where even some of the most fundamental operations such as, say, those of multiplication in respect of negative numbers or of 'action at a

Freedom, thus, is related to action or conduct or behaviour in an essential sense and, thus, is related to 'good', or 'value' in general and, hence, also not only to the 'other' or 'others' in an essential sense but, reflexively, to oneself as the 'agent' of the 'action' also. The 'exercise' of 'freedom' affects not only others but, in a radical and essential sense, freedom itself. Freedom can be enhanced, increased or become less, or even lost by its 'effect' on itself through its exercise, and one 'knows' it, even when the others do not, though in extreme cases, it becomes obvious to others what is happening, even if it remains a matter of faith that 'ontologically' freedom can never 'not be', as it is identical with *Being-as-self-consciousness*, or at least as one of its defining properties.

It is true that conditions within which freedom is exercised 'condition' its 'exercise' but the direction that this exercise takes and the way it is exercised create those very conditions which retard or enhance it in an essential way. The 'facilitating' or 'obstructing' situations are at least partly created by oneself and, at another level, by the fact whether the exercise of freedom by oneself has enhanced the 'freedom' of others, or at least not affected it adversely.

Freedom, thus, is not what the existentialists or post-modernists, or even the *mokṣa*-seekers have thought it to be. It is embedded in a plurality of 'interactive beings', 'living' and 'human', where there is no such thing as freedom, given for once and for all time, but something that is continuously 'lost' and 'gained' by the dynamic interplay of the interacting constituents of the dynamics.

The 'freedom to withdraw' as we said earlier, is always there, but only temporarily so, as one has to 'return', unless one chooses to exercise the freedom in order to destroy the very center of freedom at the human level itself.

To talk of 'freedom' in the context of death, seems meaningless, just as one does not know where would 'freedom' be if one were not born as a 'human being'. Within these two opposed, but inter-related 'limits', freedom at the human-level has its 'being' and only by its, 'humane exercise' can a 'realm of freedom' be built by individual and collective effort of each in the consciousness that itself is 'freedom centred' and knows that its freedom is fragile and dependent not only on 'others', but on the universe itself, or that which constitutes its Being a Reality.