

HUMANISM AND FREEDOM

Sherwin TWine

Few words win humanist hearts more than the *words* *freedom* and *liberty*. They are intimately tied up with the humanist self-image and have been slogans of the humanist message from the very beginning.

Of course, freedom is not exclusively a humanist value. It has been the battle-cry of many people, both leftwing and rightwing, in modern times. Even religious conservatives have come to embrace it in their propaganda. But, certainly, few philosophies of life have paid it as much attention as humanism.

It is no great wonder that humanists gave freedom center stage. For most of Western history tyrannical governments sought to impose their religious views on intimidated populations. Humanists were outlaws who were persecuted for the utterance of their beliefs. Oppressive collectivist structures, like the traditional family, produced conformity and inhibited the emergence of new ideas. Even when freedom became real there was enough self-discipline left over from the past to make it attractive and popular. In the bourgeois culture of 19th century Europe liberty was sufficiently tame to win the hearts of the people. There was enough guilt and wholesome ambition around to make freedom socially useful.

But, at the end of the 20th century, the luster of freedom even for humanists is dimmer than it was. In a world of affluence and seemingly unlimited options, liberty produces consequences that were not foreseen by its early proponents. People use their freedom to choose laziness, selfishness and self-destruction. Cults of individualism thrive, which view any form of social dictation, whether government, community or family as a moral evil. Subjectivism, the refusal to be disciplined by any objective truth, is rampant and replaces the discipline of science with personal intuition. Hosts of individuals, who have long since abandoned their roots for the mobile society, wander through the consumer culture, picking and choosing, with very little concern for the effects of their choices on others. Even dictatorial regimes now embrace the vocabulary of freedom, creating an Orwellian double-speak which turns liberty into its opposite.

In an age when so many people feel alienated and lonely, the ritual praise of freedom is not enough. We have to rethink what liberty means and rethink the limitations that experience imposes on it. Despite the propaganda hype for freedom, the history of the past two centuries may indicate that there are values more than liberty which are needed to discipline it.'

FREEDOM

Our first problem is defining the concept of freedom.

Some philosophers, like Marx, claim that freedom is an illusion, that every person's choice in every situation has been determined in advance by the laws of nature. Even when we think we are free, we are not *really* free. We are the inevitable victim of events that happened before. We cannot be held personally responsible for what we do.

Others, like Sartre, maintain that freedom is real, that necessity and determinism do not control human choice. Freedom is a metaphysical condition in which human choices are not the results of events in the past, but arise spontaneously in human consciousness. Since people are free, they can be held responsible for what they choose to do. Freedom is free will, a human exemption from the laws of nature.

This metaphysical controversy about freedom, which has taken up so much prestigious philosophical time, is unresolvable. There is no imaginable evidence that will prove either the truth or the falsehood of either claim. Quite frankly, even if the answer were readily available, it makes no practical difference. Freedom, in the ordinary meaning of the term, is something different from what many abstract philosophers want to make of it. Arguments about free will and determinism divert our attention from the experience of freedom, whether that experience is determined by previous events or is spontaneous.

A similar diversion is the attempt of many thinkers, like Spinoza, Rousseau, Hegel and Freud to define freedom as the ability to do what we *really* want to do. The assumption is that most conscious choices are the result of distorted perceptions that prevent us from knowing what our *real* desires are. We are the slaves of ignorance, fear, brainwashing or repression, each of which makes us think we are free when we are not truly free. Only when we overthrow the enslaving power, whether through reason, revolution or psychotherapy, do we become free, do we come to understand what we *really* want and need. Only then is the absence of restraint a true liberation.

With this concept of freedom, what *we* think we want becomes less important than what the "experts" think we want. In the name of freedom, we surrender our decision making to those who "really" know what we desire, deep down inside our needs. Dictatorship becomes compatible with freedom. Our bossy liberator rescues us from the tyranny of our own illusions. Stalinism and fascism become models of this "authentic" freedom.

We obey in order to be free. We endure restraint in order to be rescued from restraint. What further tribute to the absurdity of so much modern political philosophy do we need! Defining freedom as doing what you *really* want to do opens the issue of who is qualified to determine the *really*. The political commissar, the philosopher bureaucrat, the psychiatrist? Too many totalitarian societies have utilized this definition to

deny people any reasonable semblance of liberty until they are de-brainwashed: until they publicly conform to the ideology of the authorities.

The same game is played by those political thinkers, like Montesquieu who maintain that freedom is the ability to do what we ought to do.² In their eyes, the will is only significantly free when it chooses what is morally right. Moral ignorance is a form of mental and spiritual slavery that prevents wrong choices from being free choices.

How silly! Are bad people never free to be bad? Are good people only free when they do the good? If I think that I am doing the right but others do not, am I both free and not free?

In the end, the sense of freedom that comes from ordinary experience is the only reasonable one to embrace. Freedom is simply the ability to do what we consciously want to do. Free will is irrelevant. Our "deep" desires - as opposed to our "superficial" desires are irrelevant. The moral quality of our choices is irrelevant. Freedom is the absence of external restraint. If we are, we are able to do what we choose to do.

This definition forces us to be honest. It forces us to admit that whatever restrictions we impose on freedom are indeed restrictions, not techniques for making people freer. It also forces us to be open to the reality that freedom can be bad. Defining freedom in such a way that it will always be positive distorts its reality. The experience of this century is that freedom frequently has negative consequences. Freedom can be bad as well as good.

The person who chooses to use drugs, the individual who chooses to be greedy, the citizen who chooses not to vote may indeed be free. But their action is not good.

HUMAN NATURE

Our second problem in rethinking the humanistic significance of freedom is determining the connection of liberty to human need.

From a humanistic point of view freedom is only significant if there is a strong need for it. After all, a humanistic ethic derives its authority from the power of its rules to satisfy basic human wants. If, in the end, people are happier, more content and more fulfilled as obedient "children," it would be irrational to force people to be what their nature finds uncomfortable.

One of the disappointments of modern times is how often enthusiastic masses have freely chosen not to be free, have freely decided to support dictators and tyrants who take away their freedom. Hitler, in his heyday, was very popular. And so was Mussolini.

Certainly, one of the clichés of the modern democratic world has been that personal liberty is something that people desperately want. But there

is very little evidence in the historical events of the past century to indicate that that perception is accurate. Both fascism and Leninist communism found wide public support, as have the fundamentalist theocracies of recent years. If freedom is so important to the average person, more people would have offered more resistance.

In fact, in modern times, the most powerful social force that controls political behavior has been nationalism. Most modern nationalism has been hostile to personal freedom because it insists that the individual subordinate his own welfare to the survival and power of the nation. National liberation, despite the coincidence of terms, has very little to do with freedom. In most cases, it simply means that members of a nation have the opportunity to be governed by their own ethnic brothers and sisters rather than by foreigners. Most countries in the world today, especially in the Second or Third Worlds which have experienced national liberation, enjoy authoritarian or dictatorial regimes. They are often one party states in which individual liberties are severely restricted. In many cases, these regimes are not unpopular. And, in many cases, there was more personal freedom under the colonial masters. Obviously nationalism and national liberation are able to mobilize human energies that the struggle for civil liberties has difficulty to inspire. Group liberation, which can better be described as group independence, is often confused with the struggle for freedom.

There are many good reasons why the desire for freedom may be low on the priority list of many people. Liberty is popular when people experience security and prosperity. It is less significant when people feel threatened by dangers that no single individual can handle by himself. Poor people who are struggling for survival, vulnerable people who believe that they are surrounded by enemies, have very little interest in the pleasure of options. They want solidarity. And the price of solidarity is mutual surveillance, mutual intimidation and conformity.

However, there does seem to be a human need that is related directly to the quest for freedom. It is the counterforce to interdependence, which is the theme of so much human behavior. One side of us, deeply influenced by the trauma of birth and the prolonged dependency of childhood, seeks to lose ourselves in the "organic" unity of the group. The other side of us, rooted in the old evolutionary striving for individual space and territory, offers resistance to the first drive. Adolescent rebellion is part of that resistance. But the ambivalence remains.

In the realm of the emotions, this internal conflict is expressed in the struggle between love and anger. Love is the expression of the push to unity and solidarity. It engenders compromise and self-sacrifice. Anger is the expression of the need for separation, privacy and independence. It sponsors the defense of private space and the affirmation of personal significance. Oddly enough, anger may be older than love. Primitive single-celled organisms are not dependent on other members of their species. Only advanced highly developed multicellular and social beings have a need for love.

Modern technological society plays havoc with this conflict. On the one hand it produces the affluence and leisure which allows for individual privacy and self-absorption. On the other hand it binds everybody together, more closely than ever before, with the bonds of modern machines and high specialization. We are more and more dependent on each other and want more and more to be less so.

Which drive is the stronger, the push for solidarity or the pull of individuality? The answer is that both may be equally strong. And that is why most people are more ambivalent about personal freedom than they are willing to admit.

MORAL VALUE

The third problem in rethinking freedom is to confront the moral implications of freedom.

Most humanists simply assume that freedom is some kind of unquestionable moral ultimate and rarely deal with the question of why we should value it. For "traditional" humanists challenging the moral validity of freedom seems bizarre.

However, freedom has to compete with many other values in "the humanist" pantheon of values. These are happiness, justice, equality and dignity. They are neither mutually realizable nor mutually compatible.

Since morality is concerned with the relationship of individuals to the groups to which they belong, moral values derive their authority from the fact that they appear to promote and enhance group survival. Even John Stuart Mill, the arch defender of individualism and individual freedom, maintained that the ethical criterion is "the greatest happiness of the greatest number."³

The view that morality began with individuals who banded together for mutual defense to create society, and that personal freedom is guaranteed by social contract, is an interesting and popular point of view. But, despite the inventiveness of John Locke, it has nothing to do with the real evolution of society. Individual rights did not precede social solidarity. The awareness of the importance of individual liberty emerged much later.

The moral question of personal freedom still revolves around the issue of what kind of a person best serves the welfare of the community - whether the family, the nation, or humanity as a whole.⁴ Does the strong individualist who always defends his personal freedom do more for his community than the strong collectivist who always subordinates his personal agenda to the needs of the majority? Is it true that conformist societies, imprisoned by tradition and governed by intimidation, are less able to adapt to new circumstances and to provide the responses necessary for survival and social welfare? The answers are not as easy as some humanists seem to think. Freedom of speech is no substitute for a sense of belonging and a willingness to share. And "doing one's own thing" is no

substitute for shared goals and the discipline of compromise. A society of free and assertive individualists -with the glue of old loyalties dissolved - is hardly the stuff out of which a social paradise is made.

AESTHETIC VALUE

Moral values are not the only values. There may be aesthetic values-which go" beyond morality"-which may be equally compelling. The pursuit of aesthetic values may not be consistent with the moral agenda of society. The *beautiful* and the *right* are not always compatible.

Aesthetic values rarely emerge in a primitive society struggling for survival. They come with affluence and are first promoted by the aristocracy. As affluence spreads to the masses in a modern capitalist society so do these values.

One of these aristocratic values is the value of dignity. Dignity is an ideal which first emerges in ruling classes. It is attached to an image of a strong person who is the master of his own life, who cultivates space, privacy and a unique style, and who refuses to suffer humiliation from the hands of any person. One of the signs of dignity is freedom, the power to be autonomous and self-governing.

When bourgeois culture replaced its feudal predecessor, dignity made its way to the bourgeoisie. Education, manners and property became the training program for dignity. A heightened sense of individuality and personal identity became more widespread. The emerging capitalist culture exalted the private entrepreneur who cultivated personal independence and self-reliance.

In time almost everybody, especially the educated and professional classes, embraced dignity. Simultaneously words like autonomy, self-esteem and self-actualization became popular and found their way into the vocabulary of psychotherapy. Ultimately, self-esteem became for many as important, if not more important, than group strength and group solidarity.

Today dignity has become a humanist value, offering resistance to the traditional values of dependency and humility and providing a lively opposition to such notions as guilt and self-sacrifice. In the era of personal fulfillment, freedom and more freedom become the signs of dignity. Every personal agenda becomes unique and "sacred." Philosophers dream of a time when there will be only masters - and no servants.

Now, it is quite obvious that if all people chose to be autonomous and brooked no interference from any higher authority, that the fabric of society would be irreparably torn. Autonomous people may be more attractive than self-sacrificing citizens. But they are often a social nuisance and disrupt morally satisfying relationships between masters and servants, between the expert and the non-expert. A society filled with genuinely autonomous people would use up its energies in endless negotiations - with very little energy left over for anything else.

As an aesthetic value dignity is ultimate and absolute. In the parlance of dignity, human rights are primary, and intrinsic to the human condition. Social consequences are irrelevant. The right of a woman to be the owner and master of her own body and to choose abortion if she wants it does not depend on the social consequences. Even if there is a shortage of children to be the labor force of the future, the right remains absolute. Aesthetic values do not need to be tested by their consequences. The *beautiful* is its own justification. And so is the person of dignity.

For humanists who embrace dignity as a major value, there is the difficult task of making dignity compatible with an ethical agenda. The person of dignity, especially if he is self-absorbed, may not be moral. And many ethical people have little time for dignity. Bringing the aesthetic and the moral value systems together is no easy task.

LIMITATIONS

Many humanists fail to make a distinction between freedom and the values of social usefulness and personal dignity. They put liberty in first place. They assume that the highest virtue is the right of individuals to do with their lives as they see fit. If they want to abandon work, if they want to take drugs, if they want to smoke themselves into lung cancer, if they want to drop out of school, if they want to eat themselves into grotesque obesity - all these wants are legitimate. Individuals have the perfect right to indulge them. They even have the right to terminate their lives at any time they so desire. They have no obligation to make their life style conform to any criterion other than their personal will. "I do not have the right to tell you what to do with your life. And you do not have the right to tell me what to do with my life."

It is quite obvious from this description that absolute freedom is incompatible with social usefulness and personal dignity. People may freely choose to diminish their own powers and to reduce the capacity they possess to be the masters of their own lives. Such self-destructive behavior is clearly opposed to both self-esteem and usefulness to others. People may not choose to compel them to reverse their self-destructive course. But that reluctance does not mean that individuals do not have a moral and aesthetic obligation to abstain from ruinous behavior.

There may be times when the intrusions of government and public opinion have greater value than the personal freedom lost. Forbidding smoking and the use of hallucinogenic drugs, requiring citizens to master useful scientific information and insisting on the observance of health precautions, may be appropriate restrictions in a world where their opposites may be dangerous to personal and social welfare.

Dignity is more than freedom. It is the mastery of one's own life. Combined with the moral demand for social usefulness, it is an achievement which requires enormous discipline. The discipline is just as important as the freedom.

BALANCE

If freedom has moral and aesthetic value, what is the best way to insure its survival? How do we establish a proper balance between freedom as the instrument of dignity and freedom as the instrument of social usefulness?

We have to recognize that social usefulness and personal dignity are not always compatible. A life committed totally to social usefulness would always be on the edge of martyrdom. A life committed totally to personal dignity would always be on the edge of selfishness. A successful free society does not insist that its citizens be socially useful all the time. Nor does it make a fetish out of self-esteem. It plays a good-humored juggling act, avoiding both extremes.

We have to make an important distinction between absolute democracy and liberal democracy. Absolute democracy makes a tyrant out of the majority. It allows the majority to impose its will on vulnerable minorities and reluctant individuals whenever it chooses to do so. A liberal democracy restrains the power of the majority and defends the power of the individual to make the choices he wants to. Only some compelling social need allows this freedom to be restricted. The individual is protected against the bossiness of the "people."

We have to avoid the excessive intrusion of government. 19th century liberals were anti-government. But 20th century liberals found government intervention to be necessary, especially since they had now embraced the additional value of equality. Freedom and equality are not always compatible. If one believes in economic equality, it is quite clear, from the experience of the past eighty years, that only the massive power of the government can insure and maintain the redistribution of wealth. Free societies, even when massive islands of inherited wealth are removed, tend to foster levels of inequality, simply because talent is unequal. If we push too far, we shall not be free.

We need to encourage hosts of private societies and organizations, whether familial, fraternal, ethnic, professional or social, to counter the tendency of governments to maximize their power. One of the reasons why liberal democracy works in Anglo-Saxon countries is that individuals do not confront the face of state power alone. They find the means to resist intrusion through the many volunteer group associations they feel comfortable with. The first thing totalitarian societies do is to assume total responsibility for the citizen's social activities.

We need to discuss the value of self-discipline as much as we talk about the importance of personal freedom. The implications of social usefulness and personal dignity need to be explored in the schools. Since freedom is a negative concept - the absence of external restraints - it needs to be supplemented by more positive ideals.

At the end of the 20th century it is very important for us as humanists to avoid being used by either naive libertarians or radical authoritarians. We

need to place freedom in the context of other values which may have equal or more compelling status.

NOTES

1. Spinoza said that "when man is governed by his passions he is in bondage, for a man under their control is not his own master, but is mastered by fortune, in whose power he is. When man is governed by reason he is free, for he does the will of no one but himself, and does those things only which he knows are of greatest importance in life, and which he therefore desires above all things."
2. Montesquieu maintained that "liberty can consist only in the power of doing what we ought to will and not being constrained to what we ought not to will."
3. Mill said that "the only freedom which deserves the name is that of pursuing our own good in our own way, so long as we do not attempt to deprive others of theirs, or impede their efforts to obtain it, for in proportion to the development of his own individuality, each becomes more valuable to himself, and is, therefore, capable of being more valuable to others."
4. Also, the vision of a large realm of activity that only affects the welfare of the individual doing it is an illusion. The famous liberal prescription that grants individuals the right to be the total masters of their own lives in those areas of their existence that do not touch the interests of others sounds good on paper. But it does not work very well in reality. In an overcrowded world, almost every personal activity involves someone else. Sex, the color of one's house, smoking, and the noise level of one's stereo are "private" activities that have social consequences. Even the personal failure to take care of one's own health may create an intolerable social burden. John Stuart Mill was wrong when he imagined that each person was capable of a private world which was of no concern to others.