

Six Kinds of Freedom

Like many people, I have a reflex affection for the word “freedom.” Nevertheless, I pause when asked to explain what it means. Most people answer: “It means doing what you want.” This common response speaks for an age – our own - which sees self-expression and personal satisfaction as the key to authenticity. But throughout history various cultures and civilizations have had vastly different concepts of freedom, and even within our own tradition the meaning has never ceased to change.

The Greek sense of freedom differed from the Roman; the earliest Christian ideal of freedom differed radically from its later one; freedom in the Renaissance meant release from the supposed darkness of religion and a return to the enlightened classical past; and by the Eighteenth century freedom meant living by the light of pure “reason”. Then again, in the Romantic period from about 1780 to 1830 people revolted against the idea of cold and heartless reason and sought “true freedom” in feeling and original self-expression.

In the middle of the nineteenth century, classical liberals (as distinct from their modern brethren who are pro-statist) began extending this idea into political life, demanding freedom from all unwarranted authority - especially that of the state. And finally, our most recent ideal of freedom is a rather paradoxical one: we want a combination of radical individual rights, but also a vast social security net to be provided by the welfare state. This uniquely modern combination we may think of as a kind of *libertarian socialism*, under which citizens have all the personal, bodily, and especially sexual freedoms imaginable, but all the political, economic, and social realities of their existence are increasingly heavily regulated and controlled by the managerial State.

At any rate, as the concept is so multi-faceted, a single definition of freedom is almost impossible to find. So I have found myself wondering if a better approach might be to try a working classification of the different kinds of freedom. There are at least six of these, as explained below. But first, there is an all-important distinction to be made between freedom and liberty, as these two words are often used interchangeably.

I propose that the word “liberty” should be used to refer to freedom in its physical context, and not to other kinds of freedom. A man in jail, for example, has almost zero liberty but retains all his freedom in the sense that he has not lost the ability to choose among myriad options, attitudes, and values. He can sleep, count the miles while pacing the floor, or write poetry. He can also decide to lie to the warden to protect a fellow criminal, or tell the truth. Most people, it seems, use their freedom to restrict their liberty in all sorts of ways. For example, selling oneself into slavery for a few years used to be common in the ancient world. Sometimes whole towns sold themselves as slaves to a neighbouring city in exchange for military protection. And there have always been people who have chosen to become hermits or monks, voluntarily restricting

their liberty in the hope of finding spiritual freedom. Less dramatically, most of modern life for everyone is spent freely getting tangled up in all sorts of ways that reduce liberty. Mortgages, bank loans, contracts, leases, business deals, and family and personal promises and obligations are mostly how we use our freedom to restrict our liberty. Indeed, a bit of reflection will reveal that most human beings most of the time build a lock-step kind of life for themselves ... and then complain they would like to be more free. With this distinction hopefully cleared up, I now want to describe the six different kinds of freedom that come to mind. The effort will be repaid if the next time someone asks a reader what freedom means, they may in turn be asked: "To what type are you referring?"

Internal Freedom

The first and most basic type of freedom is embodied by the chap in jail. He has all his internal freedom, but no liberty. All normal human beings are born and remain free in the most important sense that they are forever and at every conscious moment freely-choosing beings, and every life is a delicate tapestry of millions of such personal choices, for better or worse. We cannot escape this kind of freedom even if we try, for we must then freely choose among means of escape, and so on. From this perspective we are condemned to be free, for even choosing not to choose is a choice. Internal freedom is of the greatest personal intimacy and secretiveness, indeed it is the hidden core of our being and unknowable by others. It distinguishes human beings from the animal kingdom, and from each other, and is the basis on which we are able to become moral - or a-moral, or immoral - beings. That is why some people call this moral freedom. But this kind of freedom is not in itself moral. Rather, it is the unique capacity we have to become moral or immoral according to how we use our freedom.

Self-Freedom

Most of the world's freedom talk, at least as found in the great religions and philosophical movements has had to do with freedom from ourselves, in the sense of learning how to escape the ever-present danger of enslavement by our own passions and ignorance. For the ancients, self-freedom had to do with the practice of self-control, restraint, and balance to achieve the admired master-slave relationship of soul over body that they were certain is essential for the good life. In modern times, however, this ideal has largely been turned upside down with the expression of strong feelings, of the "true self," elevated to the superior position. The goal of this kind of freedom is therefore often expressed as the need "to find myself" (although no one ever seems to ask how we would know whether the self-seeking, or the self-sought, is the true self). At any rate, this inversion of the traditional relation of mind over feeling has according to many produced what our forebears would have called a disorder of the soul. But whatever may be the outcome, few moderns ever escape a lifelong dialogue with themselves on this kind of freedom.

External Freedom (Sometimes called "freedom from...")

This refers to the normal and common freedoms expected in daily life, in most countries, throughout history. It is sometimes described as freedom from, because it implies immunity from undue interference by authority, especially by government. It is also sometimes called “negative freedom,” meaning freedom to do anything not forbidden by the laws (in contrast to a totalitarian system that says you may only do what is permitted by the laws). Many in the Western tradition consider this, in combination with Political Freedom, explained next, to be the most important kind of freedom, and in its earliest form, liberal constitutionalism was its political expression in the West. This political form has since the post WW II era mutated into a kind of egalitarian Statism.

Political Freedom (Sometimes called “freedom to...”)

Try to imagine a world in which you are ruled by a tyrant who lets you do what you want on Monday, but not on Tuesday, and so on, unpredictably. You would likely conclude that whatever your external freedoms may be, they are too unpredictable to be of any use. What we might call “political freedom” has to do with establishing certain predictable and permanent rights of action (whether we use them or not) and limits to government power that help to guarantee the practice of those rights. The most common political freedoms are the right to speak freely, to associate with people of your choice, to own property, to worship, to leave and re-enter your country, to be tried by a jury of your peers, to vote in elections (if you live in a democracy) and so on. When these rights exist we can say we have freedom to do these things (though to speak truthfully, we are only free to do them if they are permitted). They comprise the normal rights associated with a free society (which may or may not be a democratic one). For example, ancient Athens had all these things, but was not democratic in our modern sense of the word (up to a third of the citizens of Athens were slaves). England had all these rights fully two centuries before she became democratic. The former Soviet Union, on the other hand, promised all these things to citizens on paper, but did not allow them in practice, because the only sense of freedom expected there was collective freedom.

Collective, or "Higher" Freedom (Sometimes called “freedom for...”)

Many commentators on freedom take the view that external freedom and political freedom are just formal concepts that mean nothing to the poor and disadvantaged. Indeed, they often amount to a recipe for a chaotic liberal society, an uncivil nightmare of clashing wills and unconnected citizens chasing bucks to see who can die with the most toys. What is really needed, they argue, is a “higher freedom” based on a collective will to achieve the common good. This is sometimes labelled “positive freedom,” or “freedom for”, because it is based on an ideology of collective unity that prescribes distinct social and moral values and objectives for all. For example, often under this ideal of freedom the state alone is allowed to control the production and supply of all basic citizen needs, thus giving them freedom-from-want. Believers in collective freedom say the idea of protecting citizens from their own government is not logical if the government is the

embodiment of their will in the first place. Needless to say, this type of freedom, in the name of which we have seen disastrous totalitarian experiments in our time, is the deadly enemy of the sort of political freedom found under liberal constitutionalism.

Spiritual Freedom

In its purest form this type of freedom comes from striving for a complete identification with God (or God's will, or all creation, for example) to arrive at a condition of soul that transcends the confusion and disharmony of the self and the material world. There are many types here, but at the extreme some seekers after this kind of spiritual freedom take one of two opposing routes. They engage in a kind of libertinism of the flesh on the ground that the body is of no importance whatsoever and so may be used, abused, and enjoyed until it is spent (pot-smoking hippie mystics come to mind). Or, they take the ascetic route and deny the flesh altogether on the ground that worldly needs, pleasures, and longings prevent achievement of a complete spiritual freedom (I think of my Buddhist neighbour here). For this type, strict control if not denial of the allurements of the body leads to complete freedom of the spirit.

That's the best I can do for now. This little exercise helps me think about the nature of freedom, and I hope it has helped readers, too.