

SEEKING THE ROOTS OF THE UNDERSTANDING OF FREEDOM

In the introduction to the previous issue of *Ethos* we read of “boundary conditions of freedom.” Such a formula shaped the reflection that informed the contributions to that issue. It happens that the precision of the concept of freedom becomes, as it were, easier to attain if the determinants and semantically relevant contexts of freedom are outlined. It seems that, in seeking a brief and synthetic explanation, authors of the most straightforward formulas appearing in concise dictionaries and encyclopaedias act somehow from the outside. Apparently, a descriptive method based on analogy and examples is the best way to capture the concept in rational terms.

Freedom belongs among the primary categories, which necessarily emerge in reflection on (or pertinently to) transcendentals—truth, goodness, and beauty. When truth and good emerge from their abstracted scopes, they almost instantly release and attach “freedom” to them, whereupon we hear things like “the truth will set you free” (Jn 8:32) and “freedom is for love,”¹ or “freedom as a way for goodness to be.”²

The fact that transcendentals appear (are released) necessarily in reflection on freedom (terminological affinity?) lures us into seeing the problem, in a way, from the inside, possibly outside its contextual framings. It appears that such an attempt was made by Roman Ingarden in his now classic treatise *Man and Time*, as a side note to the problem of time, when he wrote on the inner experience of freedom. The essay ends with a kind of philosophical conclusion, somewhat poetically:

“I am a force that wills to be free. It will even sacrifice the permanence of freedom. But, while alive notwithstanding all other forces acting, it will find itself carrying the embryo of slavery once it becomes less intense, if it makes no effort. It will, then, lose its freedom if it binds itself to itself. It can last and be free only when it gives itself voluntarily to produce goodness, beauty and truth. Only then will it exist”³ (emphasis mine).

Although the last sentence goes back to the transcendentals, the entire reference highlights the personal dimension of freedom and its “movable topography.” The concluding fragment of *Man and Time*, as central to the subject, is highlighted by Andrzej Półtawski in his article “Roman Ingarden – metafizyk wolności [Roman Ingarden: The Metaphysicist of Freedom]”. It is no coincidence, then, that this sketch can be interpreted as an attempt at pointing out the elementary frames within which to capture freedom. We see, however, that the concluding thoughts invoked above are full of internal dialectics, tension, or even confused tautology (e.g., “free ... when it gives itself voluntarily”). The exposition of man’s necessary endeavour, his activity, his ceaseless struggle for “something” and “towards something” appears to be something constant. The person’s “movement” makes it possible to capture what we call freedom. Only in this “movement” can freedom reveal and be seen. The last words of the excerpt reduce the momentum of the philosopher’s pathos of sorts only to “become fixed” precisely on the transcendentals, without which it is impossible to understand freedom. Ingarden points to its core way ahead of other thinkers, who start much further afield.

¹ See John Paul II, “Freedom Is for Love,” in John Paul II, *Memory and Identity* (New York: Rizzoli, 2005), 39–43.

² See Wojciech Zaluski, “‘Wolność jako sposób istnienia dobra’: O filozofii wolności Józefa Tischnera,” *Studia z Filozofii Polskiej* 10 (2015): 89–110.

³ Roman Ingarden, “Człowiek i czas,” in *Książeczka o człowieku*, (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1973), 74. Unless otherwise indicated in a footnote, translations are mine.

Speaking of Ingarden's metaphysics of freedom and referring to his seminal but unfinished treatise *Controversy over the Existence of the World*, Andrzej Póltawski writes:

In ... the work Ingarden states explicitly that the resolution of the controversy over the existence of the world is tightly linked to the concept of human nature and that it is decisive for our understanding of this nature; namely, he argues that the decisive argument against the idealist solution to the question of the existence of the world is human freedom. He writes there are real, free and responsible human acts; I perform them in hardship, they are ingrained in the deepest layers of my personality. However, these acts are possible only if I—as a real person—stay within the confines of time. Further, in such free and responsible acting I develop and build myself in such a way that I grow more independent of time. Conversely, if I am too immature to take such action, being unfaithful to myself, I squander my resources and fall apart in time.

Therefore, man changes himself through acting freely and responsibly. Indeed, the issue is merely hinted at, and Ingarden does not elaborate on this change more extensively, on how it operates and what is the result of this power that integrates man and makes him independent of time. To be sure, however, this action is to realise values—goodness, beauty and truth; it is to be a life lived consciously with a sense of responsibility for these values.⁴

In the concluding section, Póltawski refers to two basic experiences of time that Ingarden describes in his *Man and Time*, which, as it turns out, are essentially tied with the issue of man's freedom. Ingarden writes: "There are two inherently distinct ways of experiencing time and ourselves in time. On the one hand, it seems that what exists 'for real' is ourselves, with time being merely derivative and phenomenal. On the other hand, conversely, time and the transformation it brings constitute the only reality, but we seem to be completely annihilated in this transformation."⁵

Now, moving on to the brief, synthetic yet inferred conclusion of Ingarden's discernment seen in its entirety⁶ and projecting it onto the field of interest to me, we can say that the second experience of passing reveals the human being as a slave to time—he turns into the object of constant annihilation by time. In contrast, in the first case we are dealing with a situation in which man, by virtue of the decisions he makes and the actions he takes in his life, is able to evade the sense of such annihilation present in the process of passing. Ingarden continues thus: "Therefore, I overcome time by living in a natural and elemental way that I do not feel constrained by the bounds of the present, that I overstep them all the time. I—who am transcendent for the transient, conscious experiences—constantly transcend that which exists every time in the present, as if, somehow, not only the present existed, but also the past and the future."⁷

If we follow this trail, from Ingarden's description of time we infer a rather straightforward message regarding freedom: it is possible only when choices and decisions are made within the person, again and again, thus leading to inner integration. Here opens the space for possible designations determined by transcendentals—again. For this space, understood broadly as mouldable matter, is capable of integrating the inner man—the free man.

If we continue in this Ingardian vein, we may say that the unique role inscribed in human nature is gaining freedom—that is, struggling to escape the confines of time; I focus here solely on the most profound sense of individual freedom. From this observation one can extract (or associate with it, for that matter) nearly all most impressive conclusions about freedom, formulated by the most eminent minds of the 20th century and our time. Here is, for

⁴ Andrzej Póltawski, "Roman Ingarden – metafizyk wolności," in *W kręgu filozofii Romana Ingardena*, ed. Władysław Stróżewski and Adam Węgrzecki (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 1995), 144; emphasis mine.

⁵ Ingarden, "Człowiek i czas," 43; emphasis mine.

⁶ Ibidem, 43–74.

⁷ Ibidem, 51.

example, the thought of Joseph Ratzinger, who engaged in polemics with Francis Bacon and Giambattista Vico:

The freedom that derives from Bacon's new thinking is the freedom to produce everything and to acknowledge no other lawfulness save man's capacity to do.... But the freedom to produce everything, which no longer perceives any obligation in the truth ... is subject to the constraint that from now on using and being used alone hold sway over man. When all is said and done, therefore, it is a slave's freedom—even though it reveals its true nature only late in the game and even though it takes a long time before it has so ruined itself by bad management that it lands among the pigs' husks and must still envy the swine because they are not cursed with freedom.⁸

Thinking about freedom becomes more lucid if we try looking at it through the prism of perhaps the most important analogy for this problem: human freedom in general and freedom in art—the artist's freedom. In the act of creation, human subjectivity is expressed in the most remarkable manner—in no other act are the qualities of personality manifested (only in this one and concrete personality, in this unimaginable aggregation of diverse factors and their nuancing), from those most apparent to those unattainable, which will ultimately determine the final shape of the work of art. In no other human action occurs such an intensity of choosing, such consumption of the creating person by the necessity to make a possibly best decision, again and again—given the whole work, its form and expression (formal and informal factors, their interplay and integration...). Finally, nowhere else does this all contribute so powerfully to the ultimate purpose of the work—the rendition of *t r u t h*, the artistic formulation of a testimony to the experience of the world understood as broadly and deeply as possible. In the case of a work of art, the “equivalent” of freedom permeates every “cell” of the work. Here, of course, I mean a work which is essentially “finished,” a perfect work. Underlying it is *f r e e d o m*. A factor greatly contributing to such freedom is the (real) artist's *w o r k*, realised in variously configured time of creation. A special and revealing fact is the case where the artist is confronted with a very strong formal “constraint” of the creator—the necessity to conform to many ordinary and extraordinary formal norms—the structure of the work, as it were, “contrary” to it, but eventually “thanks to it.” A particularly relevant example would be the sonnet, the writing of which requires adherence to a number of norms. Therefore, the uniqueness and quality of its structure emerges in confrontation with limitations; ultimately, it results from the collision with the oppressive norm. We can say, then, that the somehow absolute emanation of freedom was due to the heavy limitation of it. As a result of such a creative process is the continuation of the work beyond time (masterpiece).

It seems that we live in a world where finding an artist who is genuinely free is quite hard. Apparently, we are witnessing frequent incidents that contradict freedom. By choosing spontaneous and easy freedom one becomes enslaved. Wiesław Juszczak says in this context that “the artist's freedom is not that he is allowed to do anything. This freedom concerns the truth and is for the truth—not freedom for freedom's sake.”⁹ Simone Weil wrote from a different angle but with similar impact: “The only form of freedom whose existence could be posited in the legendary golden age of happiness is the freedom of small children when their

⁸ Joseph Ratzinger, *Fundamental Speeches from Five Decades*, trans. Michael J. Miller, J. R. Foster, and Adrian Walker (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2012), EPUB, lecture “Interpretation—Contemplation—Action: Reflections on the Mission of a Catholic Academy”.

⁹ Wiesław Juszczak, “Nietolerancja (Rozmowa z Wiesławą Wierchowską),” in Wiesław Juszczak, *Fragmety: Szkice z teorii i filozofii sztuki* (Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1995), 119.

parents do not impose on them any rules of conduct: in fact, it is unconditional submission to whim.”¹⁰

Max Scheler writes about this whim even more vividly: “This whimsical man, someone who is—as language unambiguously indicates—‘unpredictable,’ is a person not quite free, or someone in whom ... situations and the arousals of drives they induce have decisive and clearly determining implications for his conduct. In an insane person, who is totally incalculable, freedom is excluded to the highest possible degree; his conduct and experience bring him to the determinism of the laws of nature as closely as possible.”¹¹

Is it not that our quivering era of today, while accelerating civilizationally and in some ways also culturally, but slowing down in others (personal growth?), is caught up in this whim by yielding to it? (A philosopher, having collected his psychosociological observations, would have a lot to say about the reasons for this state of affairs.)

We might say that the sources of freedom are in man himself (perhaps this is how Ingarden would like to present the problem), but we can also say that they are external—man can be enslaved by something or someone. Cyprian Norwid, a self-taught philosopher at heart, captured the essence of his experience and thought on freedom thus when reflecting on the human person:

Enough of the trials of the past.
Enough of the past to show what hurts,
So don't listen to what they say
Of freedom—hear them speak of captivity!

Who would pursue all his life
What he instituted for himself alone?
He would do nothing as well as required,
Only fret and rave, like Nero did.

He who did nothing
Of his own will and under his own steam,
Would condemn himself to confines,
Wearing a yoke like a beast!¹²

from “Królestwo”

In a nutshell, the poet is speaking of a certain (necessary) balance of the decisive factor in man and the simultaneous necessity of constraining it, about the relationship between the enslaving and the liberating, the wobbly balance of both factors. Still, there are, however, questions about the sources of the proportion or lack of proportion between those parts. It is obvious, after all, that enslavement can become a space of freedom...

The question of freedom has not been intellectually tamed, or at best it is very difficult to tame. It leads researchers into various avenues, different intellectual orders assuming often very diverse methods of thinking, or it sometimes comes across aporias. There are also fields of reflection that continually attract this freedom. The most important area (and the only one of this magnitude) is freedom, as mentioned by Robert Spaemann. It predicts a paradox, which is ultimately an illusion of contradiction:

¹⁰ Simone Weil, *Myśli*, trans. Aleksandra Olędzka-Frybesowa (Warszawa: Pax, 1985), 37.

¹¹ Max Scheler, “Z fenomenologii i metafizyki wolności,” in Max Scheler, *Wolność, miłość, świętość*, trans. Grzegorz Sowiński (Kraków: Znak, 2004), 80.

¹² Cyprian Norwid, “Królestwo,” in: Cyprian Norwid, *Pisma wszystkie*, introduction and critical notes by Juliusz Wiktor Gomulicki, vol. 2, part 2, *Wiersze* (Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1971), 63.

[The Bible says that] man is challenged to make a free decision by a prohibition. St Thomas Aquinas responds to the question why God forbade man to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil by saying that this prohibition was established only for man to do something commanded by God in this particular and only situation. The natural moral law of Paradise is not an imperative for man. It just expresses its essence. Its observance is not based on a free decision. Freedom is challenged by a prohibition.¹³

While I focus on issues that originate in the Beginning (Book of Genesis), forgoing an extensive and comprehensive analysis of this, after all, vast issue, and out of concern for the role and poetics of this essay, let me quote two sentences from the Gospel of St John: “Very truly I tell you, when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go” (Jn 21:18, emphasis mine). The question of freedom does appear in the biblical account of Salvation History, somewhat ephemerally yet pointing to landmark events, until the very event of the Cross—a place of unimaginable submission to suffering, which opens up real freedom.

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¹³ Robert Spaemann, *Odwieczna pogłoska: Pytanie o Boga i złudzenie nowożytności*, trans. Jarosław Merecki (Warszawa: Oficyna Naukowa, 2009), 249–50; emphasis mine.