

Why all the fuss about Freedom?

[Selection from *Initiative: Human Agency*]

Freedom Revived

Few can deny that human beings care about liberty. There are, of course, different senses in which the term is used. One sense of “freedom” means being without obstacles in life; another, to develop fully with as little hindrance as can be achieved through collective action; or, again, to obtain from others their surplus wealth and labor-power, etc. The sense of the term employed in political theory has been the condition that obtains when others do not intrude upon oneself, when one is not intruded upon by other human beings who can exercise choice as to how they will treat one.

My focus here will be on the sort of liberty that arises among human beings, not the sort that arises between persons and the limitations nature imposes upon us? sickness, genetic deficiency, deformity, poverty, or other limitations we would like to be rid of. The sort of liberty at issue for me concerns something that we can do something about by an act of mere will or self-discipline, namely, people not intruding on each others’ lives, not encroaching upon one another’s sovereignty. Related to this sort of liberty is another kind that lies at its base, namely, free will or the human capacity to act on one’s own initiative, without being driven to behave by forces apart from oneself. Both of these are vital and closely related.

But why do we care about human liberty at all? The issue hardly ever goes away? every new generation seems to need to consider its significance and ramifications.

Human Nature at Issue

To start with, one needs to examine human nature, although that, too, immediately poses some challenges since to many the very idea of human nature seems obscure. This is, in part, because they expect that in trying to identify human nature, one is seeking a Platonic form, a perfect, timeless metaphysical essence. But that is not what human nature has to be. Rather it can be what we know to be central to being human, what unites those in every age and every place whom we include in the human race, whatever sex or race or color or nationality or culture. And what we know to be so can gradually change, either because nature itself changes or because we learn more about the subject.

Having a fairly clear idea of what human nature is in that sense should help us to discover why human liberty? in the sense of our personal jurisdiction others must gain our permission in order to enter and our free will or capacity to engage in initiated, original behavior? makes such a difference to us and why ignoring or denying it has given rise to massive misgivings and even disaster, why even the few achievements that follow from violating liberty are paid for dearly so the prize is never worth the price.

First of all, political liberty? not having others usurp one's sovereignty, one's role as the governor of one's life? is not just a preference, as some would have it. Preferences are just that, not needed, not even firmly wanted, only something that some people wish for while others can do without. Nor is it just one of the many values that can benefit us in our lives. As F. A. Hayek observed, "That freedom is the matrix required for the growth of moral values? indeed not merely one value among many but the source of all values? is almost self-evident. It is only where the individual has choice, and its inherent responsibility, that he has occasion to affirm existing values, to contribute to their further growth, and the earn moral merit."¹ Political freedom, then, is more of a precondition of acting, not one of many goals one might try to attain so as to benefit oneself or one's loved ones.

It is evident both from analysis and experience, that one can't just dispense with freedom in either of these pertinent senses (whereas if we aren't free to gain support from others, that is something at least many of us can live with). Why is that so? What is it about human beings that requires that they be granted this fundamental condition from others? And why is free will so much a part of human living as such? And why do millions want, over and over, to have their own status as initiators? as creators or as originators? respected? Even when they cave in, quite inconsistently, to certain pleas for systems of coercion or intrusiveness, they can't stand it very long. They change their minds and demand this fundamental condition of being treated as creative original things. Why is that?

Reasons for Freedom

Almost any other animal has a facility for succumbing to a state of servitude. They can be domesticated, eventually, with a little behavior modification of course. Even they don't like it all the time. But human beings seem to be unable to adjust for very long to a condition of servitude. They may be defeated in their resistance by more powerful people

but the resistance to violating individual liberty has been nearly universal throughout human history. This is not an accident.

In order to get a start on answering the question “Why Freedom?” it is not too difficult to find a laboratory because we are dealing with ourselves. We can observe ourselves directly, at every moment of our waking hours. We *are* this laboratory, so it is not like talking about fossils from 5 million years ago. Every reader of this essay can check some of the things that I’m going to say, which is as it should be because there are no special experts about this topic, only folks who choose to address it more or less intensely in their own lives.

Our Creative Initiative

The first thing that you can notice is that as you are reading or listening to anyone, you are or could be making a critical judgment. You are engaging in something active not just responsive, not just passive. You are doing more than just noticing a smell, registering a sight. You are giving meaning to things. Not arbitrarily, not capriciously; but you are the one who is identifying the meaning of your world. That’s a creative, inventive act, not mere automatic reaction.

In short, human beings can always take a first step, bringing something about that hasn’t been there before. This is the quintessential aspect of human existence, the primary thing that distinguishes us from so many other entities in nature.

In lots of respects we are, of course, just like dogs and cats and giraffes and stuff. If you are cut, you bleed. We all have to eat. We are, indeed, very much like the rest of the animals. Except, we don’t seem to have many of their limitations, nor their abundant built in attributes for staying alive and, especially, for flourishing. We alone need to take the initiative to learn how to do this. In order for us to make any headway in any department of life, whether it is art, science, philosophy, automotive engineering, cooking or raising children—believe me, raising children—we have to make the effort to be there, to address the matter, to attend, not just attend, sit there, but attend by paying attention.

This sort of personal, individual initiative is something that other living things do not make use of, although there are some borderline cases where some evidence for it exists: you can get an ape into a lab and pound into it some awareness of this kind. But it is no life necessity for them as it is for us. We don’t live very well, nor long, if we do so passively. Even if get away doing so, it means some form of parasitism, dependence on someone else’s active engagement with the world.

This element of initiative that is so crucial to human existence and human flourishing is the first type of freedom that I want to identify here.

It is what is usually referred to as freewill and means that we are in charge of some of the vital things we do. So, we, individually, are the ones who take the ultimate initiative in life. But that idea is a very controversial one throughout the history of philosophy. In the last 400 years especially, it's been extremely difficult to sustain a case for free will. One reason that the 18th century German philosopher Immanuel Kant has been so important is that he found some way of making room for free will in the midst of an intellectual era where it was really pretty much precluded by everything that people were beginning to believe. The mechanistic world, the world of Isaac Newton, certainly didn't leave much room for the idea that there could be something *in* nature that could take the initiative, that could move on it's own power, as it were. (Newton did accord this power to God, though.)

Science versus Liberty

This is very difficult to think of even in our time and many social scientists, including economists, have a hard time fathoming the notion that human beings don't behave just like much of the rest of nature—reacting to pressures they experience—but have the capacity to act freely. Certainly we can see wherever we live that the culture widely embraces the idea that we are moved by such pressure. In contrast, individual responsibility is passé, especially as far as many experts see the situation. We are all victims, as they say—yet the idea of victim doesn't even make sense in that context because a victim needs a culprit, something that is impossible without free will. There cannot be culprits in a fully mechanistic world. We are all just billiard balls moving around by the forces that shove us.

This view, from which Kant could only break by dividing the world into two parts—one in which it holds firmly and another in which freedom reigns—seemed very sensible for a long time because certain areas of nature certainly seemed to be very much in accord with that perspective.

And, indeed, by recognizing the mechanical forces of the world, we managed very well to manipulate nature to our own purposes. The entire industrial revolution, the massive advances of technology, testify to the usefulness of looking at some of nature in the light that the Newtonian framework recommends.

So you can see the impetus, emotional, intellectual for wishing to carry that much further. Social engineering is the extension and result of

that impetus. The extrapolation from astronomy and from classical mechanics into the area of human affairs was done mostly innocently. Folks just thought this would be a way to solve problems. Among other things debilitating diseases came to be subject to successful manipulation because of this scientific understanding of human life. Poverty was widely abated, comfort was secured, work was made more enjoyable, human life improved considerably. So the scientific mentality cannot be dismissed as mere trifle, some kind of unwise hubris, as some contend.

Scientism, not Science Proper

The trouble is it was a hurried action, the consequence of a hasty generalization: A fallacy of logic to think that just because some entities in nature were under the jurisdiction of the principles of classical mechanics therefore all of them had to be. Not even in all of physics does that appear to be true.

When we consider that the human brain is probably the most complicated entity in the universe, it would not be surprising that it exhibited certain principles that are somewhat different from the behavior of other things in nature. But, that came only recently. One had to have great confidence in one's introspective evidence? the kind I pointed to earlier that comes from observing oneself as an active agent. Such self knowledge wasn't enough to resist all the very heavy scientific and philosophical sophistication coming from those who championed the Newtonian picture.

Freedom's Compatibility with Nature

Nevertheless, that's the conclusion that we now have to reach, namely, that there is, indeed, a certain irreducible element of freedom that every human being who is not suffering from major brain damage is subject to. That irreducible element is what in fact defines you as a person, what gives rise to the notion of human dignity.² Unless we divide ourselves into a comprehensible natural part and one that is totally mysterious and beyond us—the solution proposed by Kant—we must now conclude that there is a unity between our free and our predictable determined nature.

As I noted earlier, the first piece of evidence that everyone can lay a hand on is oneself. One can tell from just seeing how one lives, what one does on almost every wakeful occasion that a fundamental condition of one's life is to be free. Equally important is the realization that nature itself is highly varied? some things are inert, some mineral, some organic, some biological, some swim and others fly and so on. So there

is nothing odd about the presence of an entity that could exercise initiative in its life and not simply follow impulses acting upon it. In the multifacetedness of nature, free will is not an anomaly, only a novelty.

Freedom and Ethics

It is interesting that this very quickly then leads to another fact that one can apprehend just by looking at one's life. It is that this condition of fundamental freedom lands us in a state of enormous responsibility: It is, in short, up to us to find out what we ought to do. Birds, in contrast, don't have to worry about "should I pick seeds, or should I build a nest", ducks don't have to worry about, "should I fly North or South at any time." They do what they have to.

Any nature show makes this quickly enough evident, namely, just how wonderfully the animal world works out, how little consternation they experience in their lives. None need to sit around wondering "What should I do, God, I can't make up my mind here." Not a problem. They have it made. They've got the blueprint and it's hardwired.

We human beings don't. We have got to concerns ourselves about every big or little thing. To start with, we must consider what is true? that we are free or that we are not free? Right there we need to choose and no built in, automatic, hard wired answer is provided to us. As to less abstract ways of facing one's freedom, just consider a test I and many others have encountered, when it turned out that the best way to deal with a 16 year old child is to refrain from doing exactly what one would most like to do.³ People have to make such difficult choices in the face of all kinds of tests, as when they resist the temptation of drugs, alcohol, smoking, bad habits and practices, or when they need to change their minds in the face of new evidence and arguments, etc.

So we human beings constantly face the issue of choosing between alternatives, of exercising this free will responsibly, of being a moral agent, an ethical being, an ethical animal. As Mary Midgley puts it in her book, *The Ethical Primate*, we must really face up to the fact that we are not living by instinct, but by choice.

That is the second answer to the question, "Why is freedom important? Why the fuss?" Because while we have it, we are facing incredible alternatives, some of them devastating for ourselves, for those we love, for those we cherish, for ideals we revere. And if we don't do the right thing of our own initiative—if each of us fails to live up to this challenge—there are devastating consequences.

So another reason then that freedom matters is that it is intimately,

essentially connected with ethics, with morality. There is no such thing as guilt, regret, apology, pride, sense of achievement, if there is no free will, if human beings aren't at liberty to choose. You cannot meaningfully say to someone "You ought to have done better," if there was no choice—be this in politics, parenting, medicine, education, science, art or athletics. It makes no sense. It amounts to nothing but wishful thinking. If we aren't free to take the initiative, all this comes to no more than witchcraft or demonology. Ethics would have to be a bogus enterprise in human life if freedom were not a reality.

Now this doesn't prove that free will exists, but it does indicate why it is important if one is concerned about ethical matters, if one is concerned about oughts and ought nots in life.

Let us recall that even the determinist—who is trying to make us change our minds so that we abandon the concept of free will and embrace the concept of determinism—is invoking an ought. What the determinist is saying is that you ought to believe in determinism, not in your free will. That is how fundamental the fact of free will is. The point here isn't some trick but an illustration of how basic this notion of freedom is: Even to talk about it invokes it. It's indispensable.

Freedom and Individualism

Another thing. Freedom is also intimately connected with individualism. I am not talking about the caricature of individualism that has us all live isolated, self-sufficient lives apart from one another. The individualism at issue is the idea that each person matters as an individual not just as a member of some group, nation, tribe, or even family.

That ancient idea, invoked in novels and plays and political discussions, namely, of human dignity, comes to the fore here. This is that we really deserve a certain kind of basic respect when our sheer potentialities are being considered. Human beings are full of such potential and to deal with them properly, this cannot be overlooked. Even someone who is accused of the most severe crime is owed the respect due to a human being as such: due process in the law is in part a recognition of this fact.

So individualism of the most elementary sort—concerned with our basic rights to be treated with dignity—is intimately tied to free will. This is the notion that you can make up your mind and that you ought to be respected as a being who can make up his or her mind. This is what is ultimately indispensable to individualism, the social philosophy and ultimately the central political concept that has reached near-maturity with

the founding of the American republic.

Not that such individualism hasn't been on the minds of social thinkers and commentators until now. It was on Hesiod's mind, in ancient Greece, in his *Works and Days*. Aristotle struggled with it, in his exchange with the Greek sophist Lykkophon.

But, the idea of the sovereign individual reached prominent emancipation only in the last 250 years. As the Harvard economist Amartya Sen noted, this basic idea about human beings and their need for freedom transcends cultural and national boundaries.⁴ It is where the idea of human rights arises.

But it is faltering, also, in many, many places. There are people across the world, prominent people, who are once again claiming that the individual is an invention, not a discovery. The human individual, as Marx argued, was supposedly invented around the 16th Century as an ideological tool by which to motivate productivity. Communitarianism, the current political hope of many academic intellectuals in America, holds that an individual human being is probably only a convenient, helpful fiction. That we are, as Marx argued—perhaps in a more bellicose fashion than some of the socioeconomic gurus right now like Amitai Etzioni and Robert Bellah—the cells of the larger organic whole of humanity or the tribe or the nation or the family or some other group. “That the human essence is the true collectivity of man,” as Marx put it.

This is a very, very appealing pitch—don't misunderstand. I don't want to leave the impression that our community lives are not crucial to us. We are all extremely fond of many people around us, or at least a few, and we are linked to their lives as well as the lives of millions of people we do not directly know. We love them, we depend upon them, we want them, we serve them, we expect from them many good deeds, we are constantly flourishing with the aid and assistance and thoughtfulness of other human beings. We are, to some extent, social animals.

Marx called us “Species Beings” meaning that we are the only beings that truly flourish only when the entire species does. This is wrong but you can see the appeal because in its micro manifestation it is so true.

A kind of communalism is clearly part of human life—Aristotle was very, very good at noticing this when he discussed nature of the polis and how human beings are by nature social animals. This is both intellectually and emotionally very attractive. So it very difficult in the face of this attractiveness to make a serious niche for the individuality that is also essential and perhaps even more fundamental than our sociality.

But this individuality is indeed the driving motor of all the social values that we embrace, that we champion. It is this initiative, it's because our friends, our family, our neighbors, our colleagues, our associates, our fellow human beings have things to offer that haven't been there before, that we value them.

I don't mean just in the economic sense, although that's a very important part of it. Let us never demean money. Let us just remind people that it is there to buy things with, to enable you to visit friends, to hang out with them, to travel, to go to the museum, to go to the theater. Let us champion economic prosperity but, partly because it's a means to ends that we champion even more. Without this individual capacity to contribute to society, to contribute to their fellow human beings and to lead and guide their own lives and enhance themselves, the notion of society would be really very empty, kind of flat. It's like being in a large colony of people who are suffering from extreme sleepiness. It would be dull.

What many champions of community values fail to appreciate is that human community life is exciting and promising because it's made up of individual human beings. And their individuality is fundamentally important because they're creative agents, because they put new things into the world. They are not simply responsive, reactive beings.

Liberty and Politics

Now I come to the thing that unites people in the Western liberal political tradition, especially those calling themselves classical liberals or libertarians, even though on other issues they may differ. There are among champions of the right to individual liberty utilitarians, positivists, existentialists, people with diverse religious and other views—yet they still embrace the ideal of the basic, universal individual right to such liberty. This is the idea that a society with organized legal principles ought to have at its pinnacle, the principle that you never subject anyone to involuntary servitude.

It's inconvenient for champions of the welfare state to talk about involuntary servitude, because it could lead many to suddenly realized that one crucial component of welfare, namely, freedom of choice, is not embraced in their system of justice. This component is the prohibition of involuntary servitude. Although many who proselytize for the welfare state think it promotes charity, compassion and generosity, far from it: it promotes, in fact, the vile institution of involuntary servitude whereby individuals are forced, against their will—by political leaders in the name

of the people—to do works for others. Despite the fact that rejecting such a policy is perhaps the central distinction of the American political tradition and that American fought a bloody civil war in part to put an end to a version of the practice, chattel slavery, involuntary servitude is all around us. Indeed, by some accounts, we are supposed to be by nature all part of a system of involuntary servitude; servicing any Tom, Dick and Harry who comes around and wants something from us.

It's the denial of that social practice that unites classical liberals or libertarians.

That's the last element of liberty that I will mention. It is also the one that most readers will be quite familiar with, so I will not dwell on it further. There are others. But all relate to the issue that the ideal of human liberty—that each of us has a right to it and may exercise it even when we are not behaving as well as we should, even when millions of others don't like it—is vital to human living anytime, anywhere, even where it has been suppressed with a good deal of success. That is why there is such a fuss about it, always, even while a great deal of energy is expended in silencing that fuss, using both outright physical force as well as sophisticated rhetoric.

Endnotes:

¹ F. A. Hayek, "The Moral Element in Free Enterprise," in Mark W. Hendrickson, ed., *The Morality of Capitalism* (Irvington-on-Hudson, NY: The Foundation for Economic Education, 1992), originally written for *The Freeman*, 1962.

² Some of the works that give strong support to this contention and take issue with the widespread reductionist view that it contradicts include, Steve Rose, *Lifelines: Biology Beyond Determinism* (London: Oxford University Press, 1998); Roger W. Sperry, *Science and Moral Priority* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), A. R. Louch, *Explanation and Human Action* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1969), H. Harre and P. F. Secord, *The Explanation of Social Behavior* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1972), and Theodosius Dobzhansky, *The Biological Basis of Human Freedom* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1956.) See, also, Tibor R. Machan, *The Pseudo-Science of B. F. Skinner* (New Rochelle, NY: Arlington House, 1974).

³ In my case it was not to say anything to my daughter over 600 miles of driving with my daughter sitting next to me! I had to choose to sit on my lips, which in my case was supreme self control, discipline, the most extreme exercise of personal initiative.

⁴ Amartya K. Sen, "Human Rights and Asian Values," in *The New Republic* (July 14-24, 1997).