

Liberty, Freedom, and Power



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I thought I would take this week's column to explore some thoughts and ideas that have been stewing around my mind over the last few months. These thoughts, while seemingly complete, are in constant reflection and refinement. They concern the concepts of "liberty," "freedom," and "power." While liberty and freedom are often used synonymously, I believe there is an important and significant difference. Likewise, power has important significance when contrasted with both liberty and freedom. Let us begin with liberty.

Liberty

I will say that the following has a bit of subjectivity to it. How *I* define liberty, freedom, and power may not be how *you* define it. Though I believe my definitions do not betray the dictionary or etymological understanding, they may not be perfectly compatible either.

Liberty, in my view, is the state of being unmolested by other human beings. (Let's keep this discussion for our own species for now.) When one is not prevented by others from doing some thing, from taking some action, one has liberty. To say "at liberty" means just that. If I am "at liberty" to eat a bologna sandwich, then nobody is threatening to forcibly prevent me. Likewise, if I am "at liberty" to have sexual intercourse, then nobody, including my partner, is threatening to forcibly prevent me. (That's not to say that I am free to rape so long as my victim does not threaten or attempt to stop me, but without some display of unwillingness, how am I to know that I am not "at liberty"?) Liberty, then, is the state of nature as it concerns *other* human beings. I am a libertarian insofar as I believe that nobody has the right to initiate force (aggression, violence) against a peaceful person.

Freedom

Freedom, on the other hand, does not concern other human beings. I have previously shared the idea that "freedom is self-control," a thought attributed to Rose Wilder Lane. With this, we can see that freedom is internal; a state of mind, of sorts. If we believe that

others have the right to control us, that belief is what reduces our freedom. It's a mental construct. How we perceive our relationships to other human beings leads to the amount of freedom we have. The moment we decide, that we make a conscious choice to be free, we "are at once freed."

Clearly, then, our freedom is absolute so long as our minds are free. Others may threaten us by force to perform some action, but it is our decision to act. We "give in" to their demands because we perceive it is within our best interests. So long as we believe that our attacker is acting without our authority, we still maintain our freedom. The moment we believe that he has a right to compel us is the moment we enter a state of *mental* bondage. But that is not the only type of bondage. Drugs, alcohol, destructive habits, and the like alter our states of mind. We lose control over our faculties, our self-control. Once we lose our self-control we enter a state of *physical* bondage.

Bondage, then, must be seen in these two different ways. The first I have described as mental bondage. We could also call this spiritual bondage. The second, physical bondage. Mental bondage is completely under our control. We *choose* to enter and remain in mental bondage. (I'll explore the ideas of mental bondage, indoctrination, or in other words, compulsory education, and cognitive dissonance another time.) Physical bondage may or may not have been preceded by a choice. Either we choose to consume drugs or to perpetuate bad habits, or somebody else chooses for us. Someone may slip us a rooie or seize our bodies and inject us with something. I previously said that our freedom was absolute so long as our minds were free. If someone drugs us against our will, then our freedom has been *taken* from us. If our drug consumption or bad habits lead us to state of physical bondage (addiction), then we have *given up* our freedom. Getting it back will be very difficult and painful.

Power

As I have written previously, people are confused by the power they have. What amounts to a greater ability to do something leads many to believe that they, by virtue of that ability, are more free or have greater liberty. Considering my views on liberty and freedom above, the amount of power one wields has nothing to do with how much liberty or freedom they have. So long as they are not molested by others, they have liberty, and so long as they have control over their minds (both physically and in rejecting illegitimate authority of others over them), they have freedom.

But power is still a very important thing. As far as my life is concerned, the more power I have, the less uneasiness I feel (in Misesian terms). That reduction in uneasiness leads me to greater happiness. If my trip from Salt Lake to Chicago can be accomplished in hours instead of months (a question of power, in this case walking versus driving or flying), I have that much more time to devote to other happiness-creating tasks. Likewise for learning

something new about an historical place, communicating with a friend on the other side of the earth, or ensuring a clean and delicious meal. The power I wield today is greater than your average person in every generation prior to mine. It cannot be said, however, that my liberty and freedom are greater.

Final Thoughts

We can say that power can be physically “liberating,” but only in a non-political sense. Our liberty depends on the actions of others, although, certain forms of power can create disincentives for others in their actions toward us. An attacker desiring to violate our liberty may think twice when he sees that we are ready and willing to use a powerful weapon in self-defense. In that case, greater power can lead to securing our liberty, but we must also remember that an even greater power can take it away. Ultimately, our liberty will only be secure when others have chosen to leave us alone. This is best accomplished through persuasion and education. So long as we use our freedom and liberty to convince others that they, too, are and can remain free, liberty for all will prevail.