

## **Reflections on freedom and responsibility: An existential-analytical perspective**

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One of the intensely discussed topics of our present times across countries and continents is what has been framed as the tension between individual freedom- often conflated with the notion of individual rights-, on one hand, and the civic duty or responsibility towards the others, the public good and society at large, on the other hand. Echoes of this tension and especially of the intensified polarization perpetuated around it have showed up often in my therapy sessions over the past few months. For instance, some clients revealed in shock that their best friend broke up with them and shun them from their friends' circle over this dispute. Others decided to sever long lasting friendships or committed relationships over similar disagreements. Some people mentioned that they were scared to go to work as they felt either unsafe or blamed for their decisions. Regardless of their specific situation, they were not just shocked, scared, angry, hurt or betrayed but they were also struggling to find some ground and orientation in their predicament as they were convinced that they did what felt right for them and yet they felt misunderstood, punished, or simply discarded.

This situation motivated me to reflect more intentionally on how Existential Analysis (EA) understands freedom, responsibility, ethical decision making, caring for one another, dialogue, and openness. In line with my intention to revisit these concepts, I hope that this article

could be also an invitation for the readers to reflect on these themes and their relevance for the therapeutic practice in our current context.

### **Freedom and responsibility**

From an existential perspective, freedom and responsibility are fundamentally interconnected. One without the other is hollow, devoid of value, and potentially dangerous. Freedom without responsibility may lead to arbitrariness and anarchy, whereas responsibility without freedom is mere duty, obligation, or coercion. We cannot act responsibly or be held responsible if we are not free. At the same time, we are not free unless we exercise our ability to respond (response-ability) and to stand by our responses, including assuming the consequences of our choices. We are responsible only to the degree that we are free, and we are free only to the degree that we exercise our response-ability. Any coercion or pressure on freedom takes away responsibility and minimizes our personal capacity to respond and remain in dialogue with the world and ourselves. Similarly, any refusal to be responsible transforms freedom into a potentially dangerous mockery. In both situations, we are losing touch with ourselves and instead of arriving at a personal response we simply react to a perceived threat or to coercion. Thus, there is little value and much peril in opposing freedom and responsibility since the question is how we can choose responsibly and experience ourselves as free in being responsible.

Although as human beings we are free persons, our freedom is not exercised or claimed abstractly. Rather, we make free decisions and act freely within specific contexts. We actualize our freedom when we respond to the demands of a particular situation by assessing and taking into consideration everything and everyone involved in that situation (e.g., the accurate and pertinent information about the situation, our own values, all the values in that circumstance, other people, the larger context). We are not free in a vacuum but in specific, concrete situations

that are bound by everything that is at stake in that circumstance. Also, we are not free in isolation but in relationships: with a situation, with others and with the larger context in which we exist. Therefore, our freedom is always limited and exercised within these limitations. This is the birthplace of responsibility: how do I respond to what these limitations are asking of me? How do I respond in this particular situation by considering the information that I have, all the values and everyone involved, and assuming the consequences of my free choices? How can I stand by my choices? Understood in this manner, responsibility is losing its moralistic or coercive connotations of external obligation or duty and is truly an expression of freedom.

In times of intense upheaval or crises, this fundamental connection between freedom and responsibility tends to fade away, leading to artificially radicalized and rigidly polarized stances that tend to oppose freedom misrepresented as exercising individualistic rights and responsibility reduced to an externally prescribed social duty or obligation. Unfortunately, this polarization leads to loss of freedom, and, subsequently, to a loss of responsibility. Unfree people cannot be responsible, and the less free someone feels, the less responsible one will be. Succumbing to being dutiful or looking up to perceived authorities to tell us what to do while bypassing ourselves is as much an escape from freedom as it is the insistence on ignoring the demands of the situation and aggressively claiming one's individual rights above all other considerations. In each of these circumstances, we relinquish our freedom and decline our responsibility. We are not acting from a personal stance, but rather we are re-acting to a perceived threat.

### **The “right” choice**

Even if we accept this deeply intertwined understanding of freedom and responsibility, an important question remains, and comes up often in dialogue with my clients: how to choose

freely and responsibly? If there is no authority which can ultimately tell us what to do, if we are fundamentally free and responsible, how do we make the “right” choice?

Existential Analysis confers a central role to our moral conscience in how we make decisions that we sense to be right and justified. In EA, the moral conscience is defined as the sense for the hierarchy of values in a situation regarding what someone perceives as overall good and therefore finds to be right. In other words, following our moral conscience means finding the resonance between one’s own person and the values involved in a certain situation, in order to detect what is overall good and right in a situation. Practically, it means asking oneself: what do I sense to be right or the right thing to do in this particular situation? As I draw closer to myself and listen intently, what do I sense that it is right in this situation?

To hear the voice of our moral conscience and to sense our innermost sense of rightness, the noise of our emotional reactions and affects needs to be toned down. If we are angry or scared it is unlikely that we could hear what our moral conscience tells us and that we could sense what is right. Feeling strongly one way or another is a sign that we are still far away from ourselves and from our moral conscience, and that the decisions that we want to make under this emotional pressure are not yet personal responses but reactions to our own emotional triggers. Hence, I always encourage clients to fully experience and process their raw, primary emotional reactions and impulses to understand their message so that they could get to a quieter, more balanced inner space where they could begin to hear themselves and sense what is the right decision in a given situation.

A paradox of the moral conscience is that the more I am in touch with my own person, the more I can relate to the other as the other or the one who is not me. From this place, I can see, hear, value and care for the other rather than feeling threatened by differences and otherness.

Although deeply personal and intimate, moral conscience does not look selfishly after individual's rights or privileges at the expense of others. On the contrary, following our moral conscience invokes a deep responsibility for the others. The more one is in touch with oneself and senses what is right for them, the more one cares for the others. Sensing what is right and acting accordingly is not an individualistic affair or a moralistic imposition but a felt caring stance.

Hence, in following our moral conscience, we face the question: what do I sense to be right for me in this situation, which would be right for anyone else who would be in this exact same situation? This way, our moral conscience is not simply about what feels right for me only, but it rather connects me with the humanity and does justice to our inherent relationality as human beings. Although deeply personal and distinct, our moral conscience is a reminder that I am fully myself to the degree that I am fully responsible to the relationships in which I find myself.

Practically, the question about making the right decision is: if this is what I sense that it is right in this situation, how do I act in such a way that the value that I am choosing upholds the other's dignity and does not harm the other. Doing justice to oneself is inextricably connected with caring for and doing justice to the others. What is bad or harmful for others cannot be good for me, and what wrongs the other cannot be right for me, even if sometimes it may feel that it is.

### **Openness and dialogue**

It is virtually impossible to experience ourselves as free, and, thus, responsible or to act morally or ethically when we are beset by intense emotions, contradictory information, and constantly polarizing discourses. In these situations, we tend to react quickly and there is little space to engage in dialogue and self-reflection. We become radicalized, loud, and pressured in

defending our premature position on a topic and this narrows our openness and capacity to dialogue with both the world, including others, and with ourselves.

In EA, the double openness and dialogue are hallmarks of how we engage with the world and ourselves in a free, responsible, and ethical manner. In these exceedingly demanding times, I have been reminded more than ever about the critical importance of remaining open and making space for authentic dialogue where we can meet the other as a way to honour freedom and responsibility together, and to cultivate trust in our inner moral compass.