

CAN THERE BE A FREEDOM WITHOUT RESPONSIBILITY ?

The aim of this paper is to consider a certain charge that has sometimes been brought against the traditional Indian account of liberation (*mokṣa*). It has been said¹ that in the Indian tradition freedom and responsibility stand in opposition to each other, while in the modern liberal tradition of the West, they are not. A person, from the traditional Indian point of view, the objection runs, is not supposed to be free so long as he has responsibilities to undertake in this life. He is supposed to be free when he attains the stage of liberation, and when he attains this stage, he has no responsibilities to undertake anymore. One cannot, on this account, be both free and responsible at the same time : either a person is responsible but not free, or he is free, but no longer responsible. The concept of *mokṣa* has been analysed in different ways by the different schools of Indian philosophy, into a detailed discussion of which I do not intend to go in the present paper. What I intend to do in this paper is to consider the above-mentioned charge in the light of the different senses in which the concept of responsibility has been used in the modern philosophical tradition of the West. Discussions in this paper will proceed in the background of the more general question : how far is it possible to enjoy freedom without exercising responsibility ?

The main point about the concept of *mokṣa* that I think worth emphasizing for the purpose of the present discussion is that *mokṣa* is basically a freedom from suffering and rebirth. The individual seeking liberation wants to be freed from the clutches of desires which are supposed to be mainly responsible for creating pain, suffering and rebirth. *Mokṣa* is the highest member among the four ends (*puruṣārthas*) of life. The path to *mokṣa* is through *dharma*. (*Dharma* is a blanket term, standing for a vast array of things like duty/responsibility, morality, virtue, religion, natural order etc., a detailed discussion of the different senses of which is not possible to undertake within the scope of this paper). To

reach the stage of liberation, one has to go through the stage of due performance of one's duties and responsibilities. If *mokṣa* is supposed to be beyond *dharma*, the freedom that one enjoys in the state of *mokṣa* turns out to be basically a freedom without responsibility. If *mokṣa* is basically a freedom *from*, and not a freedom *to*, it seems difficult to deny that the freedom of *mokṣa* hardly leaves any room for responsibility. But the freedom of *mokṣa* is not merely a freedom *from*, but a freedom *to* as well. A freedom cannot be a freedom *from*, if it is not also a freedom *to*. To free oneself *from* something or other is to make oneself free *to* do something or other. If there were no need to act freely there would neither be any need to free oneself from restrictions. If the freedom of *mokṣa* is in an important sense a freedom *to*, in what sense can a person, who has attained *mokṣa*, be said to be responsible? Does he lead the same sort of life that an 'autonomous person' of the liberal Western tradition is supposed to lead?

To answer this question, one has to ask further: what does 'responsible' mean? The modern literature on 'responsibility' shows that the concept of responsibility has been understood in different ways. First, there is what has been called the 'capacity' sense of responsibility.² A responsible person is supposed to be one who possesses certain capacities — understanding, reasoning, deciding etc. — capacities which are considered necessary for his being praised or blamed for his behaviour on any particular occasion. Secondly, there is the 'accountability' sense of responsibility. A person is said to be responsible for some actions if he or she is found to be answerable for them. To some thinkers³ of the last century, accountability was all that was meant by the concept of responsibility. But as the recent literature on 'responsibility' shows, 'responsibility' can be used in many other senses as well. What these other senses are will be discussed shortly. But before that, a few more points to note about the 'accountability' sense. The word 'accountability' can be used in the sense of 'liability' or in the sense of 'explicability'.⁴ The difference between 'explicability' and 'liability' lies in the fact that the former is mainly concerned with acts and events, while the latter with persons. Unlike 'explicability', 'liability' presupposes some notion of a 'person'. The word 'liability' cannot be used in respect of someone who is unlikely to be considered as a self-conscious being, capable of

judging, deciding etc. This shows how closely the 'liability' sense is related to the 'capacity' sense. A person cannot be considered to be responsible in the 'liability' sense, if he or she is not endowed with the capacities of reasoning, understanding, deciding etc.

Another sense of responsibility is what has been called 'role-responsibility'.⁵ A person, in this sense, may be said to be responsible in so far as he does something in this or that role. To speak of a person as responsible in this sense is essentially to see him in relation to the duties that he is expected to perform. Responsibility in this sense means the same as duty, and is more often *responsibilities* rather than *responsibility*. 'Responsibility' in the plural refers to the particular tasks which an individual in this or that role is expected to perform. A person who does not perform the particular responsibilities assigned to his role, turns out, on this account to be irresponsible. But a person, as will be shown shortly, can be considered to be responsible even if there is no reference to any role-expectations. The notion of role-responsibility, like that of accountability, has to be distinguished from what has been called 'personal responsibility' or 'self-responsibility'.

The concept of self-responsibility is closely related to that of individual autonomy. A self-responsible person is supposed to be one who is capable of making important decisions 'for himself'. He is the sort of person who is capable of prescribing laws to himself and of conforming to them. Self-responsibility is closely related to the Kantian conception of autonomy, according to which an individual has to undertake critical examinations of maxims in the light of such principles as impartiality and respect for persons. The actions of a self-responsible person are supposed to be governed by a coherent set of beliefs, values and principles.⁶ A self-responsible person is supposed to be capable of critical assessment and evaluation. He is supposed to be one who refuses to accept a rule simply because it has been prescribed by some authority. This is not to say that he can never apply a principle without making a previous critical assessment. It is true that he does not accept 'ready-made' principles, that he thinks them through before he accepts them, but that does not mean that he has to go through a similar process everytime he acts. All that he is required to have is a disposition to do so whenever change of circumstances so require.

To be self-responsible, a person should be capable not only of making rules for himself and of critical assessment, but also of sticking to what he has thought out for himself in the face of counter-inclinations.⁷ He is the sort of person who is prepared to abide by his chosen values.

How far do these conceptions of responsibility fit into the picture of the liberated person of the Indian tradition? Is the person who attains liberation free but non-responsible, or is he both free and responsible, and if responsible, in what sense or senses? The objection that in the Indian tradition freedom and responsibility are considered as being opposed to each other, can be allowed to stand only if the meaning of responsibility is restricted to 'role-responsibility' alone. It is not difficult to see why one can have the impression that freedom and responsibility stand in opposition to each other in the Indian tradition. The stage of *mokṣa* is supposed to be beyond the stage of *dharma*. The very fact that a person devoted to the pursuit of *dharma* can still yearn for the attainment of *mokṣa* strongly suggests that there is something which a person is capable of enjoying in the state of *mokṣa*, which he is incapable of enjoying so long as he is engaged in the pursuit of *dharma*. A second reason why there seems to be an opposition between freedom and responsibility in the Indian tradition is that *mokṣa* is basically a freedom *from* bondage and suffering. Yearning for *mokṣa* is essentially an yearning for release from all future rebirths. Implicit in this yearning is a sort of scepticism about the ultimate value of leading one's life in the mundane world, a life that revolves around a continuous interplay of duties and responsibilities of various kinds. If the life of duties and responsibilities is the life one wants to be liberated *from*, the life that one wants to lead after such liberation would likely to be one where there are virtually no responsibilities to undertake. A third reason why freedom and responsibility are seen as being opposed to each other in the Indian tradition is that *mokṣa* has often been described as a state where moral distinctions are no longer valid. If *mokṣa* is supposed to be beyond all 'ought' considerations, can there still be any room left for the exercise of responsibility?

Is *mokṣa* then a freedom without responsibility? I have already argued that if by responsibility one means 'role-responsibility'

alone, striving for *mokṣa* is basically a striving for a state where one can be freed from responsibilities. The life of duties and responsibilities which an individual has to lead as a member of a particular caste or family, is felt, so to speak, as a burden, from which he wants to escape by striving for *mokṣa*. It is indeed difficult to deny that responsibility related to role-performances are often felt as a sort of burden. Performance of role-duties tends, more or less, to restrict one's freedom. Whatever delight one might take in performing one's role-duties, the relation between freedom and responsibility is not always free from tension. But the desire, on the part of an adult, for a freedom that is removed from all responsibilities is essentially a desire for something impossible, because the very refusal to play any role is also to play a role. The renouncers of the Indian tradition — the *sannyāsis* — are free from those responsibilities which members of caste and family have to undertake. But to play the role of a renouncer is also to play a role. The renouncer's role too imposes certain restrictions on his life. A certain degree of role-conformity is expected of him as well. His responsibilities do not become less real simply because they are self-imposed. The decision to become a renouncer might be his own, but once the decision is taken, the renouncer has to conform to a certain socially sanctioned life-pattern. The renouncer's role is socially recognized and accordingly has certain responsibilities. The renouncer, though free from caste and family responsibilities, is still attached to the society in the sense that he depends on society for his subsistence and preaches to members of society. The renouncer who joins a monastic order acquires, as a member of that order, fresh responsibilities. It is true that there is a distinction between 'being a renouncer' and 'being a liberated person'. To be a renouncer as such is not to be a liberated person : a renouncer is rather one who is searching for liberation. He is a *mumukṣu*. On the other hand, a liberated person is indeed a renouncer in the sense that caste duties or family duties are no longer obligatory on him. Even if every renouncer is not a liberated person, every liberated person is in some sense a renouncer, and hence expected to undertake certain responsibilities.

It is often said⁸ that the renouncer is the sole traditional Indian counterpart of the autonomous self-responsible individual of the

modern Western liberal tradition. He chooses values 'for himself', although he has to pay a heavy price for gaining his autonomy; he has to renounce the social order. In searching for freedom, he relies on himself alone. But what is the nature of the freedom he is searching for? That freedom is a freedom from bondage and suffering. And how is that freedom to be realized? Through knowledge alone, according to some schools⁹ of thought, and through both knowledge and right actions, according to some others.¹⁰ So far so good. Difficulties crop up if one insists on further specifications as to the nature of the freedom that one is supposed to enjoy in the state of *mokṣa*. In the first instance there is an increasing contrast between the spirit of individual autonomy characterising the renouncer and the ideal of the gradual transcendence of one's individuality which a liberated person is supposed to achieve. (Indeed the very concept of a liberated person, as will be shown shortly, urnst out, on many accounts of *mokṣa*, to be self-contradictory.) The second difficulty is that of reconciling between the freedom *from* and the freedom *to* aspects of *mokṣa*: the state of *mokṣa*, being beyond moral distinctions, does not make room for responsibility, but the kind of life that a *jīvan-mukta* (a liberated person) is supposed to lead makes him anything but a non-responsible sort of person.

To consider the first difficulty. The view of *mokṣa* that comes into sharpest conflict with the spirit of individual autonomy is that of the *Advaita-Vedānta* school. *Mokṣa*, on this view, lies in the realisation of the identity of *ātman* with *Brahman*. This realisation is supposed to be incapable of being achieved so long as one does not immerse one's individuality in the all-inclusive infinite *Brahman*. Hence, the persistent emphasis on the inadequacy of moral values and the futility of struggle and endeavour. The entire network of ignorance, attachment and action (*avidyākāmakarma*) has to be broken through to realize the identity of *ātman* with *Brahman*. *Karma*, it is belived, cannot lead to *mokṣa*, because all it is supposed to do is to 'conserve the finite as finite' whereas *mokṣa* is a state where all oppositions between finite and infinite are transcended. Morality always involves the distinction between good and bad, and a struggle for the attainment of goodness. The realisation of identity of *ātman* with *Brahman*, which *mokṣa* is, cannot be attained so long as one is within the realm of morality. If *mokṣa*

is supposed to be a realm where one has to transcend oneself as an agent, it does not seem to be right to speak of one who has attained *mokṣa* as a 'person', because a person is essentially an agent. A person is one who can choose 'for himself', can formulate his own plans and purposes, and can also act in accordance with his own decisions. The concept of being *mukta* (being liberated) thus stands in marked contrast with the concept of the renouncer. To say that the renouncer leaves society to seek his own liberation implies that he is an autonomous person capable of choosing values for himself. But on the above account of *mokṣa*, to be *mukta* (or liberated), one has to go beyond the stage, where a choice of moral values is made, into a realm where all that one has to do is to realize the identity of oneself with *Brahman*. The state of *mokṣa*, on this account, is anything but the awareness of oneself as an autonomous moral agent, and if a renouncer is to be considered as an autonomous individual, he stands distinct, in an important respect, from the individual who attains *mokṣa*.

To turn now to the second difficulty. The *Advaita-Vedāntins*, as is well known, speak of two kinds of *mukti* (liberation) — *videhamukti* and *jīvanmukti*. The former stands for the dissolution—of the final life after which the process of rebirth is permanently stopped. Before one reaches this stage, one goes through the stage of *jīvanmukti*, where a person, who has realized the identity of himself with *Brahman*, continues to live, because he has to reap the effects of action that he has already performed. The state of *mokṣa*, as we have seen, is supposed to be beyond moral distinctions and as such cannot leave any room for the exercise of responsibility. All activity, so it is believed, presupposes a sense of duality, and *mokṣa* is supposed to be incapable of being attained, until the sense of duality, caused by ignorance, is destroyed. If *mokṣa* is beyond all moral distinctions, there can be no responsibility in the 'liability' sense in *mokṣa*, because the question of someone's being answerable, that is to say, of being called upon to *justify* an action or inaction, does not arise. There is also no room for exercising 'role-responsibility', because 'role-responsibility' refers to duties relating to roles, and there can be no question of performing any *duties* where moral distinctions have no meaning. Can *mokṣa* leave room for the exercise of responsibility in the 'self-responsibility' sense? The answer is likely to be in the

negative again, because to be self-responsible is to be capable of making one's own moral judgments, and the question of making any moral judgment does not arise where moral distinctions no longer have any meaning. But even if *mokṣa* is supposed to be beyond all moral distinctions, the life of a *jīvanmukta* (a liberated person) cannot be said to be removed from all moral considerations.

Although *mokṣa*, as such, is supposed to be incompatible with the performance of actions, the kind of life that a *jīvanmukta* is supposed to lead is anything but a life of inaction. He is not supposed to renounce action and sit idle. On the contrary, he is expected to preach the truth he has realized as a liberated individual. A *jīvanmukta* is supposed to be beyond right and wrong, that is to say, removed from all 'ought' considerations, and yet, the life he is supposed to lead involves constant reference to 'oughts' and 'ought not's'. Perhaps the only way of reconciling this inconsistency is to say, as Kant says, that the will of such a liberated individual is no longer a 'moral will', but a 'holy will'.¹¹ The will is moral so long as the individual is involved in a struggle between the inclinations of sense and the dictates of reason. One can speak of freedom and responsibility, so long as the will is 'moral', but when the will is 'holy', that is to say, when the individual is capable of doing what is right without going through the struggle and endeavour, typical of a moral agent, it is more appropriate to speak of his actions as spontaneous.

How far is it possible then to enjoy freedom without exercising responsibility? An individual *qua* individual (*qua* moral agent) cannot be free unless he is also responsible. An individual, in so far as he makes moral distinctions, cannot but be judged either as responsible or as irresponsible. A person who claims to be *non-responsible* can only have freedom in the amoral, non-moral, or supra-moral sense. An amoralist is indifferent to moral distinctions and hence refuses to take responsibility for any action. The non-moral sort of freedom is one that very young children and insane people may be said to enjoy. And finally, a person who is capable of acting rightly, without going through the struggle and endeavour, so typical of morality, can be said to be free, even though he is not responsible for any action. An individual who is

not free in any of these three senses, has to take responsibility for what he thinks and does. It is true, as has been pointed out earlier that there is some amount of tension between freedom and responsibility. Indeed, there has sometimes been a reaction¹² against excessive expectation of responsibility as injurious to mental peace, expectation contentment and relaxation. Excessive concern for conscientiousness might well turn out to be a sort perversion of responsibility. But however perverse certain concerns for responsibility might be, responsibility continues to be one of the basic concept of moral language. In modern liberal societies, responsibility and autonomy are considered to be some of the basic virtues of a morally mature individual. To be morally mature is to be capable of making one's own decisions, and of acting accordingly. Such a person is one who considers himself to be responsible both to himself and to others, one who evaluates, not on the basis of his own preferences alone, but on the basis of other considerations as well. He is one who can be said to be the opposite of an arbitrary sort of person, one whose steadfastness is worth relying on.

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NOTES

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not free in any of these senses, but to lack responsibility for what he thinks and does. It is not as if he lacks responsibility for his acts, but that he lacks responsibility for the reasons behind his acts. Indeed, there is something about a person's acting in the absence of responsibility which is in itself a sign of his lack of responsibility and of his lack of freedom. A person's acting in the absence of responsibility might well be a sign of his lack of freedom, but the person's acting in the absence of responsibility might be a sign of his lack of responsibility, and of his lack of freedom. In neither case is responsibility and freedom any less essential to the person's acting in the absence of responsibility. To be morally responsible is to be capable of making one's own decisions, and of acting accordingly. A person is not also considered to be responsible for his acts if he is not free to do so, and who exercises, not on the basis of his own preferences alone, but on the basis of other considerations. It is one who can be said to be the possessor of an arbitrary will if he is not free to do so, and whose decisions are not his own.

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