

## 8. Complete Freedom and Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Responsible Action

This chapter is a commentary on three paragraphs found on pages 248 and 249 of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *Ethics*, in the translation published in paperback by The MacMillan Company in 1955.

Responsibility and freedom are corresponding concepts. Factually, though not chronologically, responsibility presupposes freedom and freedom can consist only in responsibility. Responsibility is the freedom of men which is given only in the obligation to God and to our neighbor.

In this paragraph Bonhoeffer distinguishes freedom from license. Spirit freedom does not imply being unrestrained or unlimited. Freedom does not mean being released from obligations. It does not mean that our actions are done in independence from the demands and needs of our neighboring beings. It does not mean that our actions are done in independence from the overarching requirement to be realistic – that is, to obey the Final Reality from which all of us, deluded by our reductionistic egos, attempt to flee. Bonhoeffer is saying that freedom is part of what being realistic means. Any realistic response to God and neighbor presupposes freedom.

And what does “God and neighbor” mean? “God,” for Bonhoeffer, means the fullness of Reality when that Reality is understood as “good.” “Neighbor” means the specific human beings in their actual arrangements of encounter with the responding person. “Neighbor” can be expanded to include social fabrics. And “neighbor” can be further expanded to include ecological regions and the Earth as a whole. In other words, God is the Universal Neighbor who is present or is neighboring us in and through all the specific neighboring beings that comprise our actual lives. Realism means noticing that all human actions are responses to this Universal Reality in its specific impingements upon the responding person.

In this next paragraph Bonhoeffer begins by describing how freedom is an aspect of our actual decision making. I am going to break down this long paragraph into segments.

The responsible man acts in the freedom of his own self, without the support of men, circumstances or principles, but with a due consideration for the given human and general conditions and for the relevant questions of principle.<sup>1</sup>

The above sentence challenges every mode of finding moral certainty by referring to externals as a justification for our decisions. By “men” Bonhoeffer means every person in our lives to whom we might go for advice or support for our choices. Bonhoeffer supports us in giving consideration to all these other persons, but we must ourselves decide how much consideration is due. Even if we decide that very much consideration is due, we are still the one making the decision. Our advisors cannot be blamed. Our advisors provide no excuse or support for the choices we make.

Similarly, the circumstances within which and about which we are deciding do not support our decision. Though in our responsible freedom we will give those circumstances consideration, we will choose how much consideration and what kind of consideration is due.

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<sup>1</sup> Bonhoeffer used the now obsolete convention of employing “men” and “his” to mean both men and women. I have not attempted to upgrade his language, for I want the reader to understand that my commentary is based on his words, not on some paraphrase of them.

For example, let us suppose that we are deciding about being a whistle blower on some illegal practice of the company we work for. Let us suppose that our considerations include the high probability of losing our job if we do this. Let us suppose that our considerations include discerning whether the law being violated is a good law and whether the action of the company is highly or marginally destructive. Freedom means making this decision without support of the fact that we may lose our job. Freedom means making this decision without support of the fact that our family may be without financial support. Freedom means making this decision without support of the fact that we may feel dirty working for this company if its bad practices are not corrected. Freedom means making this decision without support of the fact that the law being violated is imperfect and the damages being done are felt by some people to be excusable. Freedom means making this decision without support of any kind. Freedom means that we and we alone are responsible for this choice.

Further, we make this decision in due consideration of relevant principles but without support of those principles. Many principles might apply in the above example. "Financially provide for your family." "Don't collude with corruption." "Don't lie." "Obey the law." "Protect your superiors." "Tell the truth." "Preserve the natural environment." "Improve society." "Make the world a better place." Not only do these principles conflict with one another, none of them may be completely appropriate for this particular situation. Freedom means choosing without support of these and any other principles. Freedom also means giving such principles due consideration and deciding how much consideration is due.

Instead of making such free decisions we often react out of the principles embedded in our superego or what we sometimes call our "conscience." The responsible person acts in the freedom of his or her own self without support of conscience or superego.

When we actually experience what this freedom feels like, we become aware that freedom is a profound actuality in our essential makeup. We may become aware of how rarely we embody this freedom. How do we know we are living our essential freedom? Bonhoeffer answers:

The proof of his freedom is the fact that nothing can answer for him, nothing can exonerate him, except his own deed and his own self.

Here is the proof that we are not free: some external person, circumstance, or principle is answering for us, making the decision for us, telling us that we are certainly doing the right thing. Uncertainty with regard to all these external measures is the proof that we are acting in freedom. Bonhoeffer continues:

It is he himself who must observe, judge, weigh up, decide and act. It is man himself who must examine the motives, the prospects, the value and the purpose of his action.

Bonhoeffer has listed the elements that an ethical thinker might use to reach a decision. The responsible person does not simply close his or her eyes and leap. No, the responsible person observes, looks at the inward and outward factors, makes judgments about what is seen, weighs up the various values, selects the course of action and does it. This includes examining inward motives, outward prospects, various values, and purposes. But do "good" motives make the action right? Do "good" prospects make it right? Does some value end all debate about this decision? Is there some purpose that, when followed, makes every attempt to achieve that purpose a good choice? "No!" is Bonhoeffer's answer.

But neither the purity of the motivation, nor the opportune circumstances, nor the value, nor the significant purpose of an intended undertaking can become the governing law of his action, a law to which he can withdraw, to which he can appeal as an authority, and by which he can be

exculpated and acquitted. For in that case he would no longer be truly free.

With these sentences Bonhoeffer has completed the first part of this paragraph, which has to do with *the responsible person*. He has said that the responsible person acts in the freedom of his or her own self, and he means that radically. Freedom does not exist if that person claims certainty on the basis of any of the considerations that he or she makes. The Bible, the law of the land, one's own conscience, nothing can answer for the vulnerable, fragile, uncertain, risking self.

In the remainder of this paragraph, Bonhoeffer speaks of *the action of the responsible person*.

The action of the responsible man is performed in the obligation which alone gives freedom and which gives entire freedom, the obligation to God and to our neighbor as they confront us in Jesus Christ.

What does it mean for an obligation to give freedom or for an obligation not to give freedom? The obligation to one's nation does not give entire freedom. The well-being of one nation conflicts with the well-being of other nations. If the boundary of our obligatedness is our own nation, we are not free in all cases to do what is appropriate for the well-being of other nations or of humanity as a whole. A similar sort of limitation of our freedom is in place when we make our family the boundary of our obligatedness. Bonhoeffer says that only one obligation gives us entire freedom. What he means by "God" and "neighbor" I have already commented on above. To say that "God and neighbor confront us in Jesus Christ" means that the Inclusive Reality and its specific components confront us in the perspective won for us by Jesus who was signified as the Messiah. What is that perspective? It is the vision that Inclusive Reality is good, is like a loving and loyal Parent, is operating for our highest and deepest well-being, is for our own good and the good of all, and is requiring of us our deepest obedience. And what does that obedience look like? Bonhoeffer's "obedience" can also be described as "freedom." And what is freedom? Bonhoeffer has already told us that freedom means deciding on our own without support of humans, principles, or circumstances.

Bonhoeffer continues to talk about the qualities of the action of the responsible person.

At the same time it is performed wholly within in the domain of relativity, wholly in the twilight which the historical situation spreads over good and evil; it is performed in the midst of the innumerable perspectives in which every given phenomenon appears. It has not to decide simply between right and wrong and between good and evil, but between right and right and between wrong and wrong. As Aeschylus said, "right strives with right."

These may be the most plainspoken sentences in the entire paragraph. Every actual decision we make in the real world is made in the twilight. No decision is as clear as day. No decision is as dark as night. We have some guiding light from our centuries of living and the memories that our traditions preserve for us, but our actual situation is new, unprecedented, without absolutely clear parallels with any other moment. There are many ways to view our situation, not one of which can claim exclusive validity. So Bonhoeffer can go on to say:

Precisely in this respect responsible action is a free venture; it is not justified by any law; it is performed without any claim to an ultimate valid knowledge of good and evil.

Can we ever know if our actions are ultimately good or ultimately evil? No, such knowledge is forbidden to the human species. We act in ignorance. We act in uncertainty. We might keenly desire ethical certainty, but having such certainty is an illusion. And illusions of any sort might be said to be "forbidden" by Reality. Herein is the meaning of the myth of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. The tree, the fruit of which they were forbidden to eat, was named "the tree of

the knowledge of good and evil." It was not the tree of knowledge. It was not the tree of curiosity. It was the tree of moral certainty. It was the tree of knowing what was right and what was wrong. It was the tree of having an ultimate valid knowledge of good and evil.

So whenever human beings think they have such knowledge, they have committed the original estrangement from Reality. Such knowledge is an illusion. It looks good to eat, as the tempter says. It looks like we can be wise like God, but we cannot. The knowledge of good and evil is forbidden. In order to be authentic, we must live "beyond good and evil."

Bonhoeffer concludes this paragraph with a sentence on what good action means when we are living beyond good and evil.

Good, as what is responsible, is performed in the ignorance of good and in the surrender to God of the deed which has become necessary and which is nevertheless, or for that very reason, free; for it is God who sees the heart, who weighs up the deed, and who directs the course of history.

The good or responsible action is performed in ignorance of its ultimate good or evil. And it is not necessary for us to know ultimate good and evil, for we are surrendering the deed to God. What does this mean? We might note that "God" already has our deeds. Just try to get a deed back. You can't. So you might as well surrender it. Why do we cling to our deeds? We cling to them in order to pat ourselves on the back for our good deeds or to beat ourselves over the head for our bad deeds. Surrendering our deeds means accepting God's judgment and forgiveness for them. Part of the meaning of "forgiveness" is letting God have our deeds to judge them and use them in whatever way God sees fit. After all, God already has our deeds, and "God" means that inclusive Reality that can view the full truth of the heart out of which these deeds have come, that can render the only true judgment of their worth, and that is the Power that is determining the consequences of these deeds in the outcomes of history.

The next paragraph of Bonhoeffer's thought begins with these sentences:

With this there is disclosed to us a deep secret of history in general. The man who acts in the freedom of his own most personal responsibility is precisely the man who sees his action finally committed to the guidance of God.

Here is a fresh view of what "the guidance of God" means. It is not that God shares his principles of judgment with the minds of humans. Rather God requires freedom. If freedom is rendered, one is following the guidance of God. If freedom is not rendered, then one is in bondage to some lesser loyalty than God. One is a slave to the ego, or to the superego, or to the culture in which one lives, or to the personality habits which one has developed, or to the panic to be correct in one's action, or to the arrogance of having to know that one is right. There is an endless list of such ungodly commitments. To be committed to the guidance of God is to act in freedom. To act in freedom is to be committed to the guidance of God.

The free venture knows itself as divine necessity.

Such a perspective fosters a boldness and a confidence and a certainty that makes all our moral certainties appear as petty as they are. Freedom is our human essence. We need not settle for something less.