

The Meaning of Freedom

All societies have to try to square a particularly tricky circle. On the one hand, they need to build good structures to allow for personal flourishing, so that children can grow into mature, confident adults, and individuals are free to develop their own character and personalities. At the same time, they also need to encourage good social cohesion – a sense of a community that works well together. The current state of play seems to suggest we may be doing OK at the first but scoring much lower on the second. There is a reason for this. And it all comes down to our understanding of freedom.

Freedom is one of the few values that just about everyone holds dear. It's hard to make a case for restricting individual liberties these days. When someone simply asserts they have a right to be free to do X (as long as X does not infringe anyone else's freedom), it's almost impossible to argue against it, whatever X is. This view of freedom is rooted in the libertarian tradition exemplified by thinkers such as John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau and John Stuart Mill. The basic idea is that freedom is primarily individual freedom. It is the idea that people, as John Locke put it, should be able to "order their Actions, and dispose of their possessions and persons as they think fit... without asking leave or depending on the will of any other man." J.S. Mill extended this into the idea that such freedom from all kinds of social restriction and expectation is essential for a healthy society, and that individuals should be free to do as they choose, as long as they do not harm other people, and do not infringe upon the rights of others to exercise their own freedom within their own personal space. This notion is virtually universal these days, so that we hardly even have to assert it to feel its force. There is, however, a problem with this way of thinking about freedom.

Judging by the state of modern western societies, this libertarian view allows a certain level of personal liberty, but doesn't serve very well when it comes to social cohesion. Basically, the problem is this: on this view of freedom, my neighbour, my wife, my children, my friends, or the state, are understood as essentially a limitation or even a threat to the exercise of my freedom (hence the revolt of Brexit and Trump against an overweening state that is seen to impose alien EU laws, or threaten to deny the freedom to carry guns). If freedom is my right to choose within my own personal space, as long as I don't tread on the toes of anyone else, this inevitably sets up the other person as someone who imposes a check on my ambitions, a boundary to my desires. They are also a possible source of incursion into my territory, and therefore potentially need to be resisted in case they tread on my dreams. The Other is a potential threat, and therefore someone essentially to be feared.

The result is a mentality that sets up relationships of mutual suspicion, individuals asserting their own right to choose, their precious independence from others and in turn to the endemic isolation of individuals from each other, and of communities from other communities – the very pattern that was revealed so painfully by the Grenfell Tower disaster. The awkward people from north Kensington might threaten the security and prosperity of the south, and the people of south Kensington were assumed to be indifferent to the welfare of the north. Personal freedom is set up against social co-operation in a kind of zero-sum game. You can't really have both, so you have to work out an uneasy compromise between them.

There is however another tradition of thinking about freedom in our cultural past: the Christian notion of freedom. This is a line of thinking that goes back through thinkers such as Martin Luther, Thomas Aquinas and St Augustine all the way to St Paul and even Jesus himself. Here, liberty is not freedom to do what I want, because 'what I want' is so often the problem. Christian anthropology says that our desires are not always healthy; in fact, very often we desire what will ultimately destroy us, our relationships and even our planet. Rather than freedom to do what we want, Christian freedom is the freedom from anything that would hold us back from becoming the people that we were meant to be - people whose default orientation is not of self-interest, but of love for God and for our neighbour.

We live in the age of the cult of the self. We customise everything to make it unique to ourselves, whether our phones, our homes, or even our bodies. By contrast, Christian freedom is freedom from this obsession with ourselves, our image, wealth, looks and prospects, freedom to be properly self-forgetful in love for our neighbour. It is not so much freedom for myself as freedom from myself. It means freedom from destructive habits we wish we could kick, such as greed, envy, lust and anger, freedom from political systems that offer no incentives to care for one another, or an economy that sucks us into personal self-centred consumption. It means freedom from the very things that stop us looking out for each other and instead imprison us in endless self-regard.

How can we learn this radical kind of freedom – the freedom to love our neighbour? The paradox is that it begins not with trying hard to love the unloveable neighbour but instead to view my neighbour differently - in relation to God. It means recognising them not primarily with regard to their own particularities, which I might find either attractive or repulsive, but rather first and foremost as someone created and loved by God, and given to me as someone to help me learn the crucial art of self-sacrificial love. My neighbour becomes not a threat nor a limitation, but a gift - a gift to offer me the chance to practise this crucial virtue of love, and to grow in my ability to love that very neighbour, however awkward and difficult they may be.

This Christian account of freedom squares the circle of personal flourishing and social cohesion much better than the secular version. It says that we flourish as human beings best when we learn to forget our selves and learn to focus our attention on the needs of the person next to us. It breeds healthy individuals. At the same time, a society built on that basic shift creates a vast mutual network of interconnectedness – a vision of the elusive sense of 'community' that we constantly talk about, but find so hard to create.

Overcoming social division, reining back our polarised political discourse is no easy task. It involves radically revising our view of freedom – not a return to oppressive government and a controlling state, but adopting an entirely new way of thinking about liberty – not so much as freedom to choose as freedom to love.

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A fuller treatment of this theme is found in the Bishop of Kensington's book, "*Bound to be Free: The Paradox of Freedom*" published by Bloomsbury