

Freedom Dialogue Group **The Freedom That Really Matters**

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Human freedom appears to be paradoxical. It might seem that the more freedom we all have, the less burdened would we be to follow rules, give up resources, devote our precious time, etc., where this didn't suit us – in essence, we would not be constrained. Yet if we all achieve such 'freedom,' society as a whole is liable to be less functioning, peaceful and supportive of human flourishing ... and this is likely to lead to less individual freedom. So, must we give up some of our freedom, or the possibility of our freedom, to protect decent levels of freedom for all?

Too often, this is how we are presented with the question of freedom, as a balancing act between the interests of individual and society, between the citizen and the state. Some, on this basis, argue that it is in our 'enlightened self interest' to give up some freedom, in order to protect the rest of it. It is 'instrumentally useful' to forgo freedom now and in specific ways, to protect freedom later and in more general ways. There might be positively reinforcing collective effects. If we 'go out of our way' to not litter, or 'make an effort' to observe traffic rules, or 'pay the price' for more eco-friendly detergent, or 'take a hit' on our income to donate to the homeless on our streets, the sum effect is enjoyed by all. Freedom, on this view, comes at a price.

Yet this kind of reasoning pits freedom against responsibility, and individual against society, in ways that we should not take for granted and need not accept. Freedom need not be understood as an independent quantity, one that can infinitely grow separate to and in spite of the world. It need not be some abstract ideal that we should aim for even if fate must have it that we can never reach it.

Our understanding of freedom must be rooted in the here and now, which is where the future always starts. Our understanding of freedom must incorporate responsibility as intrinsic to what real freedom is. And our understanding of our individual freedom must place freedom-writ-large within its definition. The unfreedom of others or the steady deterioration of our natural world is our own unfreedom. Seen from this perspective, to recognise and act upon our responsibilities towards others and the earth is to live our own freedom. It is our ability to act – to begin – that epitomises our freedom. And universal responsibility, rather than our greatest burden, represents freedom's highest form. Now, what should we do?

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