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# Human Freedom and Christian Morality

James P. Danaher

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Many today simply deny the existence of human freedom. In light of what we know about the way human beings conform to sociological pressures, behavioural conditioning, and physiological and genetic factors, the position that human freedom is an illusion has become popular. Of course, if we are not free beings, neither are we moral beings. Morality demands a certain freedom. How are we to praise some for their moral excellence and condemn others when we are not, to a large extent, responsible for our behaviour, good or bad? In light of the contemporary wisdom produced by the physical and social sciences perhaps morality is an illusion.

Strangely, while geneticists and social scientists tell us of our lack of

freedom, a host of postmodern philosophers tell us quite the opposite. The existential and linguistic philosophies of the 20th century, along with historicism and pragmatism, have all contributed to the creation of a postmodern age in which our conceptual reality is very much a matter of our own making. According to postmodern philosophers, human beings have an enormous freedom to conceptualize the world in a vast variety of ways. In the past, words were generally thought to signify ready-made concepts which were given and somehow reflected reality. Today, we understand that our concepts are largely the product of a freedom we have to conceptualize the world in a variety of ways. Conceptual reality is very much a matter of our own making. Thus, even if the physical world is beyond our ability to affect, we are free to choose from a variety of competing narratives concerning what the brute facts of the physical world mean and how they are to be conceptualized. We can accept the narrative that our cultural and scientific communities impose upon us, or we can choose some alternative way to conceptual-

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James P. Danaher, PhD (City University, New York) is Head of the Department of Philosophy, Nyack College, NY and Chair of the Department of Arts and Sciences, Berkeley College, White Plains, NY. He has published articles in many philosophical and theological journals, including 'The place of Berkeley's ideas' (*Philosophical Enquiry*, Summer 2000), 'Concepts and our understanding of them' (*Ashland Theological Journal*, 1999) and 'The fallacy of the single real essence' (*The Philosopher*, Autumn 1999).

ize the world.

### Behavioural Freedom

Consequently, although we may be more aware than ever before that the physical circumstances of our existence are beyond our control, we are, at the same time, more aware than ever before that we are free to determine for ourselves what those circumstances mean. It would appear that we are both free and not free. But what is the nature of the freedom that is required in order for us to be moral beings? Is it a freedom over our behaviour and the physical reality of our existence, or is it the freedom we have over our conceptual reality?

It would at first appear that the kind of freedom necessary for us to be moral agents is a freedom over our behaviour and not merely a freedom over the conceptual world of our understanding. Indeed, the dominant cultural view is that both virtue and sin are accomplished, not by merely thinking about doing good or evil, but by actually doing good or evil. Aristotle tells us that in order to be good, we must actually do something and not merely think or intend to do good: '[M]en become builders by building and lyre players by playing the lyre; so too we become just by doing just acts, temperate by doing temperate acts, brave by doing brave acts.'<sup>1</sup> For Aristotle, virtue is a habit<sup>2</sup> and as a habit it is obviously

behavioural.

Equally, we generally construe evil as behavioural as well. Our dominant cultural view is that we are free to think what we want and are held morally responsible only for what we do and not what we think. The law sanctions only immoral acts and not immoral thoughts. We believe that thoughts hurt no one. Furthermore, they are impossible to detect. Therefore the offences we contemplate become offences only when we act on them and not when we think them.<sup>3</sup> The man who thinks of doing evil but restrains himself from actually doing it is considered not to be evil. Indeed, in many instances, his refusal to do the evil he had contemplated is seen as a virtue.<sup>4</sup>

It certainly appears that both moral good and evil are behavioural. It would, therefore, equally seem that the freedom we need to be moral beings must be behavioural as well. Since so much of our behaviour is not free but determined by genetic predisposition, conditioning, or social pressures, it would seem that we lack the freedom we need to be moral agents. Some people may do good things, while other people do bad things, but the cause of their behaviour is not the person's own will but their upbringing, financial situation, biological predispositions, chemical imbalances, and a host of other factors over which they have little or no control.

Many react to this and attempt to

<sup>1</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethic*, Ed. Richard McKeon, *The Basic Works of Aristotle* (New York: Random House, 1941), 1103a35-1103b2.

<sup>2</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean*, 1103a14-1103a34.

<sup>3</sup> The crime of conspiracy may be the one exception.

<sup>4</sup> Strangely, if this is a virtue, it is one that must be preceded by an evil thought.

resurrect the moral nature of human beings by refuting the contemporary wisdom with arguments that challenge the evidence produced by today's science. There is, however, another way to resurrect our moral nature in a postmodern world. It is the way Jesus suggested two thousand years ago.

### Jesus on Freedom

Jesus tells us that morality is not behavioural. According to Jesus, the sin is in our imagination and the offence occurs when we conceive evil in our hearts and minds and not merely when we act upon those evil thoughts.

Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not commit adultery: But I say unto you, That whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart.<sup>5</sup>

Jesus also says something very similar about anger and equates it with murder.<sup>6</sup> Equally, John confirms that teaching and says, 'whosoever hateth his brother is a murderer'.<sup>7</sup> If this can be taken to mean that morality exists first and foremost within our hearts and minds, then perhaps we are moral beings, since within that internal, conceptual world we are free.

Of course, the sin that Jesus says is in our hearts and minds is only half of the story. In order for us to be moral we must have a freedom to do good as well as evil, and thus the

moral good must also be internal and thus under our control. It would seem that this is the more difficult case. Our culture does not deem someone good merely for having good thoughts. A courageous person is one who behaves courageously and a just person is one who behaves justly. To maintain that moral goodness is not behavioural but conceptual would certainly be to oppose the dominant cultural view. But that, of course, is exactly what Christianity does. The Christian view is that not only is sin internal and a matter of our hearts and minds, but so also is our righteousness. According to Christianity, we become righteous not by what we do but by sharing in what Christ did. The way we come to share in that righteousness is through a belief and not an action.

### Christianity and Beliefs

Christianity, first and foremost, is a religion of beliefs not actions. Most religions stress what we have to do to please God. Christianity stresses what we must *believe* about the nature of God, in order to please him, and in order to realize the ultimate happiness we desire.<sup>8</sup> It is not so much what a bride does for her husband as what she thinks about him that either pleases or displeases him. All the good behaviour in the world cannot make up for the ill beliefs a wife has about her husband. Equally, her beliefs about her hus-

<sup>5</sup> Mt. 5:27-28 KJV

<sup>6</sup> Mt. 5:21-22 KJV

<sup>7</sup> 1 Jn. 3:15 KJV

<sup>8</sup> What ultimately pleases God is that his creation realizes the fullness that he intends for it. Thus, God's pleasure and our happiness are one and the same. John Piper, *God's Passion for His Glory* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1998), p. 32.

band are largely what make her either happy or unhappy. Likewise, our ultimate happiness comes not from what we do but from what we believe, and in particular what we believe about God.

Some actions can, of course, help to change our beliefs, but it is always the internal beliefs that we hold toward someone that are the true measure of whether we love them or not. The amount of Scripture that speaks of the attitude or internal belief we are to have toward God is enormous. Certainly, the Scripture also instructs us concerning our behaviour in order that we might not destroy ourselves or one another, but our relationship toward God is always about having right beliefs about who God is. Even obedience, which may be largely behavioural, is not an end in itself but a means to get us to do certain things in order that we might see God's faithfulness and thus come to believe the right things about him.

In order to please God and to realize ultimate happiness ourselves, we '... must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him'.<sup>9</sup> Christianity is a *faith* ethic. The righteousness we attain in Christianity is a righteousness of faith. Our all too human tendency, however, is to twist the truth of the Scripture in order to put the emphasis on our behaviour rather than our belief in God's faithfulness. We emphasize the fact that we need to 'diligently seek him', which we attempt to demonstrate with our

long prayers, our spectacular worship, and other behaviour we erroneously believe will please him. Since he is concerned with our ultimate happiness, however, what is most important to him is the fact that we believe that he is a faithful rewarder. That is what brings us into the fullness of the life of faith God has for us. God provides all the circumstances to produce that faith within us, but our part is to conceptualize that God is behind the circumstances of our lives and that he is a rewarder who desires and intends to bless us. This is the righteousness of Christianity. The righteousness of our culture may be behavioural, as was the righteousness of the Pharisees, but the righteousness of the Christian is internal and conceptual.

### Conceptual Freedom

This fact that Christian morality is internal and conceptual has several interesting consequences. First, it means that sin is much more abundant than our culture would have us believe. If sin is internal and exists within our imagination, the world of our imagination is certainly a more sinful place than this physical world. As decadent as the physical world may be, it does not compare to the decadence I find in my own heart where I am willing to commit murder simply because someone drives slowly in the fast lane. In the physical world, our outward behaviour is deterred, and the thought of painful consequences for our actions restrain us, but there are no such constraints in the internal world of our imagination. Within our imagi-

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<sup>9</sup> Heb. 11:6 KJV

nation we are free, and that freedom takes us deeper and deeper into what Jesus tells us is sin.

A second consequence is that although sin is much more abundant within the internal world of our imagination, righteousness is more abundant there as well. Since Christian righteousness requires only that we believe certain things about the character and nature of God, there is at least the potential for much more righteousness within the internal world than in the external (physical) world. The attainment of habitual righteous behaviour in the physical world is something very few of us ever completely realize. So while sin flourishes in that internal, conceptual world, so too does righteousness.

Another interesting consequence is that our potential for the abundant righteousness of faith that is offered through Christ and realized through our internal beliefs is in a certain correlation to the abundance of sin that exists within that internal world. As we come to understand that our behaviour only represents the tip of the iceberg and the extent of the sin which condemns us extends beyond our behaviour and exists internally within our imagination, we are much more inclined to seek also a righteousness which is beyond our behaviour. In realizing the enormity of our sin, we are much more likely to seek an enormity of righteousness to combat such a volume of sin. Of course, that is just what Christianity offers—an enormous righteousness that is had, not through external behaviour, but merely through an internal belief.

### **Freedom and Forgiveness**

Thus, while the rest of humanity may no longer see themselves as moral creatures in light of contemporary scientific wisdom, Christians are moral beings even in light of the contemporary wisdom. Indeed, the contemporary wisdom which tells us that we are not free enough to control our behaviour or even our thoughts, also tells us that we are free to conceptualize those behaviours and thoughts in a variety of ways, and that is all the freedom necessary for a Christian ethic.

We may not be free enough from our upbringing or genetic predisposition in order to get our behaviour straight. We might not even be able to control the thoughts and feelings which flood our imagination, but we do have the liberty to agree with Jesus and conceptualize those things as he does and call them sin. We may not be free to attain a righteousness of our own, but we are free enough to attain a righteousness that is not our own. The ideal of Christian morality is not that we would be able to avoid all sin, but that we would confess our sins and repent in order that we would be forgiven and receive the righteousness Jesus has for us. For the Christian, what it means to be righteous is to be forgiven and not to be sinless.