

Mark Coeckelbergh

Liberation and Passion

Reconstructing the Passion Perspective
on Human Being and Freedom



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Coeckelbergh, Mark:
Liberation and passion : reconstructing the passion
perspective on human being and freedom / Mark
Coeckelbergh. - Alfter/Bonn : DenkMal-Verl., 2002
ISBN 3-935404-06-9

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ISBN 3-935404-06-9
© DenkMal Verlag Alfter/Bonn 2002
Satz: Dieter L. Ney, Grafenschaft
Druck und Bindung: Difo-Druck, Bamberg
Printed in Germany

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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 exploration 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 Murdoch
- 3) Definition of freedom, core structure of my argument, and the programmatic aim of my book: Starting to articulate and develop the passion framework
- 4) Note on my methodology

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