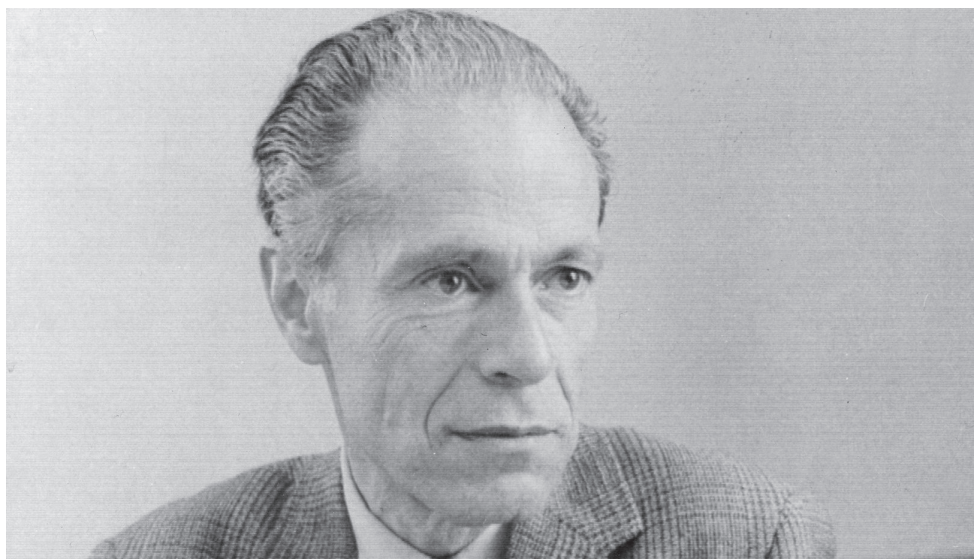


## Freedom: a Matter of Choice and Action (Libertad: un asunto de escogencia y acción)

A posthumous homage to Albert Hirschman  
(Un homenaje póstumo a Albert Hirschman)

*Freddy Cante\**



### Abstract

In this Article of critical remark is rescued a concept of freedom which has been suggested by the heterodox economist Albert Hirschman (2002). This author affirmed that freedom is a choice about styles of life (moral values, ideologies and meta-preferences) and this hard election implies will and actions: exit from inherited institutions and everyday choices (tastes and preferences) and, moreover, fight against social order.

**Keywords:** Freedom, Values, Social Choice.

### Resumen

En este artículo de reflexión crítica es rescatado un concepto de libertad el cual ha sido sugerido por el economista heterodoxo Albert Hirschman (2002). Este autor afirmó que la libertad es una escogencia de estilos de vida (valores morales, ideologías y meta-preferencias), y que esta dura elección implica voluntad y acción: salida de instituciones heredadas y de elecciones cotidianas (gustos y preferencias) y, además, lucha contra el orden social.

**Palabras clave:** libertad, valores, elección social.

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Recibido: julio 12 de 2012

Aprobado: septiembre 30 de 2012

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## 1. Introduction

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Human freedom depends on choice and action. Human beings not only have preferences (desires and objectives), they transform their environment, and, consequently, they execute actions in order to attain desired goals.

A person is free when he or she chooses their desired aims and, moreover, can transform his or her world by means actions.

This very brief critical essay is divided in four main parts:

- Firstly: there are comets and butterflies. (Section 2).
- Secondly: The fly of the comets is domesticated: the meaning of every-day choices

which are about tastes and business (section 2).

- Thirdly: the fly of the butterflies is freer: the meaning of choices about styles of life which are about values and visions of the world (sections 2 and 3).
- Fourthly: the main conditions in order to reach free choices, which are: voice and cognitive liberation, exit and rebellion against some powers, and creation of alternative values. (section four) (Sections 4 and 5)
- Fifthly, some examples about individual freedom. (section five)

## 2. Comets and butterflies

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Perhaps the most interesting story that I read when I was a child is denominated like the “fable of the comet and the butterfly”: indeed, a comet can attain more height than a small insect like a butterfly if its holder has good skills and a lot of cord; but a butterfly can attain the highest of its own choice because this small living thing can fly freely towards its desired horizons. The comet is only an instrument of the will of the manager; the butterfly is free because this small animal performs travels in order to attain her desired aims.

In the zoo of the human society we can see a big variety of occupations, roles, social positions and styles of life, but we can find a clear cut distinction between individual that act like butterflies and others which are only comets. Sadly a majority of individuals suffer problems of wishful thinking, illusion and self-deception and thus they believe or assume that they have freedom of choice.

In the recent years I had known more complex stories about the paradox or contradictions of the life and the freedom. In his fantastic tale named “the circular ruins” the Argentine

writer Jorge Luis Borges tells us the tragedy of a dreamer who sadly discovers that he is only the dream of another dreamer. The Dutch artist Michael Escher had produced famous graphic descriptions of some visual contradictions; I remember his two “drawing hands” because in this lithography it is impossible to know which hand is real and which hand is drafted by the other hand.

The main lesson from these tales and graphics is very simple: some individuals are like comets that reach important goals but they don't have freedom of choice; other people are like butterflies because they can attain freely their own aims. Perhaps the voices, dreams, objectives, and elections of millions of individuals are not his or her own choices, and they are puppets of his or her masters, bosses, and spouses.

The Russian writer Fyodor Dostoevsky in his terrific *Notes from Underground* affirmed that a man is primarily a creative animal that love to create and to construct roads. The antihero of this sad story was an unsuccessful person, and individual without money, love and power, nevertheless he has said:

“...Gentlemen, I am tormented by questions; answer them for me. Here, for example, you are trying to cure man of old habits and correct his will according to the demands of science and good sense. But how do you know that man not only can, but indeed **should** be remade in this manner? What makes you think that human desires **must** be corrected? In short, how do you know that such correction will really be to man's advantage? And, to be altogether frank, why are you so **absolutely** convinced that not going against true, normal advantages, guaranteed by reason and arithmetic, is really always to man's advantage, and is a law for all mankind? ... Let me explain myself. I agree —man is primarily a creative animal, condemned to strive consciously toward a goal and to engage in the engineering arts; in other words, to be eternally and continually building roads for himself, leading **somewhere, no matter where ...**”.

Indeed, I think that millions of happy slaves are walking in the roads create by other people,

and following the aims and behaviors imposed to them.

An interesting remark was made by the liberal thinker J. S. Mill when he was criticizing the Utilitarianism, thus: “[i]t is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied. And if the fools, or the pig, are of a different opinion, it is because they only know their own side of the question.”

The short story *The Garden of Forking Paths* by the Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges is perhaps the best example about the diverse and infinite ways open to human choice. We live in a chaotic, nonlinear, uncertain and open world and we have the possibility to be free human beings. Each human being can write can live his or her own original road.

### 3. About the superficial choices



The every-day choice of a normal person inside markets, organizations and families is cursory and superficial, and presents the following characteristics:

- a) This choice obeys the rules of an invariable behavior which is determined by some values and some formula or logic of reason. The novelties and changes are only a façade

of freedom because the behavior is regular, normal, constant and predictable.

- b) In the capitalist society each individual participates in diverse kinds of explicit and implicit markets, follows the signals of prices (the organ most sensitive of his or her body is the pocket) and supposedly has rational choice. The explicit markets are about labor, land and physical, financial, human, social and cultural capital. The implicit markets are about implied economic transactions in sex, affect, families, democracies, and criminality. The most important values of this kind of society are wealth and welfare, and this depends on the possession and accumulation of goods and services. Some authors like Veblen affirm that the most precious goals of capitalist society are ostensible consumption and pecuniary emulation.
- c) The rational choice is a pure logic of election which is based on the assumption that the utility is the only one relevant aim of

individuals. Under that debatable assumption are irrelevant the subjective beliefs and diverse values of the different human beings. Indeed, the economist H. Simon had showed this trap made by the theorist of rational choice.

- d) A typical rational individual has a function of utility and is like a machine which maximizes benefits and minimizes costs. This rational machine has economic preferences basically about tastes, always prosecutes the maximization of pleasures and monetary gains and the minimization of pains and costs. The main language of this rational individual is the possession of goods and services, and the accumulation of capital.
- e) The rational choice theorists assume that each individual has given and fixed preferences about known options (bundles of commodities) in scenarios of certainty and risk.
- f) But even the every-day choice about consumption and investment is prone to change and uncertainty. Because cognitive problems (heuristics, biases and frames) the preferences may change due to variations in the context of choice. Our world is subject to a bounded uncertainty: the past is irrevocable and we are products of history (because the choice of past generations

and institutional restrictions), nevertheless the future is not determined and not programmed and, consequently, it is impossible to know about future events and the calculation of probabilities.

Moreover our rationality is bounded and our information is incomplete and asymmetric.

- a) When rational choice is about pure tastes there is no conflict. A taste is a preference without argumentation or justification: in matter of tastes there is no serious disagreement. In more complicated choices about resources allocation, income distribution and about some aspects of welfare economy there are some soft, divisible and negotiable conflicts.
- b) The deviations from rational choice are considered like caprices or propensities which may be cured or solved by means of economic incentives.
- c) The most orthodox economist and social scientist assume that preferences and behaviors are given and are static: the individual purchases in the markets of consumption and investment are taken to reflect a unique ordering whose existence is inferred from the observed choices. This descriptive and positivist view is a blind acceptance of the status quo and a complicity with the actual social order.

#### 4. Choice about styles of life

According to Hirschman, men and women have the ability to step back from their “revealed” every-day preferences about tastes and business, to ask themselves whether they really prefer these preferences and, consequently, to form meta-preferences that may differ from their previous or traditional desires. When an individual only has every-day elections and he or she doesn’t take care about his or her long run goals and style of life, then that kind of being is wanton but not a person. Wantons never step back to criticize or consciously try to modify their preferences and tastes.



A person has questions, remarks, doubts and judgments about his or her every-day preferences and about his or her style of life. Moreover a person can have second order volitions (ideologies or values) which are long run aims or volitions about a desired style of life. The economist Amartya Sen had proposed a similar concept, the idea of meta-preferences which are “preferences about preferences” or judgments about every-day choices. Hirschman suggested that second order volitions and meta-preferences are analogous concepts, and are similar to ideologies, views of the world or projects of life.

Wantons are indifferent about every-day choices and thus are ignorant followers of hegemonic meta-preferences. They are slaves or useful idiots because they have no long run original and own ends.

Autonomous and reflective change in values or styles of life is a matter of life and loss. Frequently the diverse human values are irreconcilable, incompatible and incommensurable, and this implies hard choices and indivisible or nonnegotiable conflicts. Hirschman affirmed that values are in dispute.

## 5. Cognitive liberation and power to act

The choice of second order desires is a necessary but not a sufficient condition in order to reach freedom. Some people can have meta-preferences and, nevertheless, they maintain their undesired and dangerous every-day preferences because they suffer a problem of weakness of will.

A person may be free if he or she can change his or her behavior. Consequently freedom depends on choice and action. The person must act in order to be free. For example he or she must exit from the old or questioned everyday preferences and go towards the adoption of new preferences which must be compatible with the new style of life elected by that human being.

Perhaps two of the best explanations about the complementarities between choice and action in order to attain freedom are founded in two classical books, namely: a) *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* by Friedrich Nietzsche (concretely in the chapter about the three transformation of the spirit) and; b) *Notes from Underground* by Fyodor Dostoevsky.

I only point out some of the main ideas from these contributions. The famous Russian writer has said:

- a. The consciousness or self-evaluation is painful because it implies doubt, negation, chaos and destruction about individual desires, beliefs and actions.
- b. Although some social scientist and economists assume an entire scheme of human advantages and good behaviors from general rules, statistic figures and mathematic formulas, it is impossible to determine and to calculate with certainty those things. There is nothing sacred. The measurements of wealth and welfare can show us the success of the normal beings (puppets, comets and wantons).
- c. A person may want to live in order to fulfill his or her whole capacity for living, and not in order to follow the mandates from reason, because reason is only a part of the human existence.
- d. A free human being has his or her own and independent aims, which are not obeying some requirements of reasons ready-made by social scientist or bosses. In his words: “*What a man need is only his own independent wishing, whatever that independence may cost and wherever it may lead ...*”
- e. Ends, formulas and models of good behavior are the beginning of the death. The

permanent process of creativity and finding of news paths are expressions of life. Social scientist propose lovely advantages like prosperity, wealth, freedom, peace of mind, and others good things. Nevertheless the singular advantages and original paths of human beings don't fit into any category or any scheme.

My interpretation of the controversial German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche may be combined with my reading of Albert Hirschman's *Exit, Voice and Loyalty*, thus:

- a. The freedom of a person depends on voice, exit and creation.
- b. Each individual wants his or her own internal and critic voice, which may be understood like doubt and self-evaluation about the normal and traditional every-day choices and stile of life of this individual.
- c. Wantons are beings condemned to degradation and corruption because they have not voice.
- d. Some individuals can have desires about new and alternative stiles of life, but they can suffer problems of weakness of the will because they only have desires but they do

not act. They contemplate the world but they do not transform it.

- e. The individual who desires another style of life must act in order to exit from the traditional and normal every-day choices. Some times the exit implies the destruction of old habits and patterns of behavior.
- f. The creation of new styles of life and of new every-day choices is crucial in order to attain freedom. The true individual and social relation implies the creation of alternative ways.

Some examples of freedom

Finally I mention briefly some examples of individual freedom, thus:

Jesus Christ was a free man because he had showed the way of love and magnanimity. Henry David Thoreau had showed the ways of civil disobedience and the possibility of an independence from the market. Mahatma Gandhi had showed the way of nonviolent political action which is a force more powerful than the violence and the authoritarianism.

Spread your wings and take the sky!!!

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