

The Faces of Freedom

On Being Free, by Frithjof Bergmann, *South Bend, Indiana: The University of Notre Dame Press, 1977. 238 pp. \$10.00.*

PROFESSOR BERGMANN has written an eminently readable, wise, and provocative book. It is unusual for other reasons: it is scholarly without being narrowly "academic" (it has no footnotes and no index, and yet it is closely argued and aware of its debt to philosophical tradition); it attacks a host of popular myths and penetrates the fog that surrounds many a learned discussion about human freedom; and it ventures to make practical suggestions about how society can increase the possibilities of freedom among its members. True, some of this praise must be qualified and some of the virtues of the book are studied—one suspects that Bergmann delights in setting off firecrackers in the hallowed halls of academic philosophy—but these flaws can be forgiven because (1) the book is excellent, and (2) *something* needs to be done to get the attention of professional philosophers and to bring their special skills to bear on the problems that confront human beings. One hopes that Bergmann's book marks the beginning of a trend.

The apparent death of several popular myths about freedom results from Bergmann's notion that freedom is essentially a function of the attainment of self-hood. Unfortunately, this notion is rather vague, and the reader leaves the book with the feeling that something has been left unsaid: namely, what freedom is. What it is not is license, or the removal of barriers (negative freedom); nor is it conformity to reason (positive freedom). Bergmann spends much of his time defending the first thrust of this attack, and his argument is an effective critique of traditional libertarianism. However, he is less convincing in his attack on the view that considers freedom to be conformity to reason. Briefly stated, his argument is that because reason is a part of man his freedom cannot be a function of that part, but is rather correspondence with "the self, which is all the various characteristics" that comprise the person-

ality. "Freedom for us is the expression of what we are . . ." As noted, this formula is vague; but, more importantly, it suggests a descriptive rather than a normative view of freedom. Bergmann attempts to raise the view to the prescriptive level by insisting that "what we are" is not determined by what we want or what we take ourselves to be at the present moment, but by what we need or might be. Thus, with a neat Aristotelian twist, he argues that "what we are" is an ideal type variously applied to specific persons. However, his language about a "genuine self," "my own authentic self," and "what I truly am" shrouds this concept in a mist; the suggestion of something hidden with which one "identifies" in becoming free puts one in mind of Eastern mysticism. The reader demands more.

Unfortunately, when his thesis calls for extended analysis Bergmann often relies on analogies, several of which he belabors. In his discussion of education, for example, he repeatedly likens the student to a juggler to whom the teacher must hand a new plate without disturbing the six that are already in the air. "If it is done at the wrong moment either before the juggler's skill is far enough advanced, or clumsily, off by a split second, the result will be that with a crash all of the plates will fall to the ground." How, though, does such an analogy suffice to aid instruction?

On the other hand, the author rightly eschews formulae. Although he is sympathetic with Neill's experiments with Summerhill, for example, he does not espouse "free schools" (most of which were set up on a misreading of Neill, Bergmann carefully points out), and he disagrees with Neill's blind commitment to freedom as the paramount human value. As Bergmann says, "whether and to what extent education should aim at freedom is for us a genuine and problematic question." The entire thrust of his argument suggests that indeed freedom is the aim of education, but apparently the author does not want us to take anything for granted. Thus, with persistent curiosity and sound critical acumen Bergmann forces the reader to rethink some of his most treasured convictions. As Bergmann would have it, the myth of the absolute value of freedom lies dor-

mant alongside several companions.

First among these companions is the traditional conception of freedom, including the apparently self-evident maxim that freedom is a matter of choice. It cannot be, insists Bergmann, since we make hundreds of choices daily that are clearly unfree. Undisturbed by the apparent *petitio principii*, Bergmann concludes boldly that "choice is not juxtaposed to coercion," since coercion, in the form of "forces outside the ego, can be liberating." Choice "is not a condition that suffices" for freedom; what matters is that I "identify with the making of a choice."

The second would-be victim is the Rousseauian conviction that freedom is the best argument for democracy since only in a democracy is it possible to attain freedom. For Bergmann this is not so, since in fact one finds much greater freedom in (some) primitive non-democratic societies such as the Pygmies and the Balinese. If freedom were a function of democratic rule, moreover, hardly anyone would ever have been free because "hardly anyone was ever literally governed by himself." The best argument for democracies, says Bergmann, is that "as systems they are more intelligent," that is to say, "more responsive, more flexible, and therefore more efficient . . ."

Third in our list of dead or missing myths is our treasured conviction that work is somehow "holy" and something no self-respecting person would be without. Bergmann would revise our conception of work after the model of Yugoslavia under pre-Communist rule, a model of "self-management" in which "a great many jobs might be engaging, and even fun" if they only had to be taken on for "three to six months." Our commitment to the notion that work is sacred is relatively recent, and Bergmann regards it as an aberration to be displaced by the view that work should be "integrated with life" and reduced to that which is essential for healthy functioning of society. He is convinced that this could be done without seriously affecting the G.N.P. or the balance of trade.

Along the way, the author leaves many questions in the air. Moreover, one is troubled by

the occasional stirring in the limbs of the presumably-dead myths about human freedom, by the author's penchant for blackwashing the opposition in derisive adjectives, and by his occasional oversimplifications and hasty generalizations. But these are small matters when weighed against the value of a book that provokes as much thought as this one does, and lets as much fresh air into the musty chambers of perennial problems.

Reviewed by HUGH MERCER CURTLER