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FREE AGENCY AND FREEDOM — SOME MISCONCEPTIONS

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This essay relates a central principle of Mormon thought to crucial issues of our time which involve the author personally. Garth Mangum did his doctoral study at Harvard University in economics, then taught at Harvard and at Brigham Young University, and then went to Washington, where he served in succession as Research Director for the Senate Labor Committee, Executive Secretary for the National Commission on Technology, Automation, and Economic Progress, and Executive Director of the President's Committee on Manpower; he is now doing research, which is financed by the Ford Foundation and published in reports and books, such as his recent AUTOMATION AND ECONOMIC PROGRESS, into the nature of human labor as an economic resource and ways of assisting the disadvantaged in our society to compete economically.

Free agency is a fundamental theological principle of the Mormon religion. Freedom is a basic goal of the American political system. But they are not the same thing, and Mormons damage both principles through a tendency to confuse them. Statements in which the action of our own or a foreign government is characterized as "taking away free agency" or "pursuing the goals for which Satan fought in the war in heaven" are too familiar to require documen-

tation. This essay defines free agency and freedom and gives one observer's assessment of the present condition of each.

Free agency is the right and responsibility of moral choice: the right because it is the source of all spiritual progress; the responsibility because we cannot avoid the consequence of choice. Free agency was perhaps best defined by Lehi:

Wherefore the Lord God gave unto man that he should act for himself. Wherefore man could not act for himself save it be that he should be enticed by [good and evil]. . . . Because [men] are redeemed from the fall they have become free forever knowing good from evil; to act for themselves and not to be acted upon . . . and they are free to choose liberty and eternal life through the great mediation of all men, or to choose captivity and death. . . . (2 Nephi 2:16, 26, 27)

On the other hand, freedom, according to Webster, is "the absence of necessity, coercion or constraint in choice or action." Freedom is a relative concept, best measured operationally by the range of choice available to the individual, while free agency is eternal and absolute in duration and range of application. The principles are related in that each implies liberal views about the nature of man. Free agency is a characteristic of potential gods; freedom is a reasonable principle only when most men at most times have the capacity to choose wisely.

One searches the scriptures in vain for warnings that free agency might be taken away by forces external to the individual. Section 101 of the Doctrine and Covenants stresses the contribution of the U. S. Constitution to both religious and political freedom but does not imply that without it Americans would be limited in their moral choices or relieved of responsibility for them. Judging from the *Journal of Discourses*, early Church leaders appear to have decried "interference with free agency" only in reference to government actions which increased the real cost of obedience to the principle of plural marriage. It is interesting that we have no record of Christ criticizing the Romans for interference with Jewish free agency (or even their freedom). The truth was enough to make them morally free. Free agency was "given unto man" and he is "free forever" to act for himself and take the consequences. In that sense, the War in Heaven was definitive. "Satan . . . came before me, saying . . . I will redeem all mankind, that one soul shall not be lost. . . . Wherefore because that Satan rebelled against me, and sought to destroy the agency of man, . . . I caused that he should be cast down; and he became Satan, . . . to deceive and blind men, and to lead them captive at his will, even as many as would not hearken unto my voice." Given his goal to "bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of

man" God had no other choice. Satan's plan was not only presumptuous; it was also inoperable. With or without freedom man might be exalted; without free agency he could not. Satan could be allowed no more than the chance to entice man to use his free agency to choose evil rather than good.

If not Satan, can any person or institution deny us our free agency? External forces may be able to increase the temporal costs of moral decisions but not prevent the choice. Both the right and responsibility of free agency are inherent in the knowledge of good and evil. Therefore, denial of the knowledge upon which moral choice can be based is the only effective limitation on the ability to choose.

Knowledge of good and evil is the most troublesome concept involved in the doctrine of free agency. Man is a creation of God, but he is also a creature of his environment. While he may be born with a natural affinity for truth, by and large he will believe to be right and wrong what his environment has taught him to accept and reject. The willingness of the Gospel plan to excuse, though not reward, those "blinded by the cunning craftiness of men" (Doctrine and Covenants 76:75) or deluded by "the tradition of their fathers" (Doctrine and Covenants 93:39) is recognition of this fact.

There is an analogous problem within the Church which is reflected in a basic division in attitudes toward instruction of youth. Should they be taught what to think or how to think? Both the Pavlovian dog salivating on signal and the rat obtaining food by manipulating a maze are obedient, but they are not free agents. Does one who has been similarly conditioned to unquestioning obedience make progress in his eternal character-building quest equal to one whose obedience is a matter of deliberate choice? Alma's impressive discourse on the pragmatic approach to faith (Alma 32:26-34) is a case in point. One plants in his bosom seeds he has reason to believe will be productive, but he is prepared to root them out should they prove unfruitful. This does not preclude following authority when the terrain is uncertain and one has evidence of the trustworthiness of the guide. But to deny man knowledge that the choice is his does not differ significantly from denial of the choice itself.

However, the more serious threats to free agency are within each of us. One can so bind himself to the animal level of existence by pandering to the lusts of his flesh that he can no longer exercise that moral choice which is the distinctive mark of man. Surrendering the ability, however, does not include surrender of the responsibility for the choices made nor the responsibility to choose. Moral choice

between good and evil, once known and clearly conceived, is unconstrained.

Freedom, on the other hand, can be won or lost, expanded or contracted. Historically, freedom to Americans has meant political freedom. Those who created our free institutions were selected by events from among the most aggressive of other lands. They found themselves confronted by a vast, unexploited continent and believed the major restraint upon their range of choice to be the arbitrary actions of European governments. They strove to remove political limitations upon their range of choice and they wrought well, so well that much of our subsequent political history has involved attempts to unshackle government to make it a useful tool by which a people could pursue its collective goals. Many who, because of the fortunes of birth or their laudatory efforts, have been relieved of other constraints on their range of choice would convince us that government is still the primary enemy of freedom. Arbitrary government is a danger never to be ignored, but it appears well down any realistic list of restraints upon choice in our country in our day. More immediate threats are immorality, ignorance, poverty, and disease. They impose *de facto* restraints which can make an empty promise of a *de jure* grant of political rights.

What, then is the state of freedom? Is it growing or waning in the United States and the world? The question is a complex one, the answer depending as it does on a balancing of political, economic, and social trends, some rising while others decline and each moving at a different pace. The yardstick is the range of choice available to the individual. The impact of any particular development is the sum of positive and negative influences. The measures are subjective ones and opinions of observers will differ. It is my judgment that the net effect of developments of the past few decades has been to broaden the range of choice and therefore the freedom available to most Americans.

A people as well as individuals can shackle themselves with immoral practices and restrict their range of choices. Trends in national morality are difficult to determine. We have no good measure of present morality nor of the past to compare with the present. Data on crime and similar phenomena are as likely to indicate improvement in statistical techniques as increased incidence. Urbanization not only increases opportunity for antisocial activity but makes behavior unacceptable which might have been ignored in a rural environment. The rapid growth of crime-prone age groups explains a lot. But though increased immorality cannot be proven, improvement is even more difficult to substantiate.

Other shackles upon the range of choice are more clearly loosening. The exercise of choice requires knowledge of the existence and implications of alternatives. Not only has available knowledge undergone a dramatic explosion, but the increase in dissemination has been equally impressive. Mass communications media are the major pipelines for the raw material of knowledge; education, hopefully, is responsible for providing the analytical tools. Our present concern for the plight of the undereducated is not that they are so numerous. In reality, it is because they are so few and so far behind that they cannot compete in a society that is lunging forward so rapidly.

In a modern industrial society, command over material goods is exercised by the purchasing power of income or wealth. In that sense, the range of choice is measurable in dollars. The average real per capita disposable personal income of Americans has doubled since 1939. Present efforts to reduce poverty do not indicate a worsening situation. We now talk of the poor one-fifth rather than the one-third of a generation ago. What is new is a nation so wealthy that abolition of poverty can be considered as real alternative. Between \$15 billion and \$20 billion per year would be required to bring every American family above present rule of thumb definitions of poverty income. In contrast, the output of the U.S. economy was \$47 billion greater in 1965 than in 1964. For the first time in history, it is possible to abolish poverty without reducing affluence. The relative economic freedom available to Americans is starkly illustrated by an international comparison of average per capita national incomes: \$2800 per year in the United States; the equivalent of \$100 per year in China and India.

Ill health, whether physical or mental, is another constraint upon individual choice. The increase in life expectancy from sixty-three to seventy years over the past thirty-five years is sufficient indication for present purposes of the conquest of disease.

This, however, is the positive side and there are important offsets. The freedom provided by the knowledge of alternatives is no guarantee that wise choices will be made. Industrialization, urbanization, and population growth are the prevailing influences on modern life. Industrialization, with its economic specialization and interdependence and its technological multiplications of the physical and mental powers of man, is a source of wealth but also of insecurity and of environmental pollution. Urbanization is both cause and consequence of industrialization; its price is congestion and strife. Because the technology of death control has outstripped the technology of birth control, we have learned to save lives to

some extent at the expense of the quality of life. The mass media which expand the knowledge of alternatives also inform the disadvantaged here and abroad of their relative deprivation. This "revolution of rising expectations" has in turn been the root of most international and domestic unrest.

The great paradox of American economic history is that government, once considered the enemy of freedom, has become its foremost protector. Its influence on morality has probably been neutral; its role in the reduction of ignorance, poverty, and disease has been positive. There have been costs. The difference is primarily in the changed nature of the opportunities and threats. Government regulations impede the freedom of the regulated but prevent their unwarranted infringement upon the freedoms of others. Taxes restrict the choices available to the income receiver, but if, as is probably the case, before-tax incomes are enlarged by effective policies, who is to say that the net result is negative, even for the wealthy?

All government decisions are not wise, many are clearly irrational. Summing the political pressures of interest groups provides workable compromises, not optimum solutions. The inefficiencies and arbitrariness of bureaucracies are inherent in all large organizations. But the net result for the society as a whole has almost certainly been an increase in the sum total of freedom.

If there is a sickness in America, it is not our lack of freedom but our apparent inability to identify our choices or to choose wisely among them. Most of us in the United States are freer than ever before, but many are still left behind in ignorance, poverty, and disease. It is the duty of the Church to inveigh against immorality. As a people, if we are interested in the expansion of freedom, we must be equally aggressive in opposition to intellectual, economic, and physical constraints.

Similar analyses could be made for other nations. Freedom measured in these terms is clearly on the increase in Western Europe. The Russian people traded one harsh political system for another, but found in increased material wealth a range of choice never before experienced in their history. China, too, experienced revolution without freedom but has yet to demonstrate loosening of the constraints of ignorance, poverty, and disease. India, despite political freedom, is no less captive.

All of this is one man's opinion. The point of this essay is that, regardless of what happens to freedom, free agency is not in danger, though the choices we make with our free agency always are. Confusing free agency and freedom confronts us with several dangers. We may fail to prepare our youth intellectually for the necessity of

moral choice. We may, by looking outward in defense of free agency, forget that the threat to this divine principle lies in our own souls. We may as citizens deny ourselves and others access to the collective power of government — a force which, in a free nation, is available to do the will of the people, and which can be used to expand as well as limit our freedoms. But whether governments do or do not protect or restrain choice, they influence freedom, not free agency.

We believe firmly that the basis upon which world peace may be permanently obtained is not by sowing seeds of distrust and suspicion in people's minds; . . . not by individuals or nations arrogating to themselves the claim of possessing all wisdom, or the only culture worth having. . . ."

David O. McKay
IMPROVEMENT ERA, LVIII (1955)