

Understanding Freedom as a Way of Knowing Social Life

Henk E. S. Woldring

The problem of human freedom is nearly as old as philosophy itself. Human freedom—understood as freedom of the will—was denied by some pre-Socratics (Xenophanes and Democritus) and by the Stoic philosophers. These thinkers maintained that a strict law of material causality prevailed throughout the whole of nature, and that human beings were no exceptions to this law. After the Renaissance, scientific discoveries convinced many scholars that physical laws governed everything in the universe, including the minds of human beings. In particular, both Darwin's theory—in which human beings were considered as a species of mammals and, consequently subject to biological laws—and Freud's theory of an unconscious realm of human mind—with its instincts, passions and repressed motivations which influence human actions—strengthened the idea that free will was either non-existent or irrelevant.

Jacques Maritain acknowledges the relevance of these physical, biological and psychological theories of human action. However, he argues that the question of free will exceeds the competence of these disciplines, and that this question is one of philosophy, which must therefore be dealt with in a philosophical frame of reference. According to Maritain, to use scientific arguments to support a philosophical determinism, to conclude that there cannot be a free will or free agents with moral consciousness and intelligence, goes beyond the proper domain of those sciences. Acknowledging that free will presupposes a complex dynamism of instincts, tendencies, psycho-physical dispositions and acquired habits, Maritain still maintains that it is where this dynamism emerges in the world of spirit that freedom of choice is exercised, where and when the person decides to give or withhold decisive efficacy to the inclinations and urges of nature.¹

¹ Jacques Maritain, "The Conquest of Freedom" in *The Education of Man: The Educational Philosophy of Jacques Maritain*, ed. Donald and Idella Gallagher (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1962), p. 161.

Maritain rightly maintains that to use scientific arguments to support philosophical determinism, to conclude that there cannot be a free will, goes beyond the competence of the sciences. He also argues—again, rightly so—that the quest to understand free will is a philosophical quest. He argues that we inherit free will as a form of spiritual energy through our rational nature; “we do not have to achieve it: it appears within us as an initial form of Freedom.”²

In Maritain’s theory, freedom of will and freedom of choice in various fields of action are closely connected. Sometimes he even equates these two: “We maintain then that freedom of choice, freedom in the sense of good will.” However, he also distinguishes them when he argues that the free act is “like an instantaneous flash in which the active and dominating indetermination of the will operates.”³ Elsewhere he writes, “the notion of Freedom is very much wider than the notion of Free Will. Free will is indeed the source and spring of the world of Freedom.”⁴ This then raises the question: What is the nature of the relationship between free will as a form of spiritual energy on the one hand, and freedom of choice in various fields of action on the other?

Freedom of Autonomy

Maritain answers this question by introducing the idea of “freedom of autonomy.” He considers the free will to be an indispensable prerequisite to, and preparation for, freedom of autonomy, which he deems much more important. For Maritain, freedom of autonomy means that the free will—or the initial, immature, form of freedom—must develop in a psychological and moral attitude that permits a person to be one “having dominion over our own acts and being to ourselves a rounded and a whole existence.”⁵ With this true freedom of autonomy, a person can rule his acts, having the power to overcome and to control those impulses and instincts, desires and passions that easily make human beings their slaves.

Maritain further maintains that the psychological and moral development from mere free will to freedom of autonomy does not occur naturally. However, this development is a necessary process, if we are to bring ourselves to maturity as morally responsible agents.

² Jacques Maritain, *Freedom in the Modern World* (New York: Gordian Press, 1971 [1936]), p. 30.

³ “The Conquest of Freedom,” p. 162.

⁴ *Freedom in the Modern World*, pp. 29-30.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

Discussing freedom of autonomy, Maritain argues that he employs this term “in a Pauline and not Kantian sense.”⁶ He distinguishes his freedom of autonomy from Kant’s, in which the individual human being is considered to be free only if he obeys the law he gives himself. For Kant, freedom of autonomy consists in obedience to the moral law, and this moral law is conceived of as being strictly self-imposed.⁷ Ultimately, a human being is not subject to any external rule; his obedience is due solely to himself.

Maritain opposes Kant’s position. He agrees with the apostle Paul who posits that freedom of choice in various fields of action consists essentially in obedience to the divine moral law as revealed in the Gospel, which is unequivocally imposed from without. The crucial point is that these moral laws should be obeyed voluntarily because they are acknowledged to be just; they are obeyed out of love for justice, and never through coercion. Because of this commitment to justice, these moral laws will strengthen freedom of autonomy.⁸

James Schall describes freedom of autonomy as “freedom that comes when, through discipline, asceticism, habit and purpose, a person can rule his acts to choose what in fact is true.”⁹ Since discipline, asceticism and habits differ from one person to another, freedom of autonomy may be achieved in different degrees in different human beings. Moreover, love for a just and true life may (and indeed should) inspire people to achieve their freedom of autonomy more and more.¹⁰

Again, for Maritain, the free will is a necessary precondition for freedom of autonomy. But this begs the question as to whether the reverse may also be the case in a certain respect; although the free will is the necessary condition of freedom of autonomy, should not the true meaning of free will and freedom of choice in various fields of action be understood when we know what someone’s freedom of autonomy is? My provisional answer to this question is that the free will is the essence of freedom of autonomy, and that freedom of autonomy is the cognitive condition for understanding the free will and freedom of choice in various fields of action. I will therefore discuss more extensively the nature of the relationship between free will and freedom of choice.

⁶ “The Conquest of Freedom,” p. 159.

⁷ This idea of autonomy is a key term in Kant’s *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysics of Morals* and in his *Critique of Practical Reason*.

⁸ “The Conquest of Freedom” p. 168; *Freedom in the Modern World*, p. 36-37. See also *St. Paul’s Epistle to the Romans* 8:13-15.

⁹ James V. Schall, *Jacques Maritain : The Philosopher in Society*. (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998), p. 130. See also Charles A. Fecher, *The Philosophy of Jacques Maritain* (Westminster, Maryland: The Newman Press, 1953), p. 182.

¹⁰ “The Conquest of Freedom,” pp. 165-68.

Maritain's Theory Reconsidered

As earlier discussed, Maritain argues that free will transcends instincts, tendencies, psychological dispositions, acquired habits and inheritable traits. He acknowledges that certain physical, biological and psychological factors have a determinative efficacy to human actions, while other factors are conditional. Since human beings have no gills or wings they cannot live like fishes or birds. The physical-biological characteristics of human beings, inherited through the human genome, are coercive or determinative factors of human life.

However, not all physical-biological factors are determinative. There are individuals who are deaf or color blind. For a choice of career these factors may be decisive, but not always. Many of these people are looking for compensations or alternative possibilities to overcome their physical-biological restrictions. For these people those factors have a conditional efficacy to their actions. There are people who have unchangeable psychological characteristics that may have a determinative nature. However, there are other psychological traits that have the character of conditional factors that can be changed, however difficult this may be. The same can be said of social factors, most notably education, that have a conditional influence on human life.

Those conditional factors combine to produce *dispositions*: fundamental, stable and dynamic moral attitudes that contain the permanent moral and spiritual achievements (or deprivations) of human beings. These dispositions then underlie human intentions and actions. Morally good dispositions prepare and fortify a person to make right use of her freedom of choice in various fields of action. However, a person who cultivates immoral dispositions will be inclined to misuse this freedom.¹¹ Dispositions should then be considered as an intermediate stratum or stage between the determinative physical-biological factors and the final human intentions and actions.

An example of a disposition may be what Maritain calls the *adherence of minds to a moral charter* of a democratic society. He argues that notwithstanding the diversity of worldviews citizens have a fundamental and stable attitude that contains the achieved acquirement that they should adhere to the following elements: human equality, fraternity, mutual tolerance and respect, social and political rights and liberties of human persons and corresponding responsibilities towards the common good.¹²

¹¹ *Freedom in the Modern World*, pp. 22, 38.

¹² Jacques Maritain, *Man and the State* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1951), pp. 111-13.

Dispositions are stable factors that regulate conditional human choices in various fields of action. But what motivates people to cultivate dispositions in either a morally good or a depraved manner? There is another factor that gives dispositions their dynamism: this dynamic moral force that drives people may be called *ethos*.

In his discussion of democracy Maritain argues that a genuine democracy requires a fundamental agreement between minds and wills on the basis of life in common. Democratically thinking citizens should have such a common thought or a common human creed, the creed of freedom.¹³ This faith is not a religious faith but a *secular* or *civic* one. Maritain employs the conception of a *common ethos* of democracy: the inner energy of the secular democratic faith and moral force people have, and which underlie and vitalize cultivation of their democratic dispositions.¹⁴

Moreover, there is another conditional factor that gives this ethos its strength: the deepest or *spiritual center* of a person's existence that has the potentiality to transcend the world around. This center of our existence is the "location" of free will, the initial form of freedom that belongs to the "world of spirit." It is the most fundamental and integral idea of freedom because it refers to the direction of life a person wants to choose. It is the "anchor place" of human life in which a religious human being intends to live in communion with God, love and truth.

I come back to the question asked before: What is the nature of the relationship between free will as spiritual energy on the one hand, and freedom of choice in various fields of action on the other? The substructure of determinative physical-biological factors, and conditional factors like dispositions, ethos and the center of spiritual energy culminate in human beings developing their freedom of autonomy and performing their freedom of choice in various fields of action. Both these conditional factors and human actions make a person a morally responsible person.

However, there is another complication. Persons achieve their freedom of choice in concrete social, economic, juridical, and moral actions. These actions are also conditioned by a variety of social communities in which they occur. Will social communities endanger freedom of choice in various fields of action?

Isaiah Berlin answers this question affirmatively. He criticizes all theories of human freedom that distinguish between physical, biological and psychological factors (lower nature) on the one hand and those spiritual and

¹³ *Man and the State*, p. 109. See also Jacques Maritain, *The Range of Reason* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1952), pp. 165-71.

¹⁴ *Man and the State*, p. 145.

intellectual factors (higher nature) on the other that master the lower natural factors. He fears the monopolizing of the higher natural factors by embracing social collectives like the church and state. According to him, in history these social collectives have been largely oppressive.¹⁵ If Berlin's criticism has merit, it would imply a serious flaw in Maritain's theory of freedom. I shall discuss this question below.

Freedom and Authority

Since Maritain accepts the idea of heteronomy, he argues that to achieve freedom of autonomy we need authority or some kind of rule. Moreover, freedom of autonomy does not only apply to individuals but also to communities because, according to Maritain, we should acknowledge that communities have their own rights, liberties and moral responsibilities. Authorities in communities do not guide only the individual participants but also these communities as entities. Moreover, these authorities do not consider individual and community-centered liberties and rights independently, but as parts of society. These authorities are bound in conscience to feel responsible toward society at large. On the other hand, the authority of the government has not only to protect the liberties of individual citizens and their private associations but also to guide these liberties toward the common good. In short, if associations are able to show the strength of their own responsibilities and purposes to promote their own good and the common good as well, they are also characterized by having freedom of autonomy.

Maritain argues that freedom and authority are not in fundamental opposition to each other. Although authority is often equated with coercion, and although authority sometimes needs coercion in a legitimate way, we should distinguish these two. A good citizen ought to obey authority and laws not out of compulsion or fear of punishment but of his own free will and love for a just social order.¹⁶ To practice authority or to obey authority is neither irrational nor inhuman. On the contrary, both can be perfectly intelligent acts. If the social order should be an order of freedom it needs authority, not as a guarantee but rather as a necessary condition.¹⁷

¹⁵ Isaiah Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty" in *Four Essays on Liberty* (London: Oxford University Press 1969), pp. 132-34.

¹⁶ *Freedom in the Modern World*, p. 79.

¹⁷ "The Conquest of Freedom," p. 171. See also Yves R. Simon, *A General Theory of Authority* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1962), pp. 1-79. See also *Jacques Maritain: The Philosopher in Society*, p. 122.

Maritain argues that this freedom will not be a quiet and easy-going peacefully expanding freedom, but rather one defined by tensions. According to him, we need education for freedom and authority for the sake of the society of the future.¹⁸ However, if freedom of autonomy, both of persons and communities, requires authority, what conditions do we need to prevent that authority from suppressing freedom of autonomy? If freedom of autonomy should be understood as a property of a person or community that enables them to choose one from among several alternative courses of action (positive freedom), what is the area in which they can employ their freedom of autonomy in various fields of action without external constraint beyond their control (negative freedom)?

Social Freedom

Maritain argues that society at large consists of a multitude of social communities that should achieve their freedom of autonomy. Autonomy means that every social community governs itself, and carries out duties according to its own freedom, rights and responsibilities. As such, the true political society is characterized by social pluralism.

While civic associations have an enduring worth, from the standpoint of the communities as well as individuals, oppression within these associations is often overlooked. In fact many associations are undemocratic. Maritain argues that freedom of autonomy of civic associations cannot be achieved without freedom of participants, and, consequently, principles of democracy should also be applied to these communities.¹⁹

I have already discussed that there is a mutual and indissoluble relationship between freedom and authority. This means, more precisely, that freedom of action of both participants and communities as wholes is conditioned and limited by the authorities of these communities. In this context it may be illuminating to discuss briefly the concept of authority as found in the writings of the Dutch neo-Calvinist philosopher Abraham Kuyper.

Kuyper (1837-1920) was the founding father of neo-Calvinism in the Netherlands. He was the founder of the first Christian political party in the Netherlands (1879), founded the Reformed *Vrije Universiteit* (Free University, 1880) in Amsterdam, and was inspirational in the struggle for free denominational schools. Kuyper argued that parents should have the right to

¹⁸ Jacques Maritain, *Education at the Crossroads* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1943), pp. 98, 102.

¹⁹ *Man and the State*, pp. 9-12.

found their own denominational schools independent from the state. Consequentially, the Dutch constitution contains an article that acknowledges the right of denominational schools, and, moreover, the financial standardization of denominational and public schools by the state.

One of the central ideas in Kuyper's political philosophy is the idea of *sphere sovereignty*. Kuyper argues that each form and level of government ought to be considered as "God's servant," and that it therefore has the obligation to maintain social justice.²⁰ Because of this religious calling of the government, he rejects the Enlightenment idea of popular sovereignty that underlies the French Revolution. The revolutionaries opposed divine authority, and they refused to recognize any deeper ground of political life than that which is found in the people as an aggregate. Consequently, Kuyper rejects any individualist view of society.²¹

Kuyper then further rejects the unrestricted sovereignty of the state. This conception of sovereignty proposes that everything is subordinate to the will and the goal of the almighty state. There is no other right but the positive law that is codified in the law. The law is right not because its content is in harmony with principles of justice but because it is law. This internal logic of state sovereignty seems to demand centralization of power in the government, regardless of effects on the rights and liberties of its citizens. In this case the government would absorb the responsibilities of its citizens and thereby undermine the vitality of society.²²

In contrast to both the idea of popular sovereignty and the idea of unrestricted state sovereignty, Kuyper presents his organic view of society. He argues that a nation is an organic whole that not only comprises individual citizens as its parts, but also civic associations. Citizens should not only stand up for their individual rights and liberties but also for the rights and liberties of their civic associations.

Kuyper defends his organic concept of *sphere sovereignty* as follows:

In a Calvinistic sense we understand hereby that the family, business, science, art, and so forth are all social spheres, which do not owe their existence to the state, and which do not derive the law of their life from the superiority of the state, but obey a high authority within their own bosom; an authority which rules, by the grace of God, just as the sovereignty of the state does.²³

²⁰ Abraham Kuyper, *Calvinism: Six Stone-lectures* (Amsterdam: Höveker & Wormser, 1899), pp. 105-06.

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 109-12.

²² *Ibid.*, pp. 113-14.

²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 116, 123-27.

Kuyper acknowledges that God is the absolute sovereign to whom all other forms of authority are subordinated. Next, he acknowledges that his idea of sphere sovereignty involves a sharp distinction between state and civil society: private associations belonging to each of those social spheres have their own sovereignty, authority and freedom that are not derived from the competence of the state. These private associations should practice their proper competencies and freedoms to promote their private interests. The state should acknowledge these authorities and liberties and not intrude. On the other hand, these private associations contribute to the public policy that they tend to amplify. In contrast to the perception of private associations as special interest groups, Kuyper argues that from their acknowledged special interest they also contribute (optimally) to the public interest.

According to Kuyper, the law has to acknowledge the rights and liberties of citizens and their private associations and protect them from abuse of power by the government and other institutions. Although he discusses the idea of sphere sovereignty of civic associations that are characterized by their own authority, he also speaks of these spheres as a “palladium of our liberties.”²⁴

Kuyper’s ideas on freedom and authority are compatible with those of Maritain. Maritain’s idea of the freedom of autonomy of differentiated social communities and Kuyper’s idea of sphere sovereignty tend to struggle against both individualist and totalitarian social theories. Berlin’s criticism of higher natural factors that are often identified by totalitarian, all-embracing, social collectives cannot be applied to Maritain’s and Kuyper’s parallel theories. Maritain and Kuyper characterize their theories of freedom as both communal and personal.²⁵

This leaves one last difficulty. If freedom of autonomy should be understood as a property of a person and a community that enables them to choose one from among several alternative courses of action (positive freedom), what are the boundaries within which they can employ their freedom of autonomy without external constraint (negative freedom)? For larger social communities also have their own dispositions, ethos, and a core of existence that underlie their actions, and which the freedom of others might endanger. I have already discussed Maritain’s idea of a common ethos of a democratic society. Other social communities like families, schools and industries have their own fundamental agreement between minds and wills on the basis of life in common. This idea of a differentiated social ethos underlies social

²⁴ Ibid., p. 141.

²⁵ *Freedom in the Modern World*, p. 46. *Calvinism*, p. 141.

dispositions within a variety of social communities. They have their own stable socio-moral attitudes (customs of cooperation and communication) which condition and fortify the individual and common activities of the participants. Therefore, the core competencies of social communities are characterized by their proper qualifications. Families, industries, schools, churches, etc. have their own moral, economic, educational or religious qualification. They therefore have their own proper purposes that flow from these qualifications, beyond which their autonomy is limited. These qualifications of social communities and their ethos and dispositions characterize the freedom of autonomy of these communities.

A person's freedom of choice in various fields of action can be achieved only through and within differentiated social communities. Freedom of choice does not belong only to the personal sphere but also to the sphere of social communities. These communities are permanent frameworks of human actions that transmit moral values, norms, discipline, asceticism, habit and purposes of action. They may contribute to the formation of human dispositions and ethos. In short, through and within social communities we learn our freedom of autonomy or how to become morally responsible persons.

In opposition to Berlin who univocally considers every sacrifice of freedom to be a loss, however great the moral need for it may be,²⁶ I argue that there will nowhere and never be freedom without (at least) authority and (often) constraint, but authority and constraint do not necessarily result in a loss of freedom. On the contrary, the word "authority" comes from a Latin word that means "to grow" or "to cause to grow."²⁷ In this context this means that citizens need authority to be themselves, to be what they are or, better yet, what they ought to be as morally mature and responsible agents striving toward freedom as autonomy. I shall clarify this thesis below.

Authentic Freedom

Maritain argues that the idea of freedom is dominant in the theories of many political philosophers after the Renaissance. However, he repeatedly asks, what notion of freedom do they employ and in what way do they elaborate it?

A general characteristic of philosophic thought after the Renaissance on the relationship between man and society is, according to Isaiah Berlin, the

²⁶ "Two Concepts of Liberty," p. 125.

²⁷ *Freedom in the Modern World*, pp. 79-80. See also *Jacques Maritain: The Philosopher in Society*, pp. 123, 128.

idea that “there is no value higher than the individual.”²⁸ Charles Taylor argues that the general characteristic of post-Renaissance philosophy is that a person considers himself as a “self-defining subject.”²⁹ A new conception of man emerged that was characterized a) by a separation and gaining of independence by the “self” in opposition to nature, society and history, and b) by replacing this separation or gain of independence by an alternative: human beings were in search of possibilities of self-determination and self-realization in and through reconsidered relationships to nature, society and history. However, there is a serious tension between a) and b). The “self-defining subject” stood in an oppositional relationship to what he considered to be a contingent world. Post-Renaissance philosophers no longer looked for the meaning of human actions in relationship to a cosmic order. They found their starting-point in the individual human being who defines his “self” in relationship to nature, society and history, and also to God. These ideas underlie many, if not most, liberal social theories.³⁰

There are other political theories that do not start from the freedom of individuals but instead turn to the state as the guarantor of freedom for its citizens, for instance Georg W. F. Hegel and Karl Marx. Since in these theories the state is interpreted as the fulfillment of free will and freedom of choice, Maritain characterizes these theories as imperialistic.

I concentrate for the moment on the individualistic ideas that underlie the liberal social theories that are dominant in our time. However, these liberal theories have become far-removed from the authentic meaning of freedom. A fundamental error committed by many contemporary liberal philosophers is that they confuse (in Maritain’s terms) free will with freedom of autonomy, and they do not accept the possibility of a chosen moral commitment. Maritain argues:

This error makes the highest form of freedom consist in freedom of choice; as if the reason for choosing were not to escape having to choose again! Free choice becomes an end in itself, and man, condemned to recurrent acts of choice, without ever being able to bind himself, is launched into a dialectic of freedom which destroys freedom. In order always to be ready to make any fresh choice that the circumstances of the moment may suggest, he refuses to declare for an end which, once chosen, would limit the field of possible choices in the future. In order to enjoy as supreme good the pure exercise of his freedom he refuses to determine it by reference to a rational ground.³¹

²⁸ “Two Concepts of Liberty,” p. 137.

²⁹ Charles Taylor, *Hegel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), p. 6.

³⁰ *Freedom in the Modern World*, pp. 39-41.

³¹ *Freedom in the Modern World*, pp. 31-32.

Maritain argues that a human being in action makes choices and that these choices reflect his freedom of autonomy or his psychologico-moral attitude. These choices may either affirm or correct former choices but new choices do not damage the continuity of actions. If a person denies this continuity he gets caught in his own self-denials. The essence of freedom of autonomy always implies, according to Maritain, a moral commitment. I shall clarify this essence of freedom by reminding briefly some historic notions of freedom.

From the sixth century B.C. in ancient Greece, freedom (*eleutheria*) of citizens was connected originally with the experience to be "at home," to belong to a people or to live in a concrete social milieu. The original question was not "Who is free?" but "Where is someone free?" In the *polis* the question is not primarily to be free human beings but to be free as citizens. Citizens of a *polis* can exist only if they are associated in a well-ordered society that is ruled by laws (*nomoi*). However, *nomos* does not mean only law but it refers also to moral values: human beings cannot exist as independent individuals but they can exist only within the moral order of a political community.³²

Certainly, there have always been tensions between freedom and law in the *polis*, but no contrast (except in situations of tyranny). Freedom for the citizens could only be achieved if they accepted and internalized laws by reasonable insight. Freedom was not only endangered by tyranny but also by growing individualism, and the concurrent weakening of the binding force of laws.

Further, in the Jewish and Christian traditions the idea of freedom is a central one. In these traditions freedom means first of all: liberation from slavery (in Egypt). Next, freedom refers to the direction of a new home country, the land of promise. This liberation *from* and liberation *to* arises from a divine act that is characterized by love and justice. Moreover, this divine love implies a call of imitation, to act toward fellow human beings with love and justice. In the Jewish and Christian traditions freedom is a *relational* concept. Freedom will be endangered if a person as an individual breaks away from this relationality and if he does not imitate love and justice.

Both in the ancient Greek tradition and in the Jewish and Christian traditions the essence of freedom had nothing to do with individualistic ideas of freedom. Freedom was considered as a relational concept that has something to do with choice, the fundamental choice of a moral commitment to the state

³² See Dieter Nestle, *Eleutheria. Studien zum Wesen der Freiheit bei den Griechen und im Neuen Testament.* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1967), pp. 26-30, 104-12.

or the people. In our socially differentiated society the essence of freedom, freedom of autonomy or what I call *authentic freedom* is characterized by a moral commitment to a variety of social communities.

Degraded Freedom

After the Renaissance, in particular since John Locke, representatives of liberal mainstream theories employed the concept of freedom in various ways. Most of these representatives acknowledged the individualist basis of their conceptions of freedom. They restricted freedom to individual human beings who are characterized as “self-defining subjects.” Moreover, they ascribed to freedom certain civic rights, participatory rights, and economic rights such as property and competition between individuals in free markets. These needs and rights underlie contemporary constitutional states. In particular, market freedoms have had a decisive impact in contemporary Western societies, and not only in the economic sectors.

Freedom of the market is characterized by commerce, competition and contracts between citizens. Everyone is an end in himself, and everyone considers others as potential opponents. Consequently, fellow-men become “counter-men.” Many liberals use the market as a model for other sectors of society. However, society at large is not a market. In a socially differentiated society there are also families, groups of friends, religious communities, schools and hospitals. Freedom of the market is essentially different from freedom in those differentiated communities.

Certainly, neo-liberal theories do not want to use the market as a model without restrictions for other sectors of society. They pay attention to ideas such as the responsibility of individuals and industries for society at large, and to social justice. However, these ideas are primarily additive and corrective, and they can only veil the individualist character of the liberal concept of freedom, both in the market and other sectors of society.

From their individualistic perspective, many people stand up for their needs and they claim their fundamental human rights to defend their properties, which gives them a feeling of certainty, at least materialist certainty. To look for such a certainty is not wrong in itself but, according to Maritain, it does not mean that our use of property rights will be good.

Maritain’s younger contemporary, Emmanuel Levinas, argues that freedom starts with liberating oneself from possible commitment with pseudo certainties, and to have an eye for other human beings, in particular, for widows, orphans, strangers and other vulnerable people. This means that we should test the authenticity of what we call our freedom: it should be tested

by the critique of others who are related to our freedom. Levinas argues that authentic freedom is hardly achievable, and, therefore, he characterizes it as “difficult freedom.”³³

Berlin acknowledges that his concept of negative freedom may be compatible with social injustice. His idea of negative freedom answers the question: “What is the area within which the subject—a person or a group of persons—is or should be left to do or be what he is able to do or be, without interference by other persons.”³⁴ He argues: “Legal liberties are compatible with extremes of exploitation, brutality, and injustice. The case for intervention, by the state or other effective agencies, to secure conditions for both positive, and at least a minimum degree of negative liberty for individuals, is overwhelmingly strong.”³⁵ To avoid widespread misery (lack of income, knowledge or health), Berlin is prepared to sacrifice some, or all, of his freedom for the sake of justice, equality or love of his fellow men. However, he considers a sacrifice of freedom always as a loss, however great the moral need of the compensation of it may be.³⁶

There is an important difference between Berlin’s and Levinas’s ideas of freedom. Berlin’s starting point is the liberal conception of individual freedom as the highest value. Next, he is willing to correct any immoral consequences of his starting point and to sacrifice some of his freedoms in so doing. Levinas’s starting point is that human freedom is not an individualist but a relational concept that locates people in relationships of responsibility to others. These relationships presuppose acknowledgement of human dignity. This implies that freedom has a normative dimension that becomes visible in a variety of concepts closely connected to it: community, justice, service and care.

Conclusion

Liberal social theories have become far removed from the authentic meaning of freedom as socio-moral commitment. In this respect they degenerate the authentic meaning of freedom that is characterized by freedom of choice in various fields of action, and by a moral commitment to social communities that have their own liberties and responsibilities. These responsibilities imply ideas of public spirit, social justice, service and care.

³³ Emmanuel Levinas, *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), pp. 11-26.

³⁴ “Two Concepts of Liberty,” pp. 121-22.

³⁵ *Four Essays on Liberty*, p. xlvi.

³⁶ “Two Concepts of Liberty,” p. 125.

Further, these concepts are not simply supplements or amendments to correct individualistic visions of freedom. On the contrary, public spirit, justice, service and care lie at the basis of freedom. These factors give freedom its authenticity and strength, and give rise to critical reflection on its use, and understand it as a way of knowing social life.