Mark Coeckelbergh

Liberation and Passion

Reconstructing the Passion Perspective on Human Being and Freedom
# Contents

**Chapter 1 – Introduction**

Establishing the framework

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.1.</td>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2.</td>
<td>The Will &amp; Action Framework</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2.1.</td>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2.2.</td>
<td>J.S. Mill on liberty</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2.3.</td>
<td>H. Frankfurt on freedom of the will and what we care about</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2.3.1.</td>
<td>Frankfurt’s Concept of a Person (I)</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2.3.2.</td>
<td>Frankfurt’s Concept of a Person (II)</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2.3.3.</td>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2.4.</td>
<td>The citadel image: source and significance</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3.</td>
<td>Iris Murdoch: Attention and Vision</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3.1.</td>
<td>The existentialist-behaviourist view: an action-perspective on human being and freedom</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3.2.</td>
<td>Murdoch’s critique</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.4.</td>
<td>Definition of freedom, my argument, and my aim(s) in this dissertation</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.5.</td>
<td>Note on my methodology</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Chapter 2 – Greeks**

Tragedy, Dionysian Passion, and Greek Madness

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2.1.</td>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2.</td>
<td>The evolution from passion to action in ancient Greek culture</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2.1.</td>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2.2.</td>
<td>The Ancient and the Modern: Passion versus Action</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2.2.1.</td>
<td>Tragedy: Between Activity and Passivity</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2.2.2.</td>
<td>The Glory of Passivity</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2.3.</td>
<td>From Passion to Action in Antiquity</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2.3.1.</td>
<td>From Dionysus to Apollo</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2.3.2.</td>
<td>The evolution of the meaning of hybris</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2.3.3.</td>
<td>Aristotle's view on tragedy in the Poetics</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2.3.4.</td>
<td>Madness in Greek culture and philosophy</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2.4.</td>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3.</td>
<td>Are Dionysians Free?</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3.1.</td>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
2.3.2. Exploration of the connection between Dionysus and freedom ........................................... 57
  2.3.2.1. The liberating role of the Dionysian ritual ......................................................... 57
  2.3.2.2. Dionysus, the liberator .......................................................... 58
  2.3.2.3. “Now the slave is a free man” ......................................................... 61
  2.3.3. Three types of Dionysian liberation and freedom .................................................. 62
  2.3.4. Discussion .................................................................................. 63
    2.3.4.1. Social liberation ................................................................. 63
    2.3.4.2. Psychological liberation ...................................................... 66
    2.3.4.3. Mystical liberation ............................................................ 73
  2.3.5. Conclusion .............................................................................. 77

2.4. Conclusion .............................................................................. 77

Chapter 3 – Christians
Pagan Rituals, Christian Grace, and Modern Reason

3.1. Introduction .............................................................................. 79
3.2. Paul’s imaginative transformation of elements in pagan culture ........................................ 80
  3.2.1. Introduction .............................................................................. 80
  3.2.2. Paul’s idea of freedom and liberation ............................................. 81
  3.2.3. The pagan origin of Paul’s imagery .............................................. 82
    3.2.3.1. Mythras and Heracles ........................................................ 82
    3.2.3.2. Dionysus ............................................................................. 84
  3.2.4. Conclusion .............................................................................. 87
  3.3. An Age of Darkness ................................................................ 88
  3.3.1. Magic, possession, and other phenomena ........................................ 88
  3.3.2. The inward turn ....................................................................... 90
  3.4. Augustine .................................................................................. 91
    3.4.1. Introduction .............................................................................. 91
    3.4.2. Action: “I am, I know, and I will.” (VIII.11/318) ......................... 93
      3.4.2.1. In the whirlpool of sin: the action model of a divided self .... 93
      3.4.2.2. The origin of evil: the action concept of ‘free’ will in trouble . 94
    3.4.3. Passion: I open up myself to receive You ..................................... 96
      3.4.3.1. Searching ......................................................................... 97
      3.4.3.2. Personal history and the concept of vision ......................... 98
      3.4.3.3. Receptivity ....................................................................... 99
      3.4.3.4. Love ............................................................................... 100
    3.4.4. Conclusion .............................................................................. 103
    3.4.5. Augustine and the Modern idea of freedom ............................. 105
3.4.5.1. Rousseau .................................................. 105
3.4.5.2. Kant ..................................................... 106
3.5. Conclusion .................................................. 109

Chapter 4 – Moderns
The Inquisitor and the Poet

4.1. Introduction .................................................. 113
4.2. The legend of the grand-inquisitor .................... 115
4.2.1. Introduction .................................................. 115
4.2.2. The argument of the grand-inquisitor .............. 116
4.2.3. My interpretation .......................................... 117
4.2.4. Afterword .................................................... 122
4.3. Heidegger’s view of freedom and human being .... 123
4.3.1. Introduction .................................................. 123
4.3.2. The question “What is human being?” ............ 125
4.3.3. Human being ................................................ 128
4.3.3.1. From Nothing to Being .............................. 128
4.3.3.2. The Poetry of Being ................................... 129
   a) Thinking and art as forms of passion: disclosure and happening ........................................... 129
   b) The domination of will and the inward turn ....... 130
   c) A Heideggerian poem ....................................... 131
4.3.3.3. The essence of thinking .............................. 132
4.3.3.4. Heidegger’s view of human being: Ek-sistence .................. 133
   a) Why is it necessary to clarify the relationship between Being and Dasein? ......................... 133
   b) The concept of ek-sistence and the relationship between Dasein and Being .......................... 135
4.3.4. Human freedom ........................................... 136
4.3.5. Gelassenheit ................................................. 138
4.3.5.1. Introduction ............................................. 138
4.3.5.2. Gelassenheit: Towards another relationship to things .................................................. 139
4.3.5.3. Gelassenheit: Heidegger’s answer to the question about human being and freedom ......... 141
4.3.6. Conclusion .................................................. 144
4.3.6.1. General conclusion and comparison with Augustine .................................................. 144
4.3.6.2. Comparison with Levinas ................................ 145
4.4. Conclusion .................................................... 149
Chapter 5 – The Politics of Passion  
Critical Implications for Politics & Society

5.1. Introduction .................................................. 153
5.2. Meister Eckhart’s Theory of Passion and Freedom .............. 154
  5.2.1. Introduction .............................................. 154
  5.2.2. Passion and freedom in Eckhart’s work .................... 154
  5.2.2.1. The potentiality within us ............................ 154
  5.2.2.2. Eckhart’s Instructions ................................. 155
  5.2.2.3. Sermons on Receptivity .............................. 158
  5.2.2.4. Eckhart’s explicit theory of passion .................. 159
  5.2.3. The merits of Eckhart’s theory of passion and freedom .... 160
  5.3. Eckhart and social critique .................................. 162
    5.3.1. Introduction ............................................ 162
    5.3.2. Fromm: To have or to be .............................. 163
      5.3.2.1. Introduction ....................................... 163
      5.3.2.2. The world as it is ................................ 163
      5.3.2.3. The world as it should be ......................... 167
      5.3.2.4. Conclusion ........................................ 169
    5.3.3. Sölle: mysticism and resistance ........................ 169
      5.3.3.1. Introduction ....................................... 169
      5.3.3.2. Sölle’s view of human being ....................... 173
    5.4. Towards an alternative Critical Theory ........................ 177
      5.4.1. Introduction ............................................ 177
      5.4.2. The challenge for critical theory in Heidegger’s later thought ........................................ 178
      5.4.3. The gnostic world-view as a metaphor for the core of critical thinking .............................. 178
      5.4.4. The interactionist approach ........................... 180
      5.4.5. Thinking Heidegger and Habermas together .............. 182
    5.5. Conclusion .................................................. 190

Conclusion  
Two perspectives on human being and freedom

Overview of the arguments ........................................ 193
Conclusion: Passion versus Action? .............................. 195

Bibliography ..................................................... 199
Chapter 1 – Introduction
Establishing the framework

1.1. Introduction

The project of this book emerged from my reflections on various writings dealing with the issue of freedom. I noticed that most discussions of personal freedom depend on the concept of an active self. The self, as it is considered in these discussions, is viewed as a purposeful, potent agent, a willing self, setting itself a task in the world, making decisions, actively shaping its life, controlling its passions, feelings, and desires, etc. The aim of this book is to show that a very different perspective on freedom is possible and even preferable, based on the concept of a self shaped by passion: a self that is being moved, shaped, discovered, disclosed, revealed; a self that receives, opens itself up, suffers, submits, accepts; a self the being of which is disclosed during its life. My claim is that this view of a self-in-passion has been mostly disregarded, lost sight of, in the Western philosophical tradition. Therefore I think that it is necessary to open up and explore this perspective.

In this chapter, I first present what I will call the will & action model of human being and freedom. In discussions of freedom, problems about and objections to this or that account of freedom usually arise from within this model. A particular theory is challenged, but the arguments for or against remain part of the will & action framework. My purpose is a different one. I will use the idea of freedom found in Frankfurt and Mill as illustrations of the will & action framework. In the course of this presentation, I do not want to defend or critique a particular theory, but rather raise questions about the adequacy of the overall framework in which these theories are situated, a framework which is often so much taken for granted. I want to challenge the way the question of freedom is defined in this framework, and ask: Is this what the question of freedom for human beings is?

Secondly, I want to show that there are philosophers, such as Iris Murdoch, who have raised radical questions concerning the validity of the assumptions about the self and its freedom that are made in such discussions of freedom. This might give us inspiration if we want to start challenging the adequacy of the will & action framework.

Thirdly, I say something about the general conception of freedom I use in this book, and its relevance in relation to the will & action framework on the one hand, and the passion framework on the other hand. I will argue that conceptions of the constitution of human being and conceptions of freedom are
necessarily linked, and I then reformulate the aim of this book as the explora-
tion of a different conception of human being as a basis for a different view of
human freedom. I will show that the argument in this book is ultimately an
argument about the core of human selfhood and human freedom.

I will present the ‘program’ of this book, which is to challenge the will &
action framework by developing an alternative. I will call this alternative the
‘passion’ framework. In this book, I will use the term ‘passion’ not entirely in
its usual meaning (which is vague anyway), but rather in a semi-technical
way, to point to a variety of key elements or key concepts (passivity, receptivity, openness, dependency, love, etc.) that are part of the alternative
idea of human being and freedom that I want to develop in this book. Often –
and particularly in the will & action framework – these elements are seen as
impediments to freedom, elements that stand in the way of my freedom. I
want to show that, on the contrary, these elements need not be considered
impediments but rather a basis for a strikingly different representation of
human being and freedom. My agenda is to put these conceptions to work in
my discussion of certain thinkers and cultural elements in the history of
Western philosophy. Because the ‘passion’ idea of human being and freedom
has largely been lost sight of, my aim is to articulate this idea, and the notion
of ‘passion’ is my instrument, my conceptual tool, to open it up. I will
describe the structure of my book in this perspective.

Finally, I will say something more on my methodology.

To conclude this introduction, I summarize the structure of this chapter:

1) Presentation of the will & action framework
   (a) J.S. Mill on liberty
   (b) H. Frankfurt on freedom of the will and what we care about
2) A challenge to the adequacy of the will & action framework: Iris Mur-
   doch
3) Definition of freedom, core structure of my argument, and the pro-
   grammatic aim of my book: Starting to articulate and develop the
   passion framework
4) Note on my methodology

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