

# Freedom of thought and its substitutes

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However we define it, the concept of freedom always has the possibility of choice at its core. When someone can choose what he wants, whatever it is, we can say that he acts freely, provided that he does not violate certain rules related to the benefit of the community to which he belongs. However, the fact that he is attracted to a thing, a person or a situation does not mean that his motion towards them is necessarily the result of a conscious appraisal. His preference may manifest itself impulsively or reflexively or have the character of a hasty reaction to inner doubts: "In order to stop wavering, let me choose something, whatever it is. It is better to stop a doubt abruptly than to try to work it out rationally". Thus, it may seem that one is dropping an anchor in a harbour by one act, when in fact, one is doing nothing more than throwing oneself into another sea turbulence. In short, concrete choices presuppose the navigator we call reasoning. In the cases that reason is missing, a mental and physical wandering begins, which, however much it may seem at times like free motion, does not deserve such a name.

In our time, the general disempowerment of reason as a guide to action is one of the deepest problems and one of the most difficult to acknowledge. How can modern society admit that after the mass education it has organised and after its emphasis on "knowledge" first and then on "information", an ever larger part of the population is

giving up this privilege? They are embarrassed and fatigued in advance by the idea of putting their mind to searching for what they want, why they want it, and whether they should want it. Such a soul-searching can certainly be done at different depths, depending on the individual. The peculiar characteristics of a doer require more than the peculiar characteristics of a studious. The education of every individual is similarly different. But, differences aside, there remains a common denominator without which the human condition would have its distinctive feature: the obligation of man to reflect on himself. “And the unexamined life is not worth living” according to the ancient wisdom of Socrates<sup>1</sup>. Since this is the case, to defy this suggestion, refusing to check whether one is living freely or slavishly, indicates that he finds it easier to hide behind alibis and embellishments. He embraces a version of freedom tailored to his weaknesses. He sees through a reassuring prism of his own invention, situations which, if he had the courage to look them right in the eye to judge them, would show him how much they diminish him, how much they transform him from subject to object. It is indeed the object on which giant mechanisms direct their action: mechanisms of trade in consumer goods, of advertising, of publicity, of the economic management of “human resources”. Obviously, what extent of flexibility to decide there is for an individual, in such a context, is a matter which, in its fundamental aspects, belongs to the power of the mechanisms. It is them that decide. Nevertheless, the powerless individual invents a kind of artificial self-protection: he tells himself that he retains the ability to maneuver among the data. If the advertising pressures him to buy a certain product, he can always move towards a similar one. If a television or radio channel pushes him with its propaganda or its chatter, he can turn the button to a competitor. A dose of self-flattery allows him to temporarily not see that he has been reduced to a passive receiver. He claims that he has the right to choose, avoiding to recognize that the field of selection is formed in such a way that it permanently involves him as an active buyer; as someone who, if he does not buy this

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1. Plato, *The Apology of Socrates*, 38a, 6.

or that good, if he does not see this or that program on the screens, or if he does not wear this or that clothing, it is as if he ceases to participate in what has been established around him by the common addiction.

The counterargument to this statement is well known. Some argue that it is not valid to consider that thinking is shrunk since the brain seems to be more active. They refer to the barrage of stimuli, to the ceaseless function of the brain centres in mobilizing the organs of perception and coordinating the nervous system to respond promptly and satisfactorily to rapidly changing situations. They suggest that we should show greater respect for the facts. See, they say, what happens; social life is flooded with signals of warnings, suggestions, prohibitions, coordinations and alarms. In order to cope, the organism has to perceive many signals, from which it must retain those it needs and eliminate the rest. This is the job of the brain and, since it is so active, reasoning cannot inevitably be subdued. This is what they claim. Yet their argument is unsound, because it is based on an unsound premise. They assume that brain activity “produces” thought. A closer look at the issue reveals that this is not true.

Let us take an example. Let us say that at the end of a corridor I am crossing there is a staircase. It seems as if my perception immediately requires my intellect to calculate its height, the number of steps, the time it will take me to climb. The perception of the physical event seems to prescribe to the mind a specific task. A series of upward movements will follow, step by step. But what is it that makes the body arrange its limbs and joints for this purpose? Before the body began to move, the mind incubated the will to perform the action. The brain had no part in this process; all it did was to show the mind that the moment of the necessary impulse had arrived and that the switch must be turned so that the legs could take the proper inclination. Never will the enigma of voluntary movement be solved by a mechanism. The physical mechanism, however much it may have as its co-ordinator such a complex and sensitive organ as the brain, is incapable of giving us an explanation of the springs of human action.

For some reasons man is directed towards one goal or another. He thinks about these purposes, which means that he has the ability to distinguish the real from the potential, the possible from the impossible. This is the essential function of consciousness, which is supported by thought with its classifications, combinations and reasonings. It is thus clear that thought exercises an activity that precedes that of the brain. In fact, Bergson went so far as to say that the brain essentially only regulates but not produces consciousness. It sets the physical gears and levers in proper motion in a way that seems to be leading because of the precision and efficiency that its commands normally have. But the real commander is different; it is the “self”, whose boundaries are wider than the contours of the body. Or, to put it better, while one part of the self is subject to the needs and wear and tear of ordinary circumstances, another part emerges as an ideal image, as a spectral and desirable creation, urging an individual to act appropriately, so that the realization of the ideal may come about. In other words, a higher self competes with a lower self. It is an endless confrontation that seals moral and spiritual life with dilemmas and solutions for which one sometimes regrets or grieves and sometimes prides oneself. In any case, the human being is challenged and stimulated from within. This was the basis of Plato’s and Aristotle’s conviction that man’s tendency to “resemble” the divine is a component of his soul and therefore, if he denies it, he is inevitably crippled. However, one side of the human being needs to move upwards, towards the perfection of truth, beauty, justice. But before one reaches the ethers, one must climb the rungs of worldly life, in order to expand one’s freedom and happiness by the means of every motion. A prerequisite is the development of thought.

We were talking exactly about thinking and not just about the functioning of the intellect. With the intellect the human being strives in general and with the assistance of the body to pass from a state of inadequacy to adequacy, in relation to his physical and social environment. All practical intelligence is concerned with how to cease to be inferior. Even when advantages begin to appear, the fear that they may be lost

still gives practical intelligence the attribute of a weapon of deterrence rather than attack. We are always victims of our worldly insecurity; an anxious instinct never ceases to work in our defence. But with thought the orientation changes. Thinking consists, to a large extent, in a kind of question that the mind asks itself: what is the point of doing this? What need does it correspond to? Is it worth the price you will pay? The dialogue will by definition be internal. This means that, although external things will be taken into account as parameters, the conclusion will not emerge from anything other than man's self-examination. Of course, "who I am" is related to what I do or intend to do. Very simply and very generally this means that human plans are subject to the pressure of material conditions from the outset. However, calculating the external factors should not become a guiding principle. If such a calculation is introduced in the very first phase of thinking, it will inevitably erode it. Then, whatever one's reasoning, one will be struck by the ordinary arithmetic by which "expenses" and "income" are recorded on paper – as in the imagination or in the dreams of some people. Life will be equated with an attempt at a balance sheet. But this would not be real thinking in terms of freedom; it would be data measurement and speculation under the state of anxiety. We would be back to the old –and unsolved– conflict between "I am" and "I have".

In fact, in our time neither the first term nor the second term has the intensity that it once did. "I am" is repulsed because it reminds us of the dead ends of introspection. The "I have", though not repulsed, is reminiscent of the anxiety of the instability and complexities of the world. Both point to uncertainty. It is a development that has come to disappoint many expectations to the contrary. Indeed, the social system in the countries of the West, although it had shown during the last century that the antagonisms and conflicts within it were inexorable, presented another side in which the potential for, if not self-regulation, at least a control of extreme contradictions was discernible. It was the welfare state, the experience of economic crises and wars, the need to integrate into the framework of organised urban social life masses of people moving

from the provinces or from other countries; all these factors signalled the urgency of a general organisation and administration on a national and global scale. Nevertheless, the operation did not pay off. In spite of all the indicators of the need for cohesion, the holders of great economic power engaged in conflicts between them which left increasingly narrow margins for compromise. The struggle for dominance on the markets is now so fierce that it gives the impression that no one, not even the state, not even coalitions of states (such as the European one), can intervene on behalf of the society as a whole. But our issue is not the causes that led to this. It is the impact of the expanding disorder in thinking.

It is a prerequisite for the development of free thought that there is a sufficient degree of stabilization. Not, of course, in the sense of consolidation. Material things do not have to remain standing for the intellect to take them up and begin to examine them at its leisure. After all, it is in their nature to change, by relating to other similar or different things. But it is necessary that their alteration should not appear too dependent on chance. Chance is not identical with the unexplained. With the former, thought can be paralysed, with the latter, however, not necessarily, as long as the sense is maintained that what now seems causeless will later be subject to causal relations. The idea of cause has always provided a certain comfort. At one time, it was supposed to be found the cause of people torturing each other, hating or destroying what they professed to love. Nor was extinguished the hope that, as every disease has its cause, so life will be freed from its miseries, if the factor that pushes it into misery with his malevolent, evil hand is found.

After a few centuries, roughly from the 17th century onwards, the concept of cause is today subject to a reservation which, without being explicit, is diffused in all fields of thought and action. In only a few spheres of special scientific activity does it enjoy a confidence worthy of discourse. The very scientific theories –much later than when David Hume in philosophy replaced the concept of cause with the “constant conjunction” of events– shook the foundations of the relationship between that which changes and that which is subjected to change. What is it,

then, that allows something to exert a force such as to alter things? It opened a chasm that science initially stepped back from in awe. But she quickly covered it up with a counterattack trying to convince her that the Universe is not able to close the door, once she opened it a little. Science embedded the concept of the indeterminate in its idea in such a way as to make it a structural element. Hence we have structures that contain what deconstructs them, even if only in basic points. But what does that mean? To carry on as if nothing can stop us, when we're pretty sure that it will happen at some point? To work as if nothing can order a work stoppage, when we're pretty sure nothing can stop it from happening, at any time? An abyss of absurdity opens up and, to avoid seeing it, infinite means of voluntary blindness are invented.

It is typical how fast is the pace with which the points where attention can be temporarily anchored proliferate in the social field, until it turns to other points. It seems to be the primary concern of the social system to entice the individual in order to shift his attention from one thing to another and never focus on what seems to be of central importance in his life. And what would be more important than to focus on the ability to act freely? In this respect, the evidence of the facts is inexorable: it shows him that in all spheres of life the scope for intervention and for leaving his mark is desperately narrow. In the finance sector, centralisation is constantly intensifying, to the point where even those at the top of the hierarchy are reduced to the status of instrument, without participating in decisions; a fact which equates them, despite differences in pay, with workers at the lower levels. The concept of management no longer applies to formal directors, and the feeling among the latter that they are increasingly losing the prestige of being a decision-maker also sharply reduces their willingness to perform their role. All professional roles are downgraded. Consequently, everyone, whether being a manual worker, an employee, or a manager, from the position of an sidekick where is thrown by developments, all he wants is not to lose at least his income and to forget the unpleasant fact that initiatives are forbidden. In parallel with this, there is also the elimination of the individual's agency in the

political sphere. The effects of partisanship are decisive here, especially in countries like Greece, where the past continues to be reproduced in the present. However disappointing it may be and revealing its ruthless character, partisanship maintains its power and permanently reproduces the claim, which is exclusively its own, that the “party line” must be followed by all sides if the party itself is to be kept in line with its own interests. But even if an individual deviant opinion were to be sacrificed to the party perception, experience shows that in turn parties and political representatives so often succumb to the dictates of money holders that the sacrifice of spirit is considered to be without merit.

Alienated in work, neutralized in politics, stuck in the automation of administration and social exchanges, the individual finds as a last refuge against his weakness the artificial and hasty stimulation of his subjectivity. It is an attempt to make illusion life’s compass. Since the social reality appears already formed, since events seem predetermined, the ego will be enclosed in its own circle, where it will play the role of the autonomous self, as far as it can.

At the level of behaviour and attitudes, examples abound. The persistence with which many people put forward their “opinion” is indicative. They proclaim, emphasize and repeat it stereotypically. The more they assert that it derives from their personal judgment, the less they convince that it does. Because they avoid the trouble of grounding what they say on a basis of common assumption. In order to introduce an opinion for discussion, it goes without saying that the participants accept certain points as a starting point for all. But here there is no such concern. The opinion holder senses that if he were to try to rely on an argument, it would be easily revealed either that the argument is a false one (from some source of information, from a message board), or that his argumentation is grossly flawed. It is not a mental retardation; the intellect could struggle to articulate the reason better. But it does not attempt it, for the attempt would take away the brilliance that categoricity gives to language. The individual needs to have a certain rigidity of style in order to be able to believe himself that he is independent, that



nothing and no one obliges him. So he's stubborn? It doesn't go that far. Stubbornness implies effort and risk-taking; it is lurking with rejection, vilification, ridicule. One is saved from all this if he launches his opinion without struggling to prove himself more reasonable than others. Thus, the discussion does not even begin; everyone stays in his place and the thought is sooner or later stuck in banality.

It says a lot about the mores and intellectual culture of our time that their trite, overused and apathetic views, their supporters have no interest whatsoever in fixing them better and imposing them as the norm. Here is a difference of great importance from what the mass man of a bygone era was characterized by. Ortega y Gasset had observed during the interwar period that one way for the mass man to feel that he ruled, even though he had no scepter at his disposal, was to give his clichés the weight that corresponded to proven truths. His present descendant is less ambitious. He is indifferent to the prevalence of his opinion; if his ancestor broke up the dialogical relationship, he leaves it on the shore, not worrying much. He is free not to define, not to classify, not to analyze. It is not surprising, therefore, that in other expressions of his life the requirements of reason are set aside. It is a shameful turn for the societies of our time to educate people for whom their social depravity drags down even the most rudimentary foundations of rationality. It is striking how often speeches and writings are marked by contradictions. Politicians' speeches, journalists' comments, and experts' discourses move ahead unabated, ignoring the fact that in the proceed some of what is said or written is incompatible with each other. They pay no attention to them. The contradictions remain unchanged, are maintained and will come back some time later. No one fears that a dissenter, even with moderate critical faculties, will stop them and bring them back to order. After all, what is the cost of such mistakes? And are they really mistakes?

Obviously, we are far from the intellectual mores of Ancient Greece, in the context of which the speaker who was burdened with contradictions, felt a sense of shame as soon as his error was revealed, as mentioned

in Plato's *Sophist*. For the man of our time, such challenges seem inconceivable. One who has stretched the concept of freedom so far is expected to think that building consistently a syllogism is an obsolete scholasticism to which he refuses to give in. It is one of his "rights" to make assertions without basing them on anything; to avoid also certain types of reasoning, especially the hypothetical, and secondly the disjunctive. Rarely will one see in student papers hypothetical propositions linked to corresponding alternative conclusions. It goes without saying that outside the classrooms and lecture halls the situation has gotten much more out of control. Here comes unhindered semi-literacy meeting the sloganeerings of tolerance. Permission is given to some, whose only qualification is their expertise in one corner of their discipline, to speak arrogantly as if they had the same qualification on all subjects. One should not be stigmatized for one's deficiencies. It's not his fault – and it's complicated to find out whose is. So the deficiency does not exist. A civilization that accommodates everything, without aiming to create in any way, naturally accepts the "right to ignorance", to error, or even to absurdity, since it is considered that it would be unbearable for people who are very much burdened with knowledge to be required being impeccable in their thinking as well. But that is not the point. It is not about the size of the deficiency, it is about the extent to which the deficiency is disguised in order to preserve in the eyes of the individual an image of himself that does not debase him.

The overall result is that the truth is distorted and the lie is made up, so that the serious coercions people were subjected are pushed into oblivion, and the lighter ones appear in the consciousness as being amenable to correction. Take, for example, the widespread use of the term "annoyance" or "harassment". Harassment is found and reported everywhere: in the way of speaking, in gestures, in sexual relations, in relations between superiors and subordinates or between neighbours. Undoubtedly, with the evacuation of the public space from the active presence of individuals, there have been increased cases of indiscretion, rudeness and aggression, which in previous times could not, at least in

public, be expressed openly because of the rules set by the community. The rules and morals served to maintain a minimum of secularity, which later times ridiculed as conventional and hypocritical. If the anti-conformists were right, to a certain extent, they took that right to the other extreme. They denounced formal catholicity so flatly that the way was left open for the ostentatiously crude and crude in manners to invade and become acceptable – under the guise of simplification. Until we have reached in recent years a kind of explosion of ugliness, crudeness and vulgarity, and this in contrast to legislation that was becoming more detailed and providing for heavier penalties for the offences concerned. The laws became more protective for the individual, but people –in practice– more brutal towards each other.

Thus, harassment penetrated all aspects of social life: the extended family, school, professional life. It goes without saying that it is an example of moral health for those offended to react against those who consider that their appetites meet no barrier. The trouble starts from there. Throughout the whole range of social relations the increase in the number of such episodes of tension between individuals, sexes and groups of all types tends to result in an enlargement of the minor at the expense of the major. When one opposes another who behaves indecently, he defends his freedom so as not to become easy prey to indecency or cruelty. When the same individual submits a proposal in his workplace that would improve the situation of the staff employed from the point of view of justice and dignity, and the proposal is shelved and not even considered, the damage to the proposer's freedom affects more people. From this point of view, the harm caused is objectively greater than in the first case.

In general terms, this asymmetry has been established in the social sphere. Reactions to insults addressing to personal integrity are recorded there, which reactions expire when the damage is somehow repaired; they rarely extend to the social sphere, where coercion meets with less and less resistance. Decency in private, apathy in public. It is not a paradoxical contrast. It is the result of the fact that modern man, unable

to bear the thought of being enslaved, desperately subscribes to a “do not touch me” in compensation, seeking by all means –even neurosis– to appear faithful to his doctrine. Such games can be played by the conscience. But to deprive yourself of your freedom by deception is not simple. Conscience finds it very difficult, from a certain point on, to continue its maneuvers. At some point it fades. It confesses that it is discouraged. Why should one strive to gain his freedom, when the world he would address seems to have no need of it at all; and furthermore, to even make it clear to him that in order to continue to have some freedom, the tools of networking, organization, centralized control are sufficient? Those tools work and they run everything. The mind, which originally invented them, now passively watches their operation and is so dazzled by the spectacle that it tends to forget who invented all these.

From the moment the consciousness becomes hypnotized by what the spirit has produced, having effectively ceased to understand its abuses and their side effects, it is bound to give way to that part of the soul which, on the contrary, abhors sleep. The unconscious is in a hurry to awaken. It wants to rise to the surface, and the weakened, drugged consciousness not only does not prevent it, but invites it to come. Nowhere else is this process more evident than in the arts. Theatre scenes, movie screens, galleries and other spaces conducive to “multispectral” welcome a constant stream of improvisations and spontaneities, which give the impression that they are performed as if they were predetermined to fade out the next minute. At other times, the voices raised by the surrealists were a protest. Today their descendants are reduced to flight drills.

Similar phenomena are also occurring in the various areas of the spiritual sphere. Fragmentary expressions, discontinuity, an ellipticity that does not imply anything renewing –even though it aspires to appear so– are favourably welcomed, albeit without warmth, since nothing is warmly received, anyway. Moreover, space is readily made available to the various versions of a discourse noisily panting, although not wearied by any exploration or questing. We are witnessing a misunderstanding absolutely characteristic of our culture. It is assumed that the repressed part of human

existence would be well served to gain a voice by forcibly opening the trapdoor where it was closed. Many people are unaware or have forgotten that the ferocity of such a movement bears some fruits only if the thought that has motivated that movement, could reintegrate it into a program of human liberation. Radical thinkers and revolutionary artists until the middle of the last century did just that. The valve that they opened they were trying to adjust again (regardless of what they eventually achieved). Nowadays, those who are the adherents of fragmentation become its spectators and devour the spectacle, having ceased to be interested in how another, higher synthesis would be possible. It is obvious that they classify thought as the impediment to expression, assigning it only practical tasks. Yet another evasion or a further evidence of neo-primitivism? Be that as it may, free and methodical thinking are defeated. An inevitable turn, since the fact is not taken into account that there is no sincere aspiration towards the New that has not yet appeared, if it is not accompanied by the thought that really wants to give its fight to the finish.

Many of those who talk about leaving the conventional framework of worldly life and extending the soul beyond the boundaries of the transcendent, are simply speechifying, unwilling to understand that in order to detach from existing things, thought must first penetrate into them. There can be no refinement of the spirit unless the hands get dirty. Man's desire to get out of his boundaries is tempered when his mind has actually reached a limit. First comes the digging of the excavation and then comes the gushing of truth. But the earth is not dug up and the stones are not set aside, unless the task is subjected to the rules of excavation. In order for the soul to open up to what it feels transcends it, to turn towards the Universe and seek there the signs of the presence of a Being with whom it senses an inner relationship, the thought must have covered a certain distance. Freedom of thought means equipping thought with such courage that it does not hesitate to move –from stage to stage– to the innermost. One does not meditate directly on the Beyond and what it may be inhabited by. Before approaching, he has used up every ounce of his freshness wondering about how he lives,

who he is, where he is going. It takes painful mental exploration to prepare for an experience of high tension: an upheaval, a conversion. One by one the facts must be examined and the feelings weighed. What attracts me? What once attracted me and what now? What have my love affairs and their ravages or my fears left in me? All are given their proper importance. Until in the end, this thought, free enough to accept to suffer with some of its findings, can decide on behalf of the soul: it finds at last “what it lacks”. Only after it has approached this point is it possible to move upwards. Observation is now sharpened. A number of key correlations between phenomena have been identified. Even insightfulness is being recruited and disciplined. Everything obeys to the desire grasping the truth; consciousness becomes acute. Then it is possible to seek the ultimate meaning, the beginning of everything. The “leap of faith” –to recall S. Kierkegaard’s term– does not come without training. It is the same thread that began with the contemplation of *agathon* in Plato and with the advent of the godlike “poetic mind” in Aristotle.

The conclusion is not that everyone must become a philosopher to gain the freedom of self-transformation. Philosophical theory is not the prerequisite. It is the preservation in man of the desire to live, assisted by the clarity and honesty of the spirit with which he has been endowed. The world, covered with confusion and anxiety, needs today more than anything else the consciousness and the boldness of thought. It is from those who do not muddy the waters that the purification of the waters of the world is expected to come. From those who do not hide in the fumes of gibberish, delirium or demagoguery, the purification of the spiritual atmosphere is expected to come, so that man can look with an unhindered eye towards the supreme truths to which he is subject. And to bow his head, being humble and yet free.