CONDITIONS OF FREEDOM

JOHN MACMURRAY

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BEING THE SECOND LECTURES ON THE CHANCELLOR DUNNING TRUST, DELIVERED AT QUEEN'S UNIVERSITY KINGSTON, ONTARIO, 1949

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FOREWORD

The Trustees of Queen's University invited Professor John Macmurray to deliver the second series of Chancellor Dunning Trust Lectures. The theme of the freedom and responsibility of the individual in our modern society is so important that it can only be adequately treated if approached from more than one point of view. Professor Macmurray's treatment of the subject is challenging and arresting, for it makes a demand on us with all the validity of the Christian imperative.

These lectures made a deep impression on the audiences. They are now available, in this printed form, to be studied by a still wider audience.

R. C. WALLACE.

Principal's Office.
Queen's University.

PREFACE

THE THREE LECTURES here published were delivered under the auspices of the Chancellor Dunning Trust at Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario, in January, 1949. The first two lectures stand as they were delivered. The third has been considerably enlarged. This lecture was originally condensed to a point which made it somewhat difficult to follow; and in preparing it for a wider public it seemed advisable to remove, so far as the subject would allow, the danger of misunderstanding. In expanding it for publication, I have added nothing to its substance, and have changed the form of the argument hardly at all.

It is the duty of the Chancellor Dunning Trust lecturer "to promote understanding and appreciation of the supreme importance of the dignity, freedom and responsibility of the individual person in human society." There can surely be no more urgent task in our time; nor one, I venture to think, more difficult of adequate performance. Men whose minds are dazzled by the splendours of a scientific technology and whose pulses echo the rhythm of the machines are unapt to understand or to appreciate the things that belong to our peace. Dignity, freedom and responsibility are inseparably bound together. Without freedom we have no dignity. Without responsibility we have no freedom. The threat to our freedom comes not from without but from within; from a lowering of our sense of human dignity and from a growing effort to escape

responsibility. It comes even more, perhaps, from an intoxication with power, and an unmeasured faith in organization. These have their place, and can yield us much that is desirable. Yet they are hard to reconcile with freedom; and they easily rob us of our responsibility and our dignity. The world of the spirit has its own laws of causality, which cannot be broken with impunity. To learn these laws and to obey them is our business. If we neglect it, we shall certainly lose both dignity and freedom, and we shall have no just cause of complaint.

I have sought, therefore, to discharge my trust, and to honour the memory of a distinguished Chancellor, by discussing, to the best of my ability, the fundamental conditions of human freedom. To do justice to such a theme is too hard a task. I can only hope that I may have fulfilled the function of a good sign-post by pointing in the right direction.

I wish to thank the trustees of the Chancellor Dunning Trust for the honour of the invitation to deliver these lectures; and all those who made my visit to Queen's an inspiration and a delight. To the staff and to the students of the University I owe a debt. In the fellowship they offered I received more than I could give. Where all were generous and kind it would be invidious to name any; but I cannot refrain from expressing a special gratitude to the Vice-Chancellor and Principal, Dr. R. C. Wallace. It was a privilege to be associated, however slightly, with his unstinted and self-effacing service to his own University, and to the wider community of Canada which his University adorns.

JOHN MACMURRAY.

EDINBURGH
12th July, 1949.

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I

THE RELATIVITY OF FREEDOM

THERE CAN SURELY be no necessity, in any country of the British Commonwealth, to prove the importance of freedom, or to persuade men to a belief in freedom. At most we require at times, when we are distracted by special difficulties or when things are going too easily for our good, to be reminded of the price that our fathers had to pay for the freedom that we enjoy, and of the duty we owe to our children for its preservation and its increase. In a very special cause freedom has been the primary objective of our Western civilization from the days of the Renaissance. Little by little, and often desperately, freedom has been won and extended; built into habits of common life and buttressed by institutions. In the crowded history of our modern achievement there is a wealth of good things that we have made our own and made available to mankind for ever. Yet all of them have their roots in that freedom which is our most precious achievement; and if that soil loses its sweetness and its health, they too will wither and die. It is not our power—whether of knowledge or of technique or of machinery—which matters, either as the glory of our past or as the guarantee of our future, which now has become the future of mankind. It is our faith in freedom. If that faith is lost then all is lost; and our power will turn to our destruction, and but for the grace of God, to the destruction of the whole world.

It seemed right that I should begin by reminding you of this before I discuss the relativity of freedom; lest it

might seem that I were engaged in an effort to limit and to qualify what should remain for us and for all men an absolute and unconditional obligation. This is not my intention. Freedom is, I am assured, the pearl of great price for which, if we are wise, we shall be prepared to sell all our possessions, to buy it. The ancient and widespread belief that the supreme good of human life is happiness—for all its persuasiveness—is false. Freedom has a higher value than happiness; and this is what we recognize when we honour those who have been ready to sacrifice happiness, and even life itself, for freedom's sake.

There is a sense in which freedom is absolute. It is the sense in which freedom is the defining character of Man; the property which sets us apart from the rest of creation and fixes a gulf between us and the highest of the animals. This absolute freedom is simply our capacity to act—not to behave or to react, but to form an intention and seek to realize it. To act is to be free. As agents we are concerned not with the past or the present but with the future: not with what exists, then, but with what does not yet exist; not with matter of fact but with matter of intention. In action we stand between the past and the future, between what has been done and what is still to do. The present is merely the point of action. When we turn back from action—when we reflect—we see what has been done; and this is the world that exists, the world of fact. So we find this world of existence completely determined. We have no power anywhere to alter it. It is what is, because it is as it has been determined. This utter determinateness of all that we find in existence excludes freedom, we know. But this is no more than the knowledge that time is irreversible, and that we cannot alter what has already been determined. When we return to action we turn to the future, away from what exists, from what is determined, from what is unalterable. The future is the field of

freedom, and when we act, we determine the future. For to act is to determine, and the agent is the determiner. To assert determination and deny freedom is to assert that we never act; that no man ever, in very truth, does anything; and the assertion that our actions are determined is itself an exercise of freedom which denies itself.

Such an argument, however, while it demonstrates the absoluteness of freedom, is far too abstract to satisfy even those whom it convinces. So soon as we move towards a more concrete statement, the relativity of freedom appears, and with it the paradox of freedom, from which all fruitful thinking must take its beginning. "Man is born free, yet everywhere he is in chains," said Jean Jacques Rousseau. That is a famous historic formulation of the paradox. It is expressed in religion in the story of the Fall of Man, and by theology in a doctrine of Original Sin. It is experienced by all of us in the conflict between conscience and impulse. Perhaps the simplest expression of the paradox lies in the difficulty we find in being ourselves. All other creatures are what they are, always and inevitably. This is their determinateness; so that they can be known through and through by observation and inference. But our human nature eludes us. There is a gap between the reality of our being and its empirical expression, which teases us perpetually; and those who know themselves best are most conscious of the difference; so that, as St. Paul has put it, "it doth not yet appear what we shall be." We are and yet we are not ourselves: and in this is our freedom. Our own human nature lies always beyond us as a goal to be aimed at, an objective to be fought for and, perhaps, taken by storm. So freedom is at once absolute and relative: absolute, because if we were not free we should not be human at all; relative, because this freedom lies always beyond our present achievement as the goal of our existence. It is at once the Alpha and the Omega of our humanity.

But I have expressed this truth all too optimistically, following a tradition that has been hard hit by the disasters of our recent history. I have conjured up a picture of Man eager in the pursuit of freedom, seeking to be himself through the difficulties of circumstance and the obstacles of material conditions, free always in spirit, but thwarted by the necessities of a natural world to which freedom is alien, and which recks nothing of spiritual values. We would be free; we strive for freedom; but there is that in the nature of the world which thwarts our effort and brings our struggle to failure. This is an ancient doctrine, of which Plato is, for us, the fountain-head. Yet I am bold enough to think that it is false, or at best a dangerous half-truth. We flatter ourselves too much when we imagine that we love freedom and strive whole-heartedly towards freedom. On the contrary; there are few things that we fear so much. No doubt we find the *idea* of freedom most attractive; but the reality is another matter. For to act freely is to take a decision and accept the consequences. The free man is the man who takes responsibility for his own life before God and his fellows. Is it any wonder that when we are faced with the challenge of freedom, our fear is usually more than a match for its attractiveness; and that we seek, for the most part, to escape the demand that it makes upon us? This, at least, is my experience; and that our capacity to deceive ourselves in this matter is of extreme subtlety. I see history, in its concrete reality, not as Man's struggle to win his freedom in a world that frustrates his efforts; but as a record of the twists and evasions by which men seek to escape from freedom in a world which thrusts it remorselessly upon them. The determination which oppresses us is not the opposite of freedom; for what is determined is that Man shall be free.

Here then is the paradox of freedom. We are free to choose between freedom and security. This choice is not

voluntary nor is it once for all. It is compulsory, and it is perpetually recurrent. It is a real choice: for we can make either freedom or security our goal. Yet there is an element of illusion about it, too. For the demand for security is the reflection of our fear; while freedom is the expression of our own reality. If we use our freedom to escape from freedom we frustrate ourselves: if we persist in this choice we destroy ourselves. If we aim at security we aim at the impossible, and succeed only in multiplying the occasions of fear, and magnifying our need for security. There is no security for us except in choosing freedom. For our insecurity *is* our fear, and to choose freedom is to triumph over fear.

So, in the concrete experience of human life and in the complex processes of human history freedom is not absolute, but relative. It is not something that we possess, but something we may choose; not something we inherit but something we may strive towards if we have the courage. It has to be earned and paid for, and often the price is high. We can have more or less of it; yet it is never a secure possession; it is easily lost; and if we think to rest in the freedom we have achieved, then it begins to diminish, for it is an expendible asset. Only in the struggle to increase it can we hope to maintain the freedom we have already achieved.

In its immediate simplicity freedom is the ability to carry out our chosen purposes; to do what we please. So the problem of freedom is contained in the question, "Why can we not do as we please?" To this question the moralists have given us various answers—because God forbids it; because it would not be good for us; because it would not be right. Yet all these answers assume that it is natural that we should not be free; and how can that be true if freedom is the essence of our nature? If we cannot do as we please—and undoubtedly we cannot—then something is

wrong somewhere. If our freedom is only relative, then there are obstacles in the way; and the struggle for freedom is the effort to remove the obstacles. If we cannot do as we please—and we know that this is constantly our situation—should we not ask what prevents us from being free, and how we can remove, or at least lessen, the hindrance to our freedom. The increase of freedom is an enlargement of the field in which we can do as we please.

When we approach our question in this attitude, we notice that the relativity of our freedom depends, clearly, upon our power to do what we desire to do, so that an increase in our power will mean an increase in our freedom. But our freedom also depends upon *what we want to do.* For it is no limitation upon a man's freedom that he has not the power to do something that he has no desire to do. We can increase our freedom, therefore, by limiting our desires, without any change in the means of action at our disposal. The free man is the man whose means are adequate to his ends. We can gain freedom by increasing our power while our ends remain constant, or by limiting our ends to the means at our disposal. Let us call these two limitations of freedom the technological and the moral relativities respectively.

It is characteristic of our Western civilization in the modern period that it has sought the increase of freedom chiefly and increasingly along the technological road, through the increase of power. I need not enlarge upon this nor upon the astounding success which has crowned the effort. But there is much to be said about the other means to freedom, which concerns itself with the modification of our desires; with operations upon ourselves and not upon the world. In the first place, let me remind you that this way of seeking freedom has gone out of fashion. It used to be the main road along which men sought their freedom—through religion and the moralization of human

nature; through the release of the soul from the tyranny of vain desires; through self-examination and the cultivation of contentment. We have forgotten these things. We have come to think them unnecessary, or at best the business of a peculiar minority who feel themselves called to be saints. The other means to freedom, the increase of power—for what is power but the means of doing things?—has been so successful, the increase in our power so spectacular, that we have come to think that of itself it could provide us with all the freedom we could use; that in the long run there are no limits to our power to do what we desire.

This concentration on one of the variables is as disastrous as, for us, it is natural. The increase of power is an increase of freedom only if our demands remain relatively stable. But this is what they never will do if left to themselves. Plato saw this more than two milleniums ago. In the *Republic* he pointed to the fact that though animal desires can be easily satisfied, desire in man is insatiable. For when the natural needs of men are supplied, new desires appear for more elegant and more complicated satisfactions, until the resources available are too few for the demands upon them: and in this he finds the origin of war. The very spectacle of increased resources breeds a corresponding proliferation of desires; and if this process is uncontrolled, desires always grow faster than the power to satisfy them; for their increase is rooted in the creativeness of the imagination. If, then, we double our resources while we treble our demands upon them we do not increase our freedom. We diminish it. There is no need for astonishment that the vast increase of our resources in the last generation has gone hand in hand with a loss of human freedom. The two variables—the moral and the technological—must both be considered. Self-control is as imperative as the control of nature if freedom is to be increased or even maintained.

There is a widespread tendency to believe that our desires, along with the whole emotional side of our nature, is so much natural fact; irrational, and so incapable of modification. We can suppress our desires, we think; we can refuse them the satisfactions which they demand. But they change, if they do change, of themselves, obeying some natural law, but not the dictates of any rational decision. This is not so. There is an essential relation between our desires and our knowledge, and I would draw your attention to an aspect of it which is closely bound up with the relativity of freedom. We cannot desire what we know to be impossible of attainment. We can wish, no doubt, that what is impossible were within our reach, but we cannot make it the object of desire and the objective of action. We do constantly aim at the impossible, and so frustrate our freedom; but not if we know that it is impossible. We can even deceive ourselves into thinking possible what we really know—or could know if we would let ourselves—is not. But we cannot effectively desire what we really know to lie beyond the limits of possible achievement. For this reason it is one of the conditions of freedom that we should seek a clear conception of the limits of human power. It is a hard lesson for us to learn, for the increase of our technical resources has made us arrogant. Great as it is, that increase is only relative: it has to be measured against the vastness of the field in which we have no power at all. Until we recover our sense of proportion, until we recognize our creaturliness and our dependence, we shall continue to frustrate our freedom by desiring what we cannot attain, and by using our resources for our own destruction. Humility is the handmaid of freedom. It is the meek who inherit the earth.

Our discussion of freedom is still, however, too abstract and ideal. The most important aspect of its relativity has still to be noticed. Human freedom can be realized only

as the freedom of individuals in relation; and the freedom of each of us is relative to that of the others. Man is dependent upon the world, of which he is a part; but every man is even more intimately dependent upon his fellows in the interrelation of men which constitutes human society.

It is a commonplace that human life is social. But like many commonplaces it is imperfectly understood, and often ignored in practice. The fact that men live normally in groups, like many of the higher animals, is of relatively little importance here. It does not touch the essence of the matter. It is not the fact that men live together that counts, but the knowledge of this fact, and the intentions to which this knowledge gives rise. What constitutes the humanity of the human group is the consciousness of each member that he belongs to it; and the intention, which pervades all his activities, to realize his membership, even if it must be, at times, in anger and revolt. It is the life of the *individual* which is a common life; and we can only be human in community. Even our secret thoughts are elements in a life that we share with our fellows; for their truth lies in their reference to a common world; and if they lose this reference they become the fancies of insanity.

I hope to take up this central theme in my final chapter. For the moment it is enough to remind ourselves that our freedom, as individuals, depends upon the co-operation of others. We are fed and clothed by our fellows. The whole apparatus of our life is provided by others. That the system of co-operation is impersonal and indirect makes it no whit less real. Nor is it merely the material resources which we use at every moment that are the gift of others. The language we speak, the thoughts we think, the ideals we cherish and pursue are only partially our own. We have them from those who went before us; and the forms they

take in our private minds and mouths bear witness that they are symbols of a life that is shared.

I shall not labour what is so obvious whenever we attend to it. But it has two corollaries to which I shall direct your attention. In the first place, it is the fact that we are dependent on others for our freedom which both explains and justifies our habit of contrasting freedom with slavery. Where there is no freedom, we turn instinctively to seek the tyrant who is its suppressor. The freeman, we think, is he "who serveth not another's will." Now, as I have tried to show, there are other conditions of freedom than the interference of those who are more powerful than we. Nature itself imposes her bondage upon us; and even more important, we fall victims to our own fearfulness. Yet both these threats to our freedom are mediated through our dependence upon other people. The tyranny of natural necessity appears as the pressure of the economic system of our social relations; and the fears that constrain us are fears of what others will think or say or do. Even the fear of death, which seems so individual, and which is the symbol of all human fear, is the psychological equivalent of the terror of isolation, of being cut off irretrievably from the community to which we belong.

I have suggested that we cannot desire what we know to be impossible. If we stood alone against the forces of Nature, the limits of our power would be easily learned, and our desire would shrink within the compass of the attainable. So we should be free. But because we are social beings, dependent upon the co-operation of our fellows, possibility has a double meaning for us. A great deal that is possible in the nature of things is made impossible if the others will not co-operate with us in its achievement. More than this—if the others are determined that we shall not have what we desire, they can always refuse it to us, however simple a thing it may be, however easily attainable

with their good-will. It is this situation which sets the problem of human freedom. For it defines a wide field of possibility which is conditional upon the extent and the quality of social co-operation. Within this field we can aim at possibilities which are open to us if others will share them; and we can lose our freedom when they will not. So the essential conditions of freedom are social; and the simplest answer to the question, "Why can I not do as I please?" is, "because other people won't let me."

There is a second corollary of our interdependence which is less widely recognized, and which seems to me the most important of all. No man can compass his own freedom for himself. He must accept it as a free gift from others; and if they will not give it to him he cannot have it. This is the law of freedom. Against it our fear and our pride beat themselves in vain rebellion. If we struggle to achieve our own private freedom we merely frustrate ourselves and destroy its possibility; for we cannot free ourselves from our dependence upon our fellows. That this is not so is one of the great illusions of a sophisticated society. When we profess our faith in freedom we often mean only that we want to be free. What value, what honour is there in such a miserable faith? Which of us would not like to do as he pleases—if only he could escape from his fear of the consequences? To believe in freedom, in any sense worthy of consideration, is to believe in setting other people free. This is to some extent within our power, and it is the greatest service we can render; even if it must be, at times, by the sacrifice of our own. In giving freedom to others, we have a right to hope that they in turn will have the grace and the gratitude to give us ours. But of this we can have no guarantee.

In the nexus of personal relationship which is our common life, the enemy of liberty, the great inhibitor of free action, is fear. I do not mean the direct fears that

have an immediate danger before them; for these are natural and call only for a natural courage. But there are deep and pervasive fears in us which have primitive roots and which are projected upon the future by our imagination. If they gain control, they turn us upon the defensive, so that we see danger everywhere and spend our energies in the attempt to secure ourselves against the future. We feel relatively safe only within the circle of familiar habit, when action is automatic. Before the unusual, the foreign, the unknown, we feel the need of protection and defence; and because of our intimate dependence upon our fellows, we fear one another most of all.

The mechanisms of self-defence which we develop to serve our fear of other people are of two types, one negative and one positive. The negative is a mechanism of withdrawal, through which we provide ourselves with the illusion of independence. We make our relations with others as indirect and as automatic as possible, so that they can be stereotyped in a technique which prevents too close or intimate a contact. Since this subjects our co-operation with others to a rule, we lose our freedom of action. But we can compensate for this, in idea, by achieving a freedom of the mind, a spontaneity of the imagination. In this way we produce in ourselves a feeling that we are independent, that we are free from the others. For we meet them only impersonally, and their demands upon us appear only as the pressure of a mechanism of institutions, which we call Society and which fades insensibly into the order of Nature, governed and guaranteed by eternal laws which we cannot change.

Our other type of defence is the struggle for power. We meet our fear of others by an attempt to make ourselves stronger than they, so that we can compel their co-operation in our purposes. We seek some position of privilege, some

superiority over our fellows that can force their service. We set up if we can, between us and our fellows, instead of the relation of fellowship, the relation of master and servant. This is the origin of all tyranny, from the petty tyrannies of family and workshop to the major but often more tolerable tyrannies of the dictators and conquerors. This defence also is illusory and self-defeating. For it springs from fear, and depends for its success upon the inculcation of fear. The master is dependent upon his slaves and helpless without their service; if they lose their fear of him he loses his hold upon them. The more they fear him, the more he must fear them, for he has wronged them and they are justified in rebellion. So the fear he inspires increases his insecurity and his need of power for his defence, in a vicious circle that can end only with his own destruction. He spreads fear like an infection through the circle of his relationships, and poisons the springs of freedom both for himself and for his victims. Though he may indulge in a frenzy of grandiose activity, his ends are negative and destructive. Nothing creative can be accomplished through fear; and no power, however impressive in its extent, can avail us against the inevitable. For the saints and for the philosophers this is an ancient lesson. Yet we have had to hear it told again in our time as the story of Hitler's Germany.

These then, so far as I can discern them, are the general principles which govern the achievement and the increase of human freedom at all times and in all circumstances. Beyond these, however, our freedom is relative to the conditions in which we live and to the particular problems of human relationship which they set for us. In the history of social development circumstances change and the problems which they set change with them. Any substantial alteration in the social conditions of human life resets the problem of freedom and demands a new effort

and a new solution. So it comes about that often men seek to escape from solving the problem of freedom which is their own by spending their efforts in the defence of the freedom they have as a gift from past generations. There is great danger of this for us. The freedom of today must be fought for and won in the conflicts of the present; and if we fail in this we shall lose, and we shall deserve to lose, the freedom of yesterday. But this is a new theme which needs a new start. I shall make it the subject of my second chapter.