FREEDOM AND COMMITMENT

By JOHN C. HAUGHEY

GIVEN THE cultural transiency in which moderns find themselves, it should be of interest to listen to someone contending that the permanence of yesterday is what is needed for tomorrow. More precisely, this article will argue that a person who has made permanent, irreversible (for him or her) commitments, is going to experience greater freedom than those who deliberately refrain from so doing. It will contend that there is a direct proportion between a person's commitment and the degree of freedom he experiences. By the same token, we will assert that the least free are the least committed and that without commitment freedom is impossible.

First, we must state what we mean by commitment in this context. The word has so many connotations that it will mean virtually nothing unless we specify. In using it here I have in mind primary, interpersonal commitments affecting the course of a person's life. Excluded are the commitments regarding a cause or a community, a client or one's professional work, even one's family, friends or children. Although these latter are interpersonal, it is unlikely that most people consider them as primary commitments. For the majority, the primary interpersonal commitment will be to the spouse. Furthermore, I think that the spousal commitment operates as something of a paradigm or an ideal, by which other commitments are imaged or evaluated. (I would not, of course, be able to prove this; nor do most people consciously think of the marriage commitment in this way.)

Whether a person is married or not, happily married or not, I believe that the spousal form of commitment does operate as the ideal image the person has of commitment. The disastrous marital statistics, on the increase in every modern country, can be understood as a reinforcement of this contention. How? Once primacy is accorded to love – being loved by someone unreservedly and loving that same person without conditions – then a marriage which does not offer this experience is likely to be broken up by divorce or separa-

tion. If the aspiration for the ideal were not operating, many more marriages would be preserved.

All of this is merely another way of saying that the prime analogue for human commitments is the spousal commitment and that other uses of the word are really derivative. Commitment to God, for those whose belief in him is active, is, of course, in a class by itself. But even here, I believe, most people entertain, to some degree, a spousal image of their relationship with God: one which is encouraged by the imagery used in both the hebrew and the christian portions of the sacred scriptures.

A preliminary remark on the relationship between love and commitment is in order here. Most questions about commitment arise when love is lacking. When it is present, commitments have a way of getting made and being kept without any particular advertence being given to commitment as such. Most commitment problems, therefore, are a symptom that something is wrong in the love aspect of the relationship; and they will seldom be dealt with successfully by focusing on the commitment aspect. Where there is tension concerning a commitment, it is probably too soon to make it. And where the circumstances of a commitment entered into have become a matter of concern, it is probably too late to preserve the relationship. In comparison to love, therefore, commitment questions are much less relevant.

One way of approaching the question of freedom in commitment is to examine some of the contemporary myths that enjoy wide currency in our culture. Many walk around with the unexamined attitude that freedom is connected with tying no knots. There are variations on this attitude: that the greater number of options a person leaves open, the greater his freedom will be; that one can increase one's freedom by augmenting the capacity for having one's own way; that freedom is the capacity for indefinite revision, the ability always to do something different.

Although prior liberty is one aspect of freedom, we cannot identify the full meaning of freedom with the capacity a person has before choice. To be free, a person must go beyond being able to act and act. A freedom which never comes to choice will eventually cease to be. This is making freedom tantamount to indetermination.

A number of these myths are closely aligned with the sexual emancipation we are supposed to be enjoying in modern times. There is a growing body of evidence that our enlightenment about sex is not very illuminating, and that our newly-won freedom is making

for much misery. Even the most beguiling aspect of the emancipation-vision – that of the single, unfettered, 'swinging' singles, is up for re-examination. 'The failure of the singles idea is a major sociological fact of the last decade', according to George Gilder's latest volume *Naked Nomads*.[1] This study marshals overwhelming statistics to prove that 'depression, addiction, disease, disability, psychiatric treatment, loneliness, insomnia, institutionalization, poverty, discrimination, unemployment and nightmares . . . are the dirty sheets and unmade mornings' of the majority of swinging single males in the United States.

Karl Rahner, in his *Grace in Freedom*, points the finger at this myth. 'Freedom is not the capacity for indefinite revision, for always doing something different, but . . . the capacity that creates something final, something irrevocable and eternal'.

Several other observations about freedom are in order here, if we are to rescue it from the unreal lair in which our imaginations are prone to house it. The free person chooses the object: but the person is not free to determine the object chosen. The object determines the person; it stamps us with its shape. We are not free to reconstitute its reality. The scholastic adage used to run: 'acts are specified by their objects'. The rustic's aphorism is also apposite here: 'You become what you love'.

In addition, it might be noted that the individual's freedom does not exist in a vacuum. It is limited by and in relationship to everyone else's freedom. Self-determination, as our twentieth-century history has taught us time and again, is exercized in an increasingly complex and densely populated space. Every exercise of freedom affects the shape of everyone else's freedom. Affects, I say: it may expand it or constrict it.

Finally, every free act specifies the order of being at least for the person acting. In effect, this means that each of us has a history of choices made and freedom specified. These instances may be to our glory or to our shame (it will be a little bit of both for most of us); but, like it or not, they have created the context within which we live our lives. The horizon of possiblity that opens out before us is not one of unlimited possibility, therefore, but one that is limited by this past history. To ask for any other configuration to reality would be tantamount to asking that our words should not be heard, that our actions be discounted, that our person be treated as if it were a

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[1] Gilder, George: *Naked Nomads* (New York, 1974).

phantom. Since we do not look to have others deal with us in that way, we cannot afford to deal with ourselves in that way either. Our freedom comes from some place, has placed us somewhere and will bring us from what is to what can be.

Some of Jean Paul Sartre's ideas can help to bring together these two issues of freedom and commitment. While this twentieth-century existentialist is a vigorous proponent of both freedom and commitment, he advances notions about their meaning which is a re-working of what previous generations thought about them. Though this would not justify giving him our special attention, it must be admitted that his sentiment accords perfectly with the mood and behaviour of many moderns. Not that I am suggesting that there are many explicit Sartreans among us; but the approach of certain modern writers indicates that their ideas would develop along sartrean lines if they were to undertake the task of creating a philosophy from their experiences of freedom and commitment.

Sartre sees each human being driven by a 'fundamental project', which engages the whole person: fundamental, because it supposedly integrates all of one's lesser purposes and projects. This project is so radically one with the personality that he speaks of 'the fundamental project which I am'. It is a project in the sense that it implies the projection of one's entire self into the future. At the same time, it is impermanent, in that it does not have a fixed content. It is rather something which develops, is continually recovering the past in the pursuit of the future, and is, therefore, in constant need of renewal. What one's project is at any given moment is in a state of potential revocation. It can even be discarded 'in the interests of a beyond which I shall be'.

One begins to see what Sartre means by commitment: one is committed to one's fundamental project. He conceives this not in terms of persons but of actions. It might be action undertaken on behalf of people, but its frame of reference is the person performing it. The commitment is first and foremost to oneself. Perhaps this can best be seen by Sartre's lack of concern for or attention to those immediately affected by a person's movement out of one fundamental project into another. The question of responsibility towards those with whom the person has become previously involved is of no concern to him: the individual must preserve his indifference to all such matters, in order that he may be free to move from one project to another.

As one might predict, there is an unusual notion of freedom under-

lying Sartre's ideas about the fundamental project, one which goes far beyond the universally acceptable idea that human beings should be self-determining. He would go so far as to say that a person is truly human only in so far as he is actually exercising his 'freedom':

> What we call freedom is impossible to distinguish from the being of human reality. Man does not exist first, in order to be free subsequently; there is no difference between the being of man and his being-free.[2]

In Sartre's mind, freedom is not a simple condition or desideratum of human existence; it is closer to being the creator of human existence.

In examining Sartre's notions on freedom, one has to distinguish his early thought from his later reflections. In the Sartre of *Being and Nothingness*, his view was that the person had to win his freedom by escaping the determinations of society and the material universe. Otherwise one is merely an ornament amidst other ornaments, a substance drawn into the solidity of other substances. There would be a lack of spontaneity; and unless he could free himself from all these predeterminations, the person's actions would erupt from an essence fixed and determined by a constricting past. At this point in his reflections, freedom is 'from', not 'for': it seeks to transcend the impositions of society, religion and the particular culture. Sartre admits that this kind of freedom is 'synonymous with lack'; the person finds himself facing into the void, having only anguish and uncertainty as his companions.

In his later years, he did not renounce this thesis but complemented it with a marxist one. In this second phase, he produced his most important work, *Critique de la Raison Dialectique*, with its emphasis on engagement in the world. While maintaining his belief in the importance of freedom, he began to stress creative, effective action on the world of men and matter. History is to be made through *praxis*, which means that one must plunge oneself into the muddled, complex, finite. In his first phase, freedom was tantamount to withdrawal; in his second phase he saw it in terms of getting one's hands dirty through engagement. Having renounced his unity with the world of objects and thereby won his freedom, the sartrean man proceeds to the next stage of freedom, which means that he is able to act.

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[2] *Being and Nothingness* (New York, 1966), p 30.

Sartre never attempts a synthesis of these two meanings of freedom. Though they do not contradict each other, he does little to show how they are complementary. The irony of his later ideas about freedom is that they remain individualistic even whilst he develops his concern about the social condition of mankind. Whilst his concern has widened to include all mankind, Sartre still maintains that 'Hell is other people'. As he paints his cosmic picture, the individual (who is not himself) is still allowed to be blurred over. Even for Sartre the marxist and the man of acute social conscience, it seems that one is committed to oneself.

If freedom takes the leading place in the thought of Sartre, for his contemporary, Gabriel Marcel, it is communion. Marcel's brand of existentialism concentrates on pointing out that all of his philosophical reflections were one long meditation on the meaning of 'with'. He concentrated on the area of the inter-subjective, co-*être*, rather rather than *être*. In contrast to Sartre's 'hell is other people', Marcel was convinced that 'there is only one suffering, to be alone'.

Marcel explored all those human experiences which bordered on the religious, such as love and hope and faith. The focal point for him was always the inter-subjective: underneath all human striving he saw the aspiration for human communion. It is only natural, therefore, that the subject of fidelity would assume critical importance in Marcel's thought. Since communion is the natural milieu of the person, no-one who is aware of it can afford to jeopardize, by infidelity, the communion already attained. To borrow a phrase from Sartre, one could say that, according to Marcel, communion is each person's fundamental project.

Communion with others first and foremost involves the heart. The most congenial human way of ensuring communion is the use of the word: 'forever'. This shows one's unconditional intentionality better than any other; even though it is a quantitative term, it is equally expressive of the quality of the commitment.

According to Marcel, there are two different kinds of 'forever' in those who are living out their life-long commitment. Some persevere throughout their lives only at the level of behaviour. They do what they said they would do; and they are to be admired for fulfilling the terms of the promises they have made. Such behaviour Marcel calls constancy. Fidelity, however, is more than the mere fulfilment of what one has promised (which can, in fact, have a demeaning effect on the one to whom the promises were made). It is constancy plus the unction of heart which was the driving force of the initial

promises. Fidelity is performance accompanied by interior sentiments. The person to whom the promises are made is an object not of duty but of love; and commitment is a product of love, and not of more will-power.

It is evident, then, that commitment questions are to be posed in terms of communion and love, rather than of fulfilment and freedom. There is no human growth outside of human communion. Nor can there be any stable, enriching communion unless there is commitment, for this is the stuff that shapes communion. The communion achieved by commitment will be as strong or as weak as the fidelity of the parties sealing it. A commitment is achieved when one's word is given and received in such a way that one's life takes root in the soil of the other's life.

Giving one's word is one thing; but commitment is always more demanding than simple intention. As with a seed that falls into the ground and dies, every inter-personal commitment involves what might be called a paschal transition. That is to say, unless the grain or seed falls into the ground and dies, it will remain isolated even when the context of one's life, to all intents and purposes, seems to be one of commitment. Isolation is inimical to life and growth, but communion always brings new life, because it involves handing over something of oneself. And this is precisely what commitment involves. One allows the other to have a claim over oneself; and there is created in the other an expectation involving the future. The growth of both parties is henceforth intertwined.

There has never been discovered any better way for human beings to grow up than by putting down roots. There are roots and roots, of course, as the parable of the sower suggests. The yield of a person's life can range anywhere from remaining seed-sized to developing a hundred-fold. There are only two variables here: the quality of the planting of the seed and the quality of the soil into which it is sown. The soil may be rocky or cluttered with too many competing influences. Or the planting may be superficial, because the person cannot or will not bring himself to the point of totalizing himself. He might also be mistaken about the aptness of the soil to receive the word he gives. These difficulties do not argue the incompatibility of commitment and growth with commitment and freedom. They argue only the fact that at the level of performance much commitment behaviour is naïve.

In brief, it seems to me that the majority of human beings who were our forebears had their hearts' desires set on communion and

union, love and growth; and they were free enough to attain to these. I doubt we have changed; if anything our own hearts' desires for these have intensified. There is no evidence that the modern means which we have employed for achieving our hearts' desire have been successful. We need to retrieve, it seems to me, an appreciation of the fact that freedom has a purpose; and this purpose cannot be achieved without going through the narrow door of commitment.