

Knowledge, Freedom and the Meaning of Life according to Herbert McCabe

Franco Manni 

Abstract

Herbert McCabe was not an academic, he was a teacher and a preacher. He was a scholar also, but aiming to the truth for its own sake and, subsequently, for his own life improvement. Not in order to be ‘up-to-date’ with the intellectual fashions of the moment or to flatter his peers. Therefore he focused on the classics, most of all on Aquinas. The result of McCabe’s peculiar intellectual attitude was the vast amount of original and impressive ideas he conceived and conveyed despite having written little, in terms of the number of texts and the length of them. The right tribute of praise to a thinker is the presentation of his/her ideas, the test of truth, coherence, originality and power they have in explaining the reality in which we live. This is one of the things that strikes a reader of McCabe’s writings. While it is hard to name a single original idea of many authors in vogue, and of most of them only one, it is easy to name many ideas from McCabe. This paper focuses on two of them: 1) freedom as based on knowledge; 2) the meaning of life.

Keywords

knowledge, freedom, meaning of life, Herbert McCabe, non-academic intellectual attitude

Herbert McCabe was an intelligent person dedicated to intelligence. He was not at all the typical ‘scholar’ of 21st century Western societies devoting most of his time to keeping abreast of what his colleagues are writing about the hottest topics of the moment, in order to write about those topics himself and to address those colleagues, through an impressive array of citations, footnotes and bibliographies.

The result of this eccentric McCabe attitude was the vast amount of original and impressive ideas he conceived and conveyed despite having written very little, in terms of the number of texts and the length of them.

Since McCabe was a thinker, in my opinion a tribute of praise that is ‘just’ should not be a list of his teaching assignments as a holder of prestigious chairs at prestigious universities; (he never held any), nor a list of his many books and a description of their size and systematic body (he wrote few and all were collections of short and occasional papers, almost always tracks for oral exposition), nor a list of the academic chairs or departments named after him, or the books written about him or the many disciples or ‘schools’ of thought directly related to him (no chair or department, only one book, very few stated disciples, and no explicitly organized ‘school’, in McCabe’s case).

In my opinion, the just tribute of praise to the skill of a thinker is nothing of the sort: if it were the just tribute then that one given to Herbert Spencer would truly be, as was said and written during his lifetime, the ‘Aristotle of the nineteenth century’. The right tribute of praise to a thinker, instead, in my opinion, is the presentation of his/her ideas, the test of truth, coherence, originality and power they have in explaining the reality in which we live.

This is one of the things that struck me while reading McCabe. While I could not name a single original idea of many authors in vogue, and of most of them only one, rarely two, I can name many of McCabe’s ideas.

I will now focus on two of them: 1) knowledge and the nature of freedom; 2) the meaning of life.

Freedom based on Knowledge

In dealing with the topic of freedom, a quality of human nature that has been analysed for millennia in both philosophy and theology, McCabe shows his awareness of this tradition; although he does not cite authors, he nevertheless mentions: determinism, Aristotle’s theory of habits, Aquinas’s doctrine of ‘*non voluntarium*’, the debate on the relationship between intellect and will (Buridan), psychoanalytic theories on unconscious drives, and Isaiah Berlin’s distinction between negative and positive freedom. For his part, he draws inspiration from these discussions and makes his own original contribution that derives from his philosophical theology and his analysis of human beings as linguistic animals.

The starting point is the definition – although generic – of freedom as ‘being the cause of one’s own actions’: an action of Fred is free to the extent it is carried out by Fred himself and not by somebody/something else. This way McCabe takes for granted that in the real world the human person is never endowed with two equally weighing possible choices (the Buridan’s ass paradox) and, also, takes notice both of what Aquinas says about human will that is compatible with two kinds of necessity (natural and hypothetical) but is not with a third one that

is constraint, and he takes notice of Berlin's definition of 'negative freedom'.

Indeed another individual can, to some extent, induce my actions, so diminishing my freedom, and, for example, this is the reason why the first public speech of Jesus was about freedom for the oppressed and the enslaved. Furthermore, a thing or substance can cause me to carry out an action: if I was under the influence of drugs, to this extent my action would not be free. In this world a complete 'negative freedom' does not exist: 'I doubt whether there are any completely free human actions: we are all to a great extent determined by factors outside our control and in ways that we are not conscious of', McCabe writes.

Nevertheless, McCabe maintains that to some extent a human is spontaneous and 'negatively' free. However, even though a part of my actions is not caused by causes other than me, this does not imply that I behave randomly or arbitrarily (without any cause); in fact, to some extent I can be the cause of myself. Therefore, McCabe analyses what Berlin called 'positive' freedom: free actions are motivated and carried out for reasons that are inherent in me; these reasons stem from both my moral habits (and therefore from my personality) and the present circumstances of reality, and are essential to freedom. Internal causes (reasons, motivations) build up freedom and do not hinder it, despite what the common place says.

Analysing the causes of this 'positive freedom', that is of that force or power to act (physical capacities, intellectual skills, psychological strengths, moral purposes), McCabe maintains that this 'force' does not come from nothing, but, in reality, comes from others. He dislikes a certain kind of liberalism that holds that we need just negative freedom, i.e., a type of liberalism that makes you free from other people, allows you to be left alone and 'means freedom from social constraints'. This is not sufficient: for instance, the Bible says that insofar as you follow the Torah, you are freed from enslavement to the 'gods' and, so, to other people; it is the Torah that permits the existence of love. By ourselves, namely, without the ideal and interpersonal aid provided by the 'law', we are not able to be free.

Because he adheres to the Christian 'new law' and also upholds certain psychoanalytical theories on the development of the personality, McCabe wonders how freedom and love are related to each other. Let us follow his argument: around myself I need some 'room' where others do not interfere, but it does not exist by itself; in the real world it is given by other people as a gift and among these gifts there is my personality itself; in this space or room a person 'can be' without being urged to behave in any particular way. In fact, people who do not receive love always try to justify themselves in order to be loved, by possessing wealth or other goods. The root of evil lies in not having been loved or in not recognising that one has been loved.

Therefore, it is ‘others’ who give us this gift of positive freedom, that is the power to act. How is it possible, however, to describe it more closely? Here McCabe links Augustine’s idea that an action is free only if it refers to knowledge with some ideas coming from the philosophy of language: the use of any word – new or old – is ‘creative’ in a sense that, having an animal sensation is not creative; what we see or hear or touch is determined by the world around us, whereas what we say/think is not so determined. In fact, we can choose to speak of the world in an indefinite number of ways, and in this ‘indefinite number’ there is the root of human freedom. Other animals act willingly or unwillingly because their behaviour is mediated by knowledge even though sensual, but they cannot behave differently; their system of sensed meanings do not include any negation.

We are attracted by the world as we interpret it; sensual interpretation is shared with our non-linguistic fellow animals, but we have also intellectual interpretation and in both cases the cause of attraction is not only in what we are but also in what we know: it is different from what a pen does when we drop it and it falls because of its mass and the force of gravity. Like a dog we are attracted by a steak because we *see* it, but, differently from the dog, we are also attracted by it because of what we *say/think* of it: for instance, it belongs to someone else, it is full of cholesterol, it is made of the flesh of poor animals, it is expensive.

It could be observed that this description of freedom tells us that these many interpretations of a piece of reality, if they are true, are as many links of that piece with other pieces, and this multiplicity of links can produce innovations: for example, I do not eat the steak; I do not kill animals anymore and develop a technology for producing vegetable proteins.

The more true ideas I know, the freer I am. The amount of real and true alternatives that I have present in my intellect is directly proportional to the quality of freedom that I have in my will. ***Truth will set you free!***

The theme of human freedom is traditionally also related to the theological problem of freedom ‘from’ God, as if this was part of Berlin’s negative freedom (freedom ‘from’ interference). Many debates throughout the centuries presented God’s actions and human actions as if they played a zero-sum game: to the extent that God acts the human being does not, and the other way round. But McCabe dismisses this idea. He holds that we need a new view of God, since the ‘biblical theology’ popular in the Fifties-Eighties mistakenly did not care for ‘hard thinking’ and presented the many biblical ‘images’ of God as literally meaning an individual powerful person who acts within the universe, as if they were actual ideas about God’s nature.

Whereas, for McCabe, humans are not less caused by God than the stones or a dog; to think that we are free because God does not act upon us implies an idolatrous idea of God as an inhabitant of the universe,

as a Super-Man. On the contrary, I am more free than a dog because God more directly acts upon me; in fact, God creates the causes that induce the dog to act, whereas he induces me (a human being, that is, a rational being) 'directly'. If each creature is itself, free human actions are like a 'window on creation', because they are actions of creatures who act by themselves more than others.

According to McCabe, what is really new in the biblical idea of God is that God himself takes the initiative to speak to us and, by faith, we believe that he speaks and that the church answers him. It is true that in this dialogue we could also think that this God who speaks is an individual person, but this is not so important, whereas, the immediate important result of this faith is the refusal of the 'gods' and that the human beings take their own responsibility; that is, the result is not to think that God acts on our behalf. In fact, even though the many biblical images or metaphors can make us conceive the idea of God reduced to the level of human beings in order to speak with them as an individual, God according to McCabe is 'not an individual nor a set of individuals'.

In conclusion, human beings are free to the extent that they have multiple interpretations of the world, by means of their intellect. Also, they are free insofar as they have enough 'room' to be themselves, room that is a gift from other humans and from God: in fact, you love a person when you realise that he/she is important for the very reason he/she is there, for his/her own sake, not because he/she is a mere means to satisfy your needs.. This gift comes from 'others' as far as they 'love' and therefore follow the Christian commandment of love, and it comes from 'God' in a more mysterious way, which McCabe deals with while analysing the idea of Grace.

The Sense of Human Life

Christianity's main symbol is a man, Jesus, hanged to an instrument of torture and death, and this religion states that the core of its faith lies in the mystery of Jesus' passion, death, and resurrection. In it there is the Meaning of Human Life as well.

Jesus dies as all humans do, but few of them are so wickedly killed because of their ideals, and, unlike everybody, he rises again. Why the second aspect (which is bound to the third)? Why was the founder of Christianity crucified? McCabe answers that in some way or another we all are crucified. It is characteristic of all humans to struggle for their own ideals, to be unjustly persecuted and to die. Moreover, somehow these aspects of human life are more important than others, i.e., *than achievements and fulfilments* in affects, society, and culture.

For example, he considers Florence Nightingale's life and observes that she died many years after her great achievements within human society; in the last years she was not able to speak any more, and her

mind failed. According to ‘humanism’ her death was not an important event, whereas for a Christian it was the most important moment of her life, much more than those she spent with the British army in the hospitals: ‘for the Christian a man’s eternal fate depends not on the balance of good and evil in his life but on whether or not he has in him the power of divine love at his death’.

Thus, there are two issues: 1) we are afraid to acknowledge that the deep things in life are suffering and death; 2) since there are indeed other things in human life – ‘achievements’ – we have the task of ‘making value out of suffering and death amongst other things’.

Manichean dualism’s solution puts it simply: affective, political and cultural achievements are worthless and all the real goods lie within an ‘after-life’ subsequent to death, so that: 1) we are told not to fear the loss of those (worthless) achievements, and 2) we can find a meaning in our death because it is the threshold to those real goods. McCabe, in fact, acknowledges that philosophical dualism attracts Christians, because, as humans, they feel themselves ‘as torn between conflicting poles’; however he does not think that it is a right solution to those two problems (fear of loss, lack of meaning).

To distance ourselves from dualism is not easy at all. For instance, we cannot rely on Darwin’s monistic framework, because, in McCabe’s opinion, we humans are a ‘*non-adapted species*’, for two reasons.

The first one is our attitude to death, which is different from other animals. McCabe thinks that death is natural to them but not to us:

because we do not just have a life-time fitting into the rhythms of nature. Rather, we each have a life-story. [...] Every human life is not just a cycle but an unfinished story which we have been telling. [...] when we die at the hands of nature, nature is a user taking away more than we received from her. Hence our sense of injustice and outrage. [...] We do not just belong to the natural world. We reach beyond it. This is what first of all makes human life mysterious and human death a mystery. And this is why human death is something that needs to be made sense of. (*God Christ and Us*)

The second reason for our ‘non-adaptation’ is the wickedness of the species towards its own members. Jesus, for example, was a good member of the human species, and he was killed, exactly *because* he was good.

McCabe takes care to stress that Jesus did not belong to a sort of ‘Cathar’ selected group of clean pure people detached from the world and the shared condition of human life: ‘He belonged to a family of murderers, cheats, cowards, adulterers and liars. He belonged to us and came to help us’.

These two reasons for humans’ ‘non-adaptation’, however, could find a reciprocal link and, possibly, a solution in Christianity. For McCabe, baptism tells us that we are born to belong to the condemned

Christ who is also the risen Christ. That is to say, if we humans, like Jesus, try to be fully human, we will be ‘condemned’, that is persecuted and killed by the ‘world’ (by a wicked system or alliance of other humans), but, also, we will ‘rise again’, that is we will find that final ‘meaning’ of our ‘human death’ that, otherwise, would be meaningless and ‘unjust’:

It is good news because we believe that precisely by taking on death, by submitting to death out of loving obedience to the demands of that love he called his ‘Father’, he took on death and conquered it. In itself, human death is senseless. (*God, Christ and Us*)

A sacrifice for the sake of others is meant to respect the very ontological essence of the human person, who does not subsist within past achievements and the expected future ones, but, instead, within the tension between the two: McCabe says: ‘the self I look at is no longer me, I am not to be found in what is looked at, but in the *looking*’; to be both alive and myself is to go beyond the self I possess; when Jesus said that only he who loses his life will save it, he was ‘talking about what it is to be a human being: always to be going beyond a self which has become a possession, a property, something to be proud of’.

Such a *‘looking’* concerns both the achievements and the joy that stems from them, because humans naturally seek pleasure and ‘more real harm is done by not having enough delight and enjoyment in your life than by having unpleasant things happening to you’. However, such a look at achievements and joy is not a ‘possession’ of them, but, rather is a ‘hope’ that the ‘cross’ (a sacrificial death) will not destroy them, but, somehow, *give them a meaning*, which is impossible to get from their own transience and from any deceitful and fragile feeling of pride:

To believe in the cross, as distinct from knowing it happened or expecting it in the circumstances, is to believe that this challenge to the world at the cost of destruction is not only right but the key to what human life is about. (*God, Christ and Us*)

Conclusions

In all these stimulating and profound philosophical and theological ideas we see a true intelligence at work, capable of drawing from the great thinkers - whether Aquinas, Wittgenstein, Freud, Darwin or Berlin - the precious elements for a new synthesis, endowed with an original focus, and expressed in terms suitable for his contemporaries, in order to illuminate concrete aspects of our lives.

He was an English thinker and a Thomist, but he had completely avoided the blind alleys of most of the Anglophone ‘analytic’ philosophy and of the Catholic Neo-Scholasticism, which claim to

study philosophy without a real knowledge of the history of philosophy.

In this paper I wanted to imitate the writing style of McCabe, who almost never puts footnotes and never gave a list of references. In my book on McCabe's philosophical and theological thought, I have provided the reader with all the footnotes, bibliography, and indexes required by the widespread habits that any scholar could desire. Indeed, I believe that such habits make sense; however, I also believe that they should not be overstated. Benedetto Croce - the greatest Italian philosopher of the twentieth century - used to say that footnotes had the 'scientific value' of a typographical device (while certainly having a useful 'practical value').

Franco Manni
Independent Scholar

endorester@gmail.com