

MODERN AGE

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The Meaning of Liberty — *An Editorial*

LIBERTY IS A WORD that is at the heart of American public philosophy, as attested to by the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, the Gettysburg Address, and just about every Fourth of July speech. Its constant repetition, however, may have blurred its meaning and turned it into a platitude. Clearly, liberty is a very complex thing with many ramifications and relationships.

The word "liberty" is often given in its Anglo-Saxon form of "freedom," which common usage describes as a synonym. But there are differences. The ending "-dom" denotes a condition, as in "kingdom," "thralldom," and "serfdom." These words convey relative status and have nothing to say about origin.

Liberty, on the other hand, generally denotes a right. It is so intended in the Declaration of Independence where it is characterized as a natural right and in the Constitution where it becomes a civil right. Like all natural rights, Liberty is said to be "inalienable" and "self-evident." It is attributed to the "Creator" and "Nature's God," as befits its author, who was a Deist. These words are a deliberate attempt to avoid the Christian God, a living person who judges, forgives, and governs. A com-

parison used to be made with a watchmaker who, having wound the watch, left the premises for good. Even this tenuous link is broken by the invention of a self-winding watch.

As used in official national documents, the term "liberty" is understood as a right and carries a negative content. Liberty in that sense means to be free from somebody or something. The long itemized list of grievances in the second part of the Declaration of Independence (e.g., taxation without representation, et cetera) is meant to be the validation of the first philosophical part. "Liberty," then, has a strongly negative meaning. It denies, at least by implication, the idea that liberty includes liberty for and responsibility for anything or anybody. It is not understood as being correlative with duty.

The effect is to promote individual selfishness and social conflict. It has the peculiar property of self-multiplication very much in the spirit and practice of the Pharisees. What started as a simple rule becomes a plethora of minute regulations that penetrate every aspect of life, inward as well as outward. The history of the Fourteenth Amendment at the hands of the Supreme Court illustrates this

Pharisaic trait. The recent history of the civil rights movement shows federal power affecting the public schools, the status of women, employment, the environment, health standards, and so forth. At the rate we are going, liberty will be extinguished (ironically enough) in the name of liberty and life will be smothered with paralyzing burdens. Take the right to eat in any restaurant, a right which no one in his senses would contest, whether the person be white, black, brown, red, rich, poor, ignorant, or learned. You cannot refuse service to anyone, you cannot set apart any section of the restaurant — hiring or firing must conform to civil rights regulations emanating therefrom — you may or may not serve alcohol, you must conform to health regulations, you must not allow smoking or else require smokers to eat in a special place, et cetera, and so on. This torrent of restrictions has one, and only one, source: human selfishness. If good will, courtesy, and kindness were the general practice, this torrent would dwindle into a rivulet. But the nearly universal American reaction to any evil, gross or slight, is: sue and, if that is not feasible, pass a law against it to permit it — even as there will be lobbyists to see to it that there is such a law.

Inextricably interwoven with liberty is equality. Equality, too, is embedded in the Declaration of Independence, where it is characterized as “self-evident,” and in the Constitution, where it plays an increasingly prominent role. The Declaration of Independence states that all men “are created equal” — a patent falsehood if there ever was one! Only if all men were created alike in every respect would this be true. But they are not. There are inevitable differences in physical endowment, brain, ability to feel and sympathize, ability to run businesses and govern countries, heredity, social environment. These things are either biologically innate or something individuals are born into but for which they hold no responsibility.

Because of these differences liberty means social stratification. This must not

be taken to mean that all social levels are earned, either by nature or works. We all know that some social distinctions are due to monopoly, legal privileges, political power, and luck. Wrong though some of these inequalities may be, they may be to some extent redressed. But it is neither possible nor just to make all men equal. Assuming that it could be done, the price would mean the extinction of liberty. If equality is to be strictly enforced, the ablest and the luckiest must be held down and the poorest and weakest must be hoisted up. Liberty and equality are thus contradictory if either one is to be pursued as an ultimate end. That equality is impossible of realization is proved by the Soviet Union, where social gradations are excruciatingly evident. The basis of social stratification may take many forms such as birth, money, power, and knowledge. Whatever the basis may be, it is a violation of equality. As the popular witticism goes, “some people are more equal than others,” even in a society dedicated to egalitarianism.

Even the most ardent champions of liberty concede that it is not absolute. Few would deny that liberty ought not to be a cover for crimes such as murder, theft, rape, and arson. Not only are these crimes wrong in the eyes of the law but they are wrong *per se*. Thus, an act might be legal but nevertheless immoral and therefore is (or should be) a restriction on liberty. This type of restriction is enforced not only by individual conscience but even more vigorously by public opinion. Strict conformity can be the result. It was this power of public pressure that worried most seriously that eminent advocate of liberty, John Stuart Mill.

Whether restraints on liberty emanate from the law or from public opinion, they invariably lead to the Pharisaic way of life, for every infraction must be interpreted and in turn lead to additional and more detailed interpretations. The only way to avoid this predicament is to improve individual conscience so as to make both the rule and its interpretations unnecessary. A change of heart is needed, as has long

been proclaimed by the Christian faith, and is usually dismissed as the "counsel of perfection." Perhaps the nearest approximation to the counsel of perfection lies in Great Britain, where the concept and the practice of constitutional morality are highly honored. Constitutional morality is unwritten, thereby cutting down on legal rigidities and introducing a flexible element in the operation of the British governmental system.

Another version of egalitarianism is called freedom of choice. The Anglo-Saxon for this word indicates that the speaker is not concerned with liberty as a right but as a fact of life. A person should be unrestricted in his choice of vocation, for example. It is enough that he wants it. Why should there be any limits to entering the professions of law, medicine, or education? That there are entrance requirements is recognized by all and they are dismissed as obstacles by the so-called equality of opportunity. The standards of professional excellence are met without seriously interfering with individual liberty — or so it seems. The blacks, notably, are not satisfied by this solution because they claim that the standards do not give them equal opportunity. Freedom of choice may be a right, they say, but it is not a fact. Liberty must be a condition as well as a right.

The idea of freedom of choice entails philosophical difficulties. What is choice? Or, rather, what — if anything — governs choice? It could mean that there is no reason or cause connected with it. If so, it is nonsense, for even a lunatic has his reasons, however weird, for his choices. We are involved here with the old issue of freedom of the will versus predestination, an issue which has a long history in the Church. This issue has never been settled in the sense of obtaining universal agreement. Saint Augustine came closest to it with the statement that he believed in both freedom of the will and predestination. He did so by distinguishing between things fortuitous, things deterministic, and things predestined. However all this may be, absolute freedom of choice could exist

only in a complete vacuum, and hence it is an illusion to consider it either an absolute right or an absolute fact.

Sometimes liberty is conceived in terms of power. Only the powerful are free and only the free are powerful. The powerful, as the argument goes, are in a position to impose their will on others and to escape the imposition of the will of others on themselves. Most people overlook the fact that liberty as an end in itself or an absolute is self-defeating. Probably no one realizes this better than the president of the United States himself! He has to worry about foreign countries that he cannot control, about an obstreperous Congress that continually blocks him, about the media and public opinion that have so much to do with elections, about the White House staff and the Cabinet that are engaged in rivalries and in-fighting, about a massive and amorphous bureaucracy that thwarts presidential policies and chokes any change in their routine. Members of the bureaucracy, especially, are gifted in nullifying orders from above because they think them impractical or distasteful. Ruling bureaucrats in America had an ingenious formula during the time of the old Spanish Empire: *Obedezco pero no cumpro* (I obey but I do not execute), and they got away with it.

Dictators like Hitler and Stalin obviously aimed at omnipotence, but they did not get it. Too many forces thwarted them. Only God is omnipotent and free. That is why the theologian Karl Barth aptly describes God as "wholly Other." By a kind of twisted logic the Roman Caesars recognized this truth by claiming divinity for themselves. Modern dictators stop short of this claim.

In spite of all the foregoing comments, we all know that there is intrinsic value in liberty. After all, people have fought and died for it through the ages. Any examination of the concept of liberty must begin with the fundamental questions: Where do we come from? Who are we? Where are we going? To these questions there are three possible answers, the third of which is in the end the only completely adequate

answer: the Individual, the Community, and the Divine.

Because the life of every individual is a gift from God, liberty cannot be conceived as a right, except in the sense that some such right is necessary to attain the destiny of man. As the Presbyterian catechism puts it, the nature and the destiny of man reject any selfishness or self-centeredness. This line of reasoning may cause some readers to bristle. They are perhaps bound to do so unless they are well versed in the essentials of Christianity — especially the life, deeds, teachings, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This reasoning requires a sound knowledge of the Scriptures; otherwise the third answer, residing in the Divine, is empty of meaning. Moreover, this reasoning has all too often been spoiled by bigotry and narrowness of spirit. We must not forget that the institutionalized Church contains the Gospel in an earthen vessel, and many people have been alienated for precisely that reason.

The second answer, community, is not an answer if it means that the individual begins and ends with it. If it is, then what we have is fascism as described by Benito Mussolini: everything in the state, nothing against the state, and nothing outside the state. This is the essence of all totalitarianism whether of the Right or of the Left.

It is only in, through, and by the community that man can find his destiny and

transcend positivism. Good will toward all men stands at the center of it, and it is at that point where equality is reconciled with liberty. It is perhaps most visible in the family. If one child is sickly and requires frequent and expensive medical attention, parents will not worry about the other children; if the other children are what they should be, they will not resent the inequality of treatment. This argument is found in several of the parables of Jesus, such as that of the eleventh-hour worker who received the same wage as the first-hour worker and was reprimanded for objecting and trying to interfere with his employer's freedom.

The motto of the French Revolution was "Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity." But the trouble was that the French Revolution forgot Fraternity, which is the one thing which could make the first two acceptable and which was therefore followed by Robespierre and Napoleon. Community is the indispensable solvent and magnet that causes a consensus whose shared values bind the members to each other. It is essentially a thing of the spirit that, in its highest form, is the spirit of the Christian ethic. Saint Paul summed it up accurately and beautifully when he said that "where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty" (II Corinthians 3:17).

—René Williamson