Truth and freedom

Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger

Man is God's image precisely insofar as being "from," "with," and "for" constitute the fundamental anthropological pattern.

I. The question

In the mind of contemporary man, freedom appears to a large extent as the absolutely highest good, to which all other goods are subordinate. Court decisions consistently accord artistic freedom and freedom of opinion primacy over every other moral value. Values which compete with freedom, or which might necessitate its restriction, seem to be fetters or "taboos," that is, relics of archaic prohibitions and fears. Political policy must show that it contributes to the advancement of freedom in order to be accepted. Even religion can make its voice heard only by presenting itself as a liberating force for man and for humanity. In the scale of values on which man depends for a humane existence, freedom appears as the basic value and as the fundamental human right. In contrast, we are inclined to react with suspicion to the concept of truth: we recall that the term truth has already been claimed for many opinions and systems, and that the assertion of truth has often been a means of suppressing freedom. In addition, natural science has nourished a skepticism with regard to everything which cannot be explained or proved by its exact methods: all such things seem in the end to be a mere subjective assignment of value which cannot pretend to be universally binding. The modern attitude toward truth is summed up most succinctly in Pilate's question, "What is truth?". Anyone who maintains that he is serving the truth by

Communio 23 (Spring 1996). ©1996 by *Communio: International Catholic Review*

his life, speech and action must prepare himself to be classified as a dreamer or as a fanatic. For "the world beyond is closed to our gaze"; this sentence from Goethe's *Faust* characterizes our common sensibility today.

Doubtless, the prospect of an all too self-assured passion for the truth suggests reasons enough to ask cautiously, "what is truth?". But there is just as much reason to pose the question, "what is freedom?". What do we actually mean when we extol freedom and place it at the pinnacle of our scale of values? I believe that the content which people generally associate with the demand for freedom is very aptly explained in the words of a certain passage of Karl Marx in which he expresses his own dream of freedom. The state of the future Communist society will make it possible, he says, "to do one thing today and another tomorrow; to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, breed cattle in the evening and criticize after dinner, just as I please. . . ."[1] This is exactly the sense in which average opinion spontaneously understands freedom: as the right and the opportunity to do just what we wish and not to have to do anything which we do not wish to do. Said in other terms: freedom would mean that our own will is the sole norm of our action and that the will not only can desire anything but also has the chance to carry out its desire. At this point, however, questions begin to arise: how free is the will after all? And how reasonable is it? Is an unreasonable will truly a free will? Is an unreasonable freedom truly freedom? Is it really a good? In order to prevent the tyranny of unreason must we not complete the definition of freedom as the capacity to will and to do what we will by placing it in the context of reason, of the totality of man? And will not the interplay between reason and will also involve the search for the common reason shared by all men and thus for the compatibility of liberties? It is obvious that the question of truth is implicit in the question of the reasonableness of the will and of the will's link with reason.

It is not merely abstract philosophical considerations, but the quite concrete situation of our society, which compels us to ask such questions. In this situation, the demand for freedom remains undiminished, yet doubts about all the forms of struggle for liberation movements and the systems of freedom which have existed until now are coming more and more dra-

[1] K. Marx and F. Engels, *Werke*, 39 vols. (Berlin, 1961-71), 3:33.

matically to the fore. Let us not forget that Marxism began its career as the one great political force of our century with the claim that it would usher in a new world of freedom and of human liberation. It was precisely Marxism's assurance that it knew the scientifically guaranteed way to freedom and that it would create a new world which drew many of the boldest minds of our epoch to it. Eventually, Marxism even came to be seen as the power by which the Christian doctrine of redemption could finally be transformed into a realistic praxis of liberation—as the power whereby the kingdom of God could be concretely realized as the true kingdom of man. The collapse of "real socialism" in the nations of Eastern Europe has not entirely extirpated such hopes, which quietly survive here and there while searching for a new face. The political and economic collapse was not matched by any real intellectual defeat, and in that sense the question posed by Marxism is still far from being resolved. Nevertheless, the fact that the Marxist system did not function as had been promised is plain for all to see. No one can still seriously deny that this ostensible liberation movement was, alongside National Socialism, the greatest system of slavery in modern history. The extent of its cynical destruction of man and of the environment is rather shamefacedly kept quiet, but no one can any longer dispute it.

These developments have brought out the moral superiority of the liberal system in politics and economics. Nevertheless, this superiority is no occasion for enthusiasm. The number of those who have no part in the fruits of this freedom, indeed, who are losing every freedom altogether, is too great: unemployment is once again becoming a mass phenomenon, and the feeling of not being needed, of superfluity, tortures men no less than material poverty. Unscrupulous exploitation is spreading; organized crime takes advantage of the opportunities of the free and democratic world, and in the midst of all this we are haunted by the specter of meaninglessness. At the Salzburg University Weeks of 1995, the Polish philosopher Andrej Szizypiorski unsparingly described the dilemma of freedom which has arisen after the fall of the Berlin Wall; it is worth listening to him at somewhat greater length:

> It admits of no doubt that capitalism made a great step forward. And it also admits of no doubt that it has not lived up to what was expected of it. The cry of the huge masses whose desire has not been fulfilled is a constant refrain in capitalism. . . . The downfall of the Soviet conception of the world and of man in political and social praxis was a liberation of millions of human lives from slavery. But in the intellectual patrimony of Europe, in the light of the tradition of the last two hundred years, the anti-communist revolution also signals the end of the illusions of the Enlightenment, hence, the destruction of the intellectual conception which was at the basis of the development of early modern Europe. . . . A remarkable, hitherto unprecedented epoch of uniform development has begun. And it has suddenly become apparent—probably for the first time in history—that there is only one recipe, one way, one model and one method of organizing the future. And men have lost their faith in the meaning of the revolutions which are occurring. They have also lost their hope that the world can be changed at all and that it is worthwhile changing it. . . . Today's lack of any alternative, however, leads people to pose completely new questions. The first question: was the West wrong after all? The second question: if the West was not right, who, then, was? Because there is no one in Europe who can doubt that Communism was not right, the third question arises: can it be that there is no such thing as right? But if this is the case, the whole intellectual inheritance of the Enlightenment is worthless. . . . Perhaps the worn-out steam engine of the Enlightenment, after two centuries of profitable, trouble-free labor has come to a standstill before our eyes and with our cooperation. And the steam is simply evaporating. If this is the way things are in fact, the prospects are gloomy.[2]

Although many questions could also be posed here in response, the realism and the logic of Szizypiorski's fundamental queries cannot be brushed aside. At the same time, his diagnosis is so dismal that we cannot stop there. Was no one right? Is there perhaps no "right" at all? Are the foundations of the European Enlightenment, upon which the historical development of freedom rests, false, or at least deficient? The question "what is freedom?" is in the end no less complicated than the question "what is truth?". The dilemma of the Enlightenment, into which we have undeniably fallen, constrains us to repose these two questions as well as to renew our search for the connection between them. In order to make headway, we must, therefore, reconsider the starting-point of the career of freedom in modernity; the course correction which is plainly needed before paths can reemerge from the darkening landscape before us must go back to the starting-points themselves and begin its work there. Of course, in the limited framework of an article I can do no more than try to highlight a few points. My purpose in this is to convey some sense of the greatness and the perils of the path of modernity and thereby to contribute to a new reflection.

[2] I cite Szizypiorski from the manuscript provided during the University Weeks.

II. The problem: The history and concept of freedom in modernity

There is no doubt that from the very outset freedom has been the defining theme of that epoch which we call modern. The sudden break with the old order to go off in search of new freedoms is the sole reason which justifies such a periodization. Luther's polemical writing *Von der Freiheit eines Christenmenschen* [*On the Freedom of a Christian*] boldly struck up this theme in resounding tones.[3] It was the cry of freedom which made men sit up and take notice, which triggered a veritable avalanche and which turned the writings of a monk into the occasion of a mass movement that radically transformed the face of the medieval world. At issue was the freedom of conscience vis-à-vis the authority of the Church, hence the most intimate of all human freedoms. It is not the order of the community which saves man, but his wholly personal faith in Christ. That the whole ordered system of the medieval Church ultimately ceased to count was felt to be a massive impulse of freedom. The order which was in reality meant to support and save appeared as a burden; it was no longer binding, that is, it no longer had any redemptive significance. Redemption now meant liberation, liberation from the yoke of a supra-individual order. Even if it would not be right to speak of the individualism of the Reformation, the new importance of the individual and the shift in the relation between individual conscience and authority are nonetheless among its dominant traits. However, this liberation movement was restricted to the properly religious sphere. Every time it was extended into a political program, as in the Peasant War and the Anabaptist movement, Luther vigorously opposed it. What came to pass in the political sphere was quite the contrary of liberation: with the creation of territorial and national Churches the power of the secular authority was augmented and consolidated. In the Anglo-Saxon world the free churches subsequently broke out of this new fusion of religious and political government and thus became precursors of a new construction of history, which later took on clear features in the second phase of the modern era, the Enlightenment.

Common to the whole Enlightenment is the will to emancipation, first in the sense of Kant's *sapere aude*—dare to

[3]Cf. on the whole of what follows, e.g., E. Lohse, *Martin Luther* (München, 1981), 60f., 86ff.

use your reason for yourself. Kant is urging the individual reason to break free of the bonds of authority, which must all be subjected to critical scrutiny. Only what is accessible to the eyes of reason is allowed validity. This philosophical program is by its very nature a political one as well: reason shall reign, and in the end no other authority is admitted than that of reason. Only what is accessible to reason has validity; what is not reasonable, that is, not accessible to reason, cannot be binding either. This fundamental tendency of the Enlightenment shows up, however, in diverse, even antithetical, social philosophies and political programs. It seems to me that we can distinguish two major currents. The first is the Anglo-Saxon current with its predominantly natural rights orientation and its proclivity towards constitutional democracy, which it conceives as the only realistic system of freedom. At the opposite end of the spectrum is the radical approach of Rousseau, which aims ultimately at complete autarchy. Natural rights thinking critically applies the criterion of man's innate rights both to positive law and to the concrete forms of government. These rights are held to be prior to every legal order and are considered its measure and basis. "Man is created free, and is still free, even were he born in chains," says Friedrich Schiller in this sense. Schiller is not making a statement which consoles slaves with metaphysical notions, but is offering a principle for fighters, a maxim for action. A juridical order which creates slavery is an order of injustice. From creation man has rights which must be enforced if there is to be justice. Freedom is not bestowed upon man from without. He is a bearer of rights because he is created free. Such thinking gave rise to the idea of human rights, which is the Magna Charta of the modern struggle for freedom. When nature is spoken of in this context what is meant is not simply a system of biological processes. Rather, the point is that rights are naturally present in man himself prior to all legal constructs. In this sense, the idea of human rights is in the first place a revolutionary one: it opposes the absolutism of the state and the caprice of positive legislation. But it is also a metaphysical idea: there is an ethical and legal claim in being itself. It is not blind materiality which can then be formed in accord with pure functionality. Nature contains spirit, ethos and dignity, and in this way is a juridical claim to our liberation as well as its measure. In principle, what we find here is very much the concept of nature in Romans 2. According to this concept, which is inspired by the Stoa and transformed by the theology of creation, the

Gentiles know the law "by nature" and are thus a law unto themselves (Rom 2:14).

The element specific to the Enlightenment and to modernity in this line of thought may be seen in the notion that the juridical claim of nature vis-à-vis the existing forms of government is above all a demand that state and other institutions respect the rights of the individual. Man's nature is above all to possess rights against the community, rights which must be protected from the community: institution seems to be the polar opposite of freedom, whereas the individual appears as the bearer of freedom, whose goal is seen as his full emancipation.

This is a point of contact between the first current and the second, which is far more radical in orientation. For Rousseau, everything which owes its origin to reason and will is contrary to nature, and corrupts and contradicts it. The concept of nature is not itself shaped by the idea of a right supposedly preceding all our institutions as a law of nature. Rousseau's concept of nature is anti-metaphysical and is correlative to his dream of total, absolutely unregimented freedom.[4] Similar ideas resurface in Nietzsche, who opposes Dionysian frenzy to Apollonian order, thus conjuring up primordial antitheses in the history of religions: the order of reason, whose symbolic representation is Apollo, corrupts the free, unrestrained frenzy of nature.[5] Klages reprises the same motif with his idea that the spirit is the adversary of the soul: the spirit is not the great new gift wherein alone freedom exists, but is corrosive of the pristine origin with its passion and freedom.[6] In a certain respect this declaration of war on the spirit is inimical to the Enlightenment, and to that extent National Socialism, with its hostility towards the Enlightenment and its worship of "blood and soil," could appeal to currents such as these. But even here the fundamental motif of the Enlightenment, the cry for freedom, is not only operative, but occurs in its most radically intensified form. In the radical politics both of the past and of the present century, various forms

[4]Cf. D. Wyss, "Zur Psychologie und Psychopathologie der Verblendung: J.J. Rousseau und M. Robespierre, die Begründer des Sozialismus," in *Jahres- und Tagungsbericht der Görres-Gesellschaft* (1992), 33-45; R. Spaemann, *Rousseau—Bürger ohne Vaterland. Von der Polis zur Natur* (München, 1980).

[5]Cf. P. Köster, *Der sterbende Gott, Nietzsches Entwurf übermenschlicher Größ* (Meisenheim, 1972); R. Löw, *Nietzsche Sophist und Erzieher* (Weinheim, 1984).

[6]Cf. T. Steinbüchel, *Die philosophische Grundlegung der christlichen Sittenlehre* I, 1 (Düsseldorf, 1947), 118-32.

of such tendencies have repeatedly erupted against the democratically domesticated form of freedom. The French Revolution, which had begun with the idea of a constitutional democracy, soon cast off these fetters and set out on the path of Rousseau and of the anarchic conception of freedom; precisely by this move it became—inevitably—a bloody dictatorship.

Marxism too is a continuation of this radical line: it consistently criticized democratic freedom as a sham and promised a better, more radical freedom. Indeed, its fascination derived precisely from its promise of a grander and bolder freedom than is realized in the democracies. Two aspects of the Marxist system seem to me particularly relevant to the problem of freedom in the modern period and to the question of truth and freedom.

(1) Marxism proceeds from the principle that freedom is indivisible, hence, that it exists as such only when it is the freedom of all. Freedom is tied to equality. The existence of freedom requires before anything else the establishment of equality. This means that it is necessary to forego freedom in order to attain the goal of total freedom. The solidarity of those struggling for the freedom of all comes before the vindication of individual liberties. The citation from Marx which served as the starting-point for our reflections shows that the idea of the unbounded freedom of the individual reappears at the end of the process. For the present however, the norm is the precedence of community, the subordination of freedom to equality and therefore the right of the community vis-à-vis the individual.

(2) Bound up with this notion is the assumption that the freedom of the individual depends upon the structure of the whole and that the struggle for freedom must be waged not primarily to secure the rights of the individual, but to change the structure of the world. However, at the question as to how this structure was supposed to look and what the rational means to bring it about were, Marxism came up short. For at bottom, even a blind man could see that none of its structures really makes possible that freedom for whose sake men were being called upon to forego freedom. But intellectuals are blind when it comes to their intellectual constructs. For this reason they could forswear every realism and continue to fight for a system incapable of honoring its promises. They took refuge in mythology: the new structure, they claimed, would bring forth a new man—for, as a matter of fact, Marxism's promises could work only with new men who are entirely different from what they are now. If

the moral character of Marxism lies in the imperative of solidarity and the idea of the indivisibility of freedom, there is an unmistakable lie in its proclamation of the new man, a lie which paralyzes even its inchoate ethics. Partial truths are correlative to a lie, and this fact undoes the whole: any lie about freedom neutralizes even the elements of truth associated with it. Freedom without truth is no freedom at all.

Let us stop at this point. We have arrived once more at the very problems which Szizypiorski formulated so drastically in Salzburg. We now know what the lie is—at least with respect to the forms in which Marxism has occurred until now. But we are still far from knowing what the truth is. Indeed, our apprehension intensifies: is there perhaps no truth at all? Can it be that there simply is no right at all? Must we content ourselves with a minimal stopgap social order? But may it be that even such an order does not work, as the latest developments in the Balkans and in so many other parts of the world show? Skepticism is growing and the grounds for it are becoming more forcible. At the same time, the will for the absolute cannot be done away with.

The feeling that democracy is not the right form of freedom is fairly common and is spreading more and more. The Marxist critique of democracy cannot simply be brushed aside: how free are elections? To what extent is the outcome manipulated by advertising, that is, by capital, by a few men who dominate public opinion? Is there not a new oligarchy who determine what is modern and progressive, what an enlightened man has to think? The cruelty of this oligarchy, its power to perform public executions, is notorious enough. Anyone who might get in its way is a foe of freedom, because, after all, he is interfering with the free expression of opinion. And how are decisions arrived at in representative bodies? Who could still believe that the welfare of the community as a whole truly guides the decision-making process? Who could doubt the power of special interests, whose dirty hands are exposed with increasing frequency? And in general, is the system of majority and minority really a system of freedom? And are not interest groups of every kind appreciably stronger than the proper organ of political representation, the parliament? In this tangled power play, the problem of ungovernability aris es ever more menacingly: the will of individuals to prevail over one another blocks the freedom of the whole.

There is doubtless a flirtation with authoritarian solutions and a flight from a runaway freedom. But this attitude does not yet define the mind of our century. The radical current of the Enlightenment has not lost its appeal; indeed, it is becoming even more powerful. It is precisely in the face of the limits of democracy that the cry for total freedom gets louder. Today as yesterday, indeed, increasingly so, "Law and Order" is considered the antithesis of freedom. Today as yesterday institution, tradition and authority as such appear to be polar opposites of freedom. The anarchist trend in the longing for freedom is growing in strength because the ordered forms of communal freedom are unsatisfactory. The grand promises made at the inception of modernity have not been kept, yet their fascination is unabated. The democratically ordered form of freedom can no longer be defended merely by this or that legal reform. The question goes to the very foundations themselves: it concerns what man is and how he can live rightly both individually and collectively.

We see that the political, philosophical and religious problem of freedom has turned out to be an indissoluble whole; whoever is looking for ways forward must keep this whole in view and cannot content himself with superficial pragmatisms. Before attempting in the last part to outline some directions which I see opening up, I would like to glance briefly at perhaps the most radical philosophy of freedom in our century, that of J.P. Sartre, inasmuch as it brings out clearly the full magnitude and seriousness of the question. Sartre regards man as condemned to freedom. In contrast to the animal, man has no "nature." The animal lives out its existence according to laws it is simply born with; it does not need to deliberate what to do with its life. But man's essence is undetermined. It is an open question. I must decide myself what I understand by "humanity," what I want to do with it, and how I want to fashion it. Man has no nature, but is sheer freedom. His life must take some direction or other, but in the end it comes to nothing. This absurd freedom is man's hell. What is unsettling about this approach is that it is a way through the separation of freedom from truth to its most radical conclusion: there is no truth at all. Freedom has no direction and no measure.[7] But this complete absence of truth,

[7]Cf. J. Pieper, "Kreatürlichkeit und menschliche Natur. Anmerkungen zum philosophischen Ansatz von J.P. Sartre," in *Über die Schwierigkeit, heute zu glauben* (München, 1974), 304-21.

this complete absence of any moral and metaphysical bond, this absolutely anarchic freedom—which is understood as an essential quality of man—reveals itself to one who tries to live it not as the supreme enhancement of existence, but as the frustration of life, the absolute void, the definition of damnation. The isolation of a radical concept of freedom, which for Sartre was a lived experience, shows with all desirable clarity that liberation from the truth does not produce pure freedom, but abolishes it. Anarchic freedom, taken radically, does not redeem, but makes man a miscarried creature, a pointless being.

III. Truth and freedom

1. On the essence of human freedom

After this attempt to understand the origin of our problems and to get a clear view of their inner tendency, it is now time to search for answers. It has become evident that the critical point in the history of freedom in which we now find ourselves rests upon an unclarified and one-sided idea of freedom. On the one hand, the concept of freedom has been isolated and thereby falsified: freedom is a good, but only within a network of other goods together with which it forms an indissoluble totality. On the other hand, the notion itself has been narrowly restricted to the rights of individual liberty, and has thus been robbed of its human truth. I would like to illustrate the problem posed by this understanding of freedom with the help of a concrete example. At the same time this example can open the way to a more adequate view of freedom. I mean the question of abortion. In the radicalization of the individualistic tendency of the Enlightenment, abortion appears as a right of freedom: the woman must be able to take charge of herself. She must have the freedom to decide whether she will bring a child into the world or rid herself of it. She must have the power to make decisions about her own life, and no one else can—so we are told—impose from the outside any ultimately binding norm. What is at stake is the right to self-determination. But is it really the case that the woman who aborts is making a decision about her own life? Is she not deciding precisely about someone else—deciding that no freedom shall be granted to another, and that the space of freedom, which is life, must be taken from him,

because it competes with her own freedom? The question we must therefore ask is this: exactly what sort of freedom has even the right to annul another's freedom as soon as it begins?

Now, let it not be said that the issue of abortion concerns a special case and is not suited to clarify the general problem of freedom. No, it is this very example which brings out the basic figure of human freedom and makes clear what is typically human about it. For what is at stake here? The being of another person is so closely interwoven with the being of this person, the mother, that for the present it can survive only by physically being with the mother, in a physical unity with her. Such unity, however, does not eliminate the otherness of this being or authorize us to dispute its distinct selfhood. However, to be oneself in this way is to be radically from and through another. Conversely, this being-with compels the being of the other—that is, the mother—to become a being-for, which contradicts her own desire to be an independent self and is thus experienced as the antithesis of her own freedom. We must now add that even once the child is born and the outer form of its being-from and -with changes, it remains just as dependent on, and at the mercy of, a being-for. One can, of course, send the child off to an institution and assign it to the care of another "for," but the anthropological figure is the same, since there is still a "from" which demands a "for." I must still accept the limits of my freedom, or rather, I must live my freedom not out of competition but in a spirit of mutual support. If we open our eyes, we see that this, in turn, is true not only of the child, but that the child in the mother's womb is simply a very graphic depiction of the essence of human existence in general. Even the adult can exist only with and from another, and is thus continually thrown back on that being-for which is the very thing he would like to shut out. Let us say it even more precisely: man quite spontaneously takes for granted the being-for of others in the form of today's network of service systems, yet if he had his way he would prefer not to be forced to participate in such a "from" and "for," but would like to become wholly independent, and to be able to do and not to do just what he pleases. The radical demand for freedom, which has proved itself more and more clearly to be the outcome of the historical course of the Enlightenment, especially of the line inaugurated by Rousseau, and which today largely shapes the public mentality, prefers to have neither a whence nor a whither, to be neither from nor for, but to be wholly at liberty. In other words, it regards what is actually the fundamental figure

of human existence itself as an attack on freedom which assails it before any individual has a chance to live and act. The radical cry for freedom demands man's liberation from his very essence as man, so that he may become the "new man." In the new society, the dependencies which restrict the I and the necessity of self-giving would no longer have the right to exist.

"Ye shall be as gods." This promise is quite clearly behind modernity's radical demand for freedom. Although Ernst Topitsch believed he could safely say that today no reasonable man still wants to be like or equal to God, if we look more closely we must assert the exact opposite: the implicit goal of all of modernity's struggles for freedom is to be at last like a god who depends on nothing and no one, and whose own freedom is not restricted by that of another. Once we glimpse this hidden theological core of the radical will to freedom, we can also discern the fundamental error which still spreads its influence even where such radical conclusions are not directly willed or are even rejected. To be totally free, without the competing freedom of others, without a "from" and a "for"—this desire presupposes not an image of God, but an idol. The primal error of such a radicalized will to freedom lies in the idea of a divinity conceived as a pure egoism. The god thought of in this way is not a God, but an idol. Indeed, it is the image of what the Christian tradition would call the devil—the anti-God—because it harbors exactly the radical antithesis to the real God. The real God is by his very nature entirely being-for (Father), being-from (Son), and being-with (Holy Spirit). Man, for his part, is God's image precisely insofar as the "from," "with," and "for" constitute the fundamental anthropological pattern. Whenever there is an attempt to free ourselves from this pattern, we are not on our way to divinity, but to dehumanization, to the destruction of being itself through the destruction of the truth. The Jacobin variant of the idea of liberation (let us call the radicalisms of modernity by this name) is a rebellion against man's very being, a rebellion against truth, which consequently leads man—as Sartre penetratingly saw—into a self-contradictory existence which we call hell.

The foregoing has made it clear that freedom is tied to a measure, the measure of reality—to the truth. Freedom to destroy oneself or to destroy another is not freedom, but its demonic parody. Man's freedom is shared freedom, freedom in the conjoint existence of liberties which limit and thus sustain one another. Freedom must measure itself by what I am, by what we are—otherwise it annuls itself. But having said this, we are now

ready to make an essential correction of the superficial image of freedom which largely dominates the present: if man's freedom can consist only in the ordered coexistence of liberties, this means that order—right[8]—is not the conceptual antithesis of freedom, but rather its condition, indeed, a constitutive element of freedom itself. Right is not an obstacle to freedom, but constitutes it. The absence of right is the absence of freedom.

2. Freedom and responsibility

Admittedly, this insight immediately gives rise to new questions as well: which right accords with freedom? How must right be structured so as to constitute a just order of freedom? For there doubtless exists a counterfeit right, which enslaves and is therefore not right at all but a regulated form of injustice. Our criticism must not be directed at right itself, inasmuch as right belongs to the essence of freedom; it must unmask counterfeit right for what it is and serve to bring to light the true right—that right which is in accord with the truth and consequently with freedom.

But how do we find this right order? This is the great question of the true history of freedom, posed at last in its proper form. As we have already done so far, let us refrain from setting to work with abstract philosophical considerations. Rather, let us try to approach an answer inductively starting from the realities of history as they are actually given. If we begin with a small community of manageable proportions, its possibilities and limits furnish some basis for finding out which order best serves the shared life of all the members, so that a common form of freedom emerges from their joint existence. But no such small community is self-contained; it has its place within larger orders which, along with other factors, determine its essence. In the age of the nation-states it was customary to assume that one's own nation was the standard unit—that its common good was also the right measure of its freedom as a community. Developments in our century have made it clear that this point of view is in-

[8] ["Right" renders the German "Recht." Although the term "Recht" can mean "right" in the sense of "human rights," it may also be used to mean "law," with the more or less explicit connotation of "just order," "order embodying what is right." It is in this latter sense that Ratzinger takes "Recht" both here and in the following discussion; "Recht" has been translated in this context either as "right" or (less frequently) as "just order" or a variant thereof.—Tr.]

adequate. Augustine had said on this score that a state which measures itself only by its common interests and not by justice itself, by true justice, is not structurally different from a well-organized robber band. After all, the robber band typically takes as its measure the good of the band independently of the good of others. Looking back at the colonial period and the ravages it bequeathed to the world, we see today that even well-ordered and civilized states were in some respects close to the nature of robber bands because they thought only in terms of their own good and not of the good itself. Accordingly, freedom guaranteed in this way accordingly has something of the brigand's freedom. It is not true, genuinely human freedom. In the search for the right measure, the whole of humanity must be kept in mind, and again—as we see ever more clearly—the humanity not only of today, but of tomorrow as well.

The criterion of real right—right entitled to call itself true right which accords with freedom—can therefore only be the good of the whole, the good itself. On the basis of this insight, Hans Jonas has defined responsibility as the central concept of ethics.[9] This means that in order to understand freedom properly we must always think of it in tandem with responsibility. Accordingly, the history of liberation can never occur except as a history of growth in responsibility. Increase of freedom can no longer lie simply in giving more and more latitude to individual rights—which leads to absurdity and to the destruction of those very individual freedoms themselves. Increase in freedom must be an increase in responsibility, which includes acceptance of the ever greater bonds required both by the claims of humanity's shared existence and by conformity to man's essence. If responsibility is answering to the truth of man's being, then we can say that an essential component of the history of liberation is ongoing purification for the sake of the truth. The true history of freedom consists in the purification of individuals and of institutions through this truth.

The principle of responsibility sets up a framework which needs to be filled by some content. This is the context in which we have to look at the proposal for the development of a planetary ethos, for which Hans Küng has been the preeminent and passionately committed spokesman. It is no doubt sensible, indeed, in our present situation necessary, to search for the basic elements common to the ethical traditions of the various religions and cultures. In this sense, such an endeavor is by all means important and appropriate. On the other hand, the limits of this sort of enterprise are evident; Joachim Fest, among others, has called attention to these limits in a sympathetic, but also very pessimistic analysis, whose general drift comes quite close to the skepticism of Szizypiorski.[10] For this ethical minimum distilled from the world religions lacks first of all the bindingness, the intrinsic authority, which is a prerequisite of ethics. Despite every effort to reach a clearly understandable position, it also lacks the obviousness to reason which, in the opinion of the authors, could and should replace authority; it also lacks the concreteness without which ethics cannot come into its own.

One idea, which is implicit in this experiment, seems to me correct: reason must listen to the great religious traditions if it does not wish to become deaf, dumb and blind precisely to what is essential about human existence. There is no great philosophy which does not draw life from listening to and accepting religious tradition. Wherever this relation is cut off, philosophical thought withers and becomes a mere conceptual game.[11] The very theme of responsibility, that is, the question of anchoring freedom in the truth of the good, of man and of the world, reveals very clearly the necessity of such attentive listening. For, although the general approach of the principle of responsibility is very much to the point, it is still a question of how we are supposed to get a comprehensive view of what is good for all—good not only for today, but also for tomorrow. A twofold danger lies in wait here. On the one hand there is the risk of sliding into consequentialism, which the pope rightly criticizes in his moral encyclical (*VS*, nn. 71-83). Man simply overreaches himself if he believes that he can assess the whole range of consequences resulting from his action and make them the norm of his freedom. In doing so he sacrifices the present to the future, while also failing even to construct the future. On the oth-

[9]H. Jonas, *Das Prinzip Verantwortung* (Frankfurt a.M., 1979).

[10]J. Fest, *Die schwierige Freiheit* (Berlin, 1993), esp. 47-81. Fest sums up his observations on Küng's "planetary ethos": "The farther the agreements—which cannot be reached without concessions—are pushed, the more elastic and consequently the more impotent the ethical norms become, to the point that the project finally amounts to a mere corroboration of that unbinding morality which is not the goal, but the problem" (80).

[11]See the penetrating remarks on this point in J. Pieper, *Schriften zum Philosophiebegriff* III, ed. B. Wald (Hamburg, 1995), 300-323, as well as 15-70, esp. 59ff.

er hand, who decides what our responsibility enjoins? When the truth is no longer seen in the context of an intelligent appropriation of the great traditions of belief, it is replaced by consensus. But once again we must ask: whose consensus? The common answer is the consensus of those capable of rational argument. Because it is impossible to ignore the elitist arrogance of such an intellectual dictatorship, it is then said that those capable of rational argument would also have to engage in "advocacy" on behalf of those who are not. This whole line of thought can hardly inspire confidence. The fragility of consensuses and the ease with which in a certain intellectual climate partisan groups can assert their claim to be the sole rightful representatives of progress and responsibility are plain for all to see. It is all too easy here to drive out the devil with Beelzebub; it is all too easy to replace the demon of bygone intellectual systems with seven new and worse ones.

3. The truth of our humanity

How we are to establish the right relationship between responsibility and freedom cannot be settled simply by means of a calculus of effects. We must return to the idea that man's freedom is a freedom in the coexistence of freedoms; only thus is it true, that is, in conformity with the authentic reality of man. It follows that it is by no means necessary to seek outside elements in order to correct the freedom of the individual. Otherwise, freedom and responsibility, freedom and truth, would be perpetual opposites, which they are not. Properly understood, the reality of the individual itself includes reference to the whole, to the other. Accordingly, our answer to the question above is that there is a common truth of a single humanity present in every man. The tradition has called this truth man's "nature." Basing ourselves on faith in creation, we can formulate this point even more clearly: there is one divine idea, "man," to which it is our task to answer. In this idea, freedom and community, order and concern for the future, are a single whole.

Responsibility would thus mean to live our being as an answer—as a response to what we are in truth. This one truth of man, in which freedom and the good of all are inextricably correlative, is centrally expressed in the biblical tradition in the Decalogue, which, by the way, coincides in many respects with the great ethical traditions of other religions. The Decalogue is at once the self-presentation and self-exhibition of God and the

exposition of what man is, the luminous manifestation of his truth. This truth becomes visible in the mirror of God's essence, because man can be rightly understood only in relation to God. To live the Decalogue means to live our Godlikeness, to correspond to the truth of our being and thus to do the good. Said in yet another way, to live the Decalogue means to live the divinity of man, which is the very definition of freedom: the fusion of our being with the divine being and the resulting harmony of all with all (CCC, nn. 2052-82).

In order to understand this statement aright, we must add a further remark. Every significant human word reaches into greater depths beyond what the speaker is immediately conscious of saying: in what is said there is always an excess of the unsaid, which allows the words to grow as the ages go forward. If this is true even of human speech, it must *a fortiori* be true of the word which comes out of the depths of God. The Decalogue is never simply understood once and for all. In the successive, changing situations where responsibility is exercised historically the Decalogue appears in ever new perspectives, and ever new dimensions of its significance are opened. Man is led into the whole of the truth, truth which could by no means be borne in just one historical moment alone (cf. Jn 16:12f.). For the Christian, the exegesis of the Decalogue accomplished in the words, life, passion, and Resurrection of Christ is the decisive interpretive authority, which a hitherto unsuspected depth opens up. Consequently, man's listening to the message of faith is not the passive registering of otherwise unknown information, but the resuscitation of our choked memory and the opening of the powers of understanding which await the light of the truth in us. Hence, such understanding is a supremely active process, in which reason's entire quest for the criteria of our responsibility truly comes into its own for the first time. Reason's quest is not stifled, but is freed from circling helplessly in impenetrable darkness and set on its way. If the Decalogue, unfolded in rational understanding, is the answer to the intrinsic requirements of our essence, then it is not the counter-pole of our freedom, but its real form. It is, in other words, the foundation of every just order of freedom and the true liberating power in human history.

IV. Summary of the results

"Perhaps the worn-out steam engine of the Enlightenment, after two centuries of profitable, trouble-free labor has

come to a standstill before our eyes and with our cooperation. And the steam is simply evaporating." This is Szizypiorski's pessimistic diagnosis, which we had encountered at the beginning as an invitation to reflection. Now, I would say that the operation of this machine was never trouble-free—let us think only of the two World Wars of our century and of the dictatorships which we have witnessed. But I would add that we by no means need to retire the whole inheritance of the Enlightenment as such from service and pronounce it a worn-out steam engine. What we do need, however, is a course correction on three essential points, with which I would like to sum up the yield of my reflections.

(1) An understanding of freedom which tends to regard liberation exclusively as the ever more sweeping annulment of norms and the constant extension of individual liberties to the point of complete emancipation from all order is false. Freedom, if it is not to lead to deceit and self-destruction, must orient itself by the truth, that is, by what we really are, and must correspond to our being. Since man's essence consists in being-from, being-with and being-for, human freedom can exist only in the ordered communion of freedoms. Right is therefore not antithetical to freedom, but is a condition, indeed, a constitutive element of freedom itself. Liberation does not lie in the gradual abolition of right and of norms, but in the purification of ourselves and of the norms so that they will make possible the humane coexistence of freedoms.

(2) A further point follows from the truth of our essential being: there will never be an absolutely ideal state of things within our human history, and the definitive order of freedom will never be established. Man is always underway and always finite. Szizypiorski, considering both the notorious injustice of the socialist order and all the problems of the liberal order, had posed the doubt-filled question: what if there is no right order at all? Our response must now be that, in fact, the absolutely ideal order of things, which is right in all respects, will never exist.[12] Whoever claims that it will is not telling the truth. Faith in progress is not false in every respect. What is false, however, is the myth of the liberated world of the future, in which everything will be different and good. We can erect only relative

[12]Cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 78: " . . . numquam pax pro semper acquisita est" ("peace is never acquired once and for all").

orders, which can never be and embody right except in their relative way. But we must strive precisely for this best possible approximation to what is truly right. Nothing else, no inner-historical eschatology, liberates, but it deceives and therefore enslaves. For this reason, the mythic luster attached to concepts such as change and revolution must be demythologized. Change is not a good in itself. Whether it is good or bad depends upon its concrete contents and points of reference. The opinion that the essential task in the struggle for freedom is to change the world is—I repeat—a myth. History will always have its vicissitudes. When it comes to man's ethical nature in the strict sense, things do not proceed in a straight line, but in cycles. It is our task always to struggle in the present for the relatively best constitution of man's shared existence and in so doing to preserve the good we have already achieved, to overcome existing ills, and to resist the in-breaking of the forces of destruction.

(3) We must also lay to rest once and for all the dream of the absolute autonomy and self-sufficiency of reason. Human reason needs the support of the great religious traditions of humanity. It will, of course, examine critically the individual religious traditions. The pathology of religion is the most dangerous sickness of the human mind. It exists in the religions, but it also exists precisely where religion as such is rejected and the status of an absolute is assigned to relative goods: the atheistic systems of modernity are the most terrifying examples of a religious passion alienated from its nature, which is a life-threatening sickness of the human mind. Where God is denied, freedom is not built up, but robbed of its foundation and thus distorted.[13] Where the purest and deepest religious traditions are entirely discarded, man severs himself from his truth, he lives contrary to it and becomes unfree. Even philosophical ethics cannot be unqualifiedly autonomous. It cannot renounce the idea of God or the idea of a truth of being having an ethical character.[14] If there is no truth about man, man also has no freedom. Only the truth makes us free.—*Translated by Adrian Walker* □

[13]Cf. J. Fest, *Die schwierige Freiheit*, 79: "None of the appeals addressed to man is able to say how he can live without a beyond, without fear of the last day, and yet time after time act against his own interests and desires." Cf. also L. Kolakowski, *Falls es keinen Gott gibt* (München, 1982).

[14]Cf. J. Pieper, *Schriften zum Philosophiebegriff* III.