

ENJOYING FREEDOM OF WILL AND FREEDOM OF STATUS

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WHAT IS FREEDOM?

When I was nineteen, I wanted to learn French properly and worked as a student in France on what might be described as a summer camp for the aged. But ‘camp’ is not the word, nor perhaps ‘aged’ either. The camp was a palatial chateau in the Loire Valley and the aged, as at least they seemed to me, were mainly impoverished veterans of World War II, men and women alike. I was one of many helpers in a philanthropic exercise and the others were students from all over Europe but mainly from France itself.

One of the things for which I remember that month in a long-ago summer is that we student helpers, altogether about two dozen of us in the male dormitory, would chat amongst ourselves at night, in the pitch dark of a country retreat. It was a collective conversation, unlikely though that seems, and what really stands out in my memory is the seriousness with which one student once posed a general question—and indeed the earnestness with which others considered it. ‘*Qu’est-ce que c’est la liberté?*’, he asked. ‘What is freedom?’

I had just begun to read the short stories of the French writer, Jean-Paul Sartre, and to dip into his philosophy, and I was enthralled by the question. Did I have the psychological freedom he imagined: a freedom, for example, to decide not to care about pain, and not to ask the dentist for an anesthetic? Did I have the freedom to choose as I wished among world-views, or was I locked willy-nilly into the way I was raised to think? And what would be required for me to be free in relation to others: my parents, my family, my church, my country?

There are many different sorts of question here, of course. They have to do at one end of the freedom spectrum with whether I have free will, as it is called in philosophy; to do at the other end with whether I enjoy a free status amongst others: whether the institutions I live under, and the relations I have to others, give me freedom in a proper sense. There are great issues in both of these areas, all worth exploring, and all exciting to explore.

FREE WILL

One thing I have come to appreciate since that summer on the Loire is that the free-will issue, to look at that first, is tied up with the issue of when you can be held responsible for a choice. If you can be held responsible for having done something, then it follows that you exercised your free will in choosing it. And if you exercised your free will in choosing it—say, in breaking a promise to a friend, or in gossiping about them to someone else—then you are fit to be held responsible for what you did. Thus, the friend is entitled to feel resentment at how you behaved: this, by contrast with the gratitude they would have felt if you had done something helpful rather than harmful.

The connection with responsibility, gives us a workable criterion by which to determine whether someone's action was free. We should ask: would it be fair to blame the person, if what they did was bad; and would it be right to praise the person, if what they did was good? But the connection gives each of us a good lead too on how to think of the demands on us of living up to our free will.

What does the recognition of your freedom demand of you? Presumably, that you can own the things you do in the area where you have free will. You can feel that you lived up to the standards to which you believe you may be held responsible. And when can you feel that? Presumably when you can claim that you lived up to your aspirations for yourself, and indeed the aspirations you may have invited others to rely on.

You can claim to have exercised your free will, in other words, when you live up to your values: when you can think about the things you did: 'Yes, that was me', you can tell yourself; that represents what I stand for'.

This is to say, in Sartre's terms, that you are free when you can claim your choices in full authenticity as your own. Sartre thought that this required nothing more than honesty: a lack of bad faith or self-deception. Over the years I have come to think that it requires much more than that. It requires an uphill struggle to be clear about what your values are and to remain faithful to them. Free will is always a work-in-progress, never a *fait accompli*.

FREE STATUS

But if achieving a free will is what we do for ourselves, what of the free status amongst others that we envisage when we think of social or political as distinct from psychological freedom?

This is what is meant in most talk of freedom nowadays, as when people talk about the free society or the free market or freedom of opportunity. Where discussions of free will tend to occur in the calmer recesses of literature or philosophy, debates about free status are often conducted in the hurly burly of politics and the social media.

THE QUESTION ABOUT NORA

It's a bit hard to find your bearings in the cacophony of these debates and I hope you won't mind if I suggest a line on the basic divisions. In order to do that I invite you to think about the heroine of a very famous, nineteenth century play, *A Doll's House*, which was first staged in Copenhagen in 1879. The heroine is Nora, wife of a young banker, Thorvald, and I invite you to consider whether Nora counts as socially free—as enjoying a free status—in the conditions described by the playwright, Henrik Ibsen.

Nora and Thorvald live in Norway, according to the play, under a law where Nora has few rights as a woman. Her husband, Thorvald, may determine whether she can leave the house, what activities she may pursue, who she may associate with, what church she may attend, and so on. So far that sounds bad. But here's the thing. Thorvald dotes on Nora, worships the ground that she walks on, and happily gives her *carte blanche*: she may choose as she wishes in the important personal choices. So far as he goes, she has free rein.

Is Nora free in her relationship with Thorvald, whatever about her relationship with the wider Norwegian society? Is she free at least so long as he remains well disposed towards her? Does she enjoy a free status in that relationship, and under that condition?

NON-INTERFERENCE VS NON-DOMINATION

One way of thinking about social freedom, nowadays probably the most common one, would hold that Nora is free. It would say that to be free in the exercise of personal choices is just not to be interfered with in making them: not to be stopped from taking any option, not to be penalized for taking any option, not to be deceived or manipulated into taking any option, and so on. And if freedom is nothing more or less than non-interference, then Nora is surely free in relation to the good-willed Thorvald. After all, in the relevant choices, she can choose as she wills.

That way of thinking about freedom is usually described now as neo-liberal. It was introduced in the early nineteenth century, since as we shall see it helped to legitimate the rise of market relationships. At that time, it replaced an older mode of thought, often described as republican, which derived from the time of the Roman republic and had inspired the American and French revolutions. Among contemporary ways of thinking, the clearest alternative to the neo-liberal conception of social freedom is the neo-republican, as it is sometimes called. This is the older republican conception, updated to allow for the equality of all; in older times, women and often manual workers were not included in the citizenry.

The neo-republican approach suggests that being free requires, not that you happen to avoid interference in your personal choices, but that you are not subject to a power on anybody else's part to interfere in them. You have a legally established right to choose as

you will, regardless of whether others are happy or not, willing or not, to let you do so. You avoid *dominatio*, as the Romans called it, not just interference: there is no one with the power of a *dominus* or master over how you choose. On this approach, social freedom requires non-domination, so it is said, not non-interference.

ANSWERING THE QUESTION ABOUT NORA

What to say under this approach about Nora? Clearly, you must judge that Nora is unfree in relation to Thorvald. After all, Nora avoids interference only because Thorvald is willing that she should avoid it. She can choose as she wills, it is true, but only because that is what he wishes. And that means that his will is in charge, not hers; he is a *dominus* or master, albeit a gentle master, in her life.

Thorvald has no wish to interfere with Nora. Indeed, he may even wish that he did not have the power of interfering as he wishes in her life. But, whether he likes it or not, he does have that power under the law of his place and time. And that law means that she depends on his remaining good-willed towards her for the ability to choose as she wills. He is the boss. In an old metaphor, no longer meaningful in today's fashions, he wears the trousers.

Nora enjoys free rein, as I put it earlier. But free rein is not freedom. Although the horse may go as it wishes when the reins are slack, the rider remains in the saddle, able to pull on those reins as he or she wishes. And the same is true of Thorvald. He is in charge, and his will rules; it just happens, luckily for Nora, to be a gentle or kindly will.

GENERALIZING THE ANSWERS

Which view of social freedom is correct? Does freedom require just the absence of interference? Or does it require the absence of *dominatio*.

In looking at the decision between these two ways of thinking, the best thing to do, I believe, is to look at where they would lead, if they were taken as ideals for organizing society. This is not the place to explore that question but the broad outlines are pretty clear.

If people are to enjoy freedom as non-domination and enjoy it equally, then the law needs to identify the range of personal choices that are important for each, and ought to secure everyone against the power of others—say, the richer or more influential—in exercising those choices. The upshot would ideally be that they could look any other in the eye without reason for fear or deference.

In order not to dominate people, as it would under a colonial or dictatorial government, the law itself would have to be formed under democratic processes where people have a roughly equal say in its making. Otherwise the lawmakers would be despots in relation

to the general population; and this, even if, like Thorvald in relation to Nora, they were wholly benevolent despots.

If people are to enjoy freedom as non-interference, law will not be such an attractive means of establishing it, as law itself threatens non-compliers with punishment and in that way interferes with them. Hence the ideal society, democratic or not, would have only the basic sort of law, and only the minimal form of government, required to guard against civil disorder and chaos.

Where the neo-republican approach would temper the market, the neo-liberal treats it as a model for relationships where non-interference, if not non-domination, can thrive. The great thing about market choices—even, the choice of the needy to accept a job or take out a loan—is that however constrained people may be by their own neediness, and however unhappy they may be about the terms of the contract, people do make their choices in the market without active interference from anyone else. They may have to accept employment or take out a loan on harsh terms—perhaps even terms that allow some domination—but the important thing for neo-liberals is that they agree to those terms without intimidation or threat or aggression on the part of any other.

A LESSON

There is no easy way, then, of determining what is the better way of thinking about social freedom. Here, as in many other areas of philosophy, different issues are entangled with one another. You cannot work out how best to think about free will without thinking about how best to think about responsibility and about the standards to which we want to hold ourselves. And you cannot work out how best to think about free status without thinking more generally about the sort of society and polity that you think justice requires.