

The Freedom to Do What Sounds Wrong

Friends of freedom routinely defend the right to do wrong. “If you’re only free to do good things, what freedom do you really have?” Yet on reflection, this sorely underrates the value of freedom. Yes, the freedom to do bad things is important. Much more important, though, is the freedom to do *good things that sound bad*.

Why is this so important? Because Social Desirability Bias is ubiquitous; that’s why. Long psych story short: When the truth sounds bad, human beings deceive and self-deceive. This deceit in turn routinely rationalizes bad policies. Example: Convenience and fun are often better than health and safety. That’s what your actions declare whenever you drive to a restaurant instead of hunkering down in your home. But almost no one wants to give a public speech where they say, “Convenience and fun are often better than health and safety.” Policymakers, in turn, largely ignore the value of convenience and fun. Abandoning your dysfunctional country is often better than “staying to fix it.” But no one wants to openly declare, “I decided my country was a lost cause, so I got out of Dodge.” Policymakers, in turn, vigorously spurn mere “economic migrants.” Breaking inconvenient laws is often the best move, but few scofflaws will ever call a press conference to defend their behavior. Policymakers, in turn, enforce phonebooks’ worth of inane rules. Working hard to get rich yields wonderful social benefits, but hardly anyone on Earth will even admit to *being* rich. Policymakers, in turn, treat the rich as cattle or leeches.

The rhetoric of “freedom” is a great way to neutralize this poison of Social Desirability Bias. Indeed, there is probably no better antidote in the universe. When busybodies try to use government to force everyone to sacrifice tons of convenience and fun for vestigial doses of health and safety, shouting, “I spurn safety for convenience” will get you nowhere. But shouting, “*Freedom!*” like you’re in *Braveheart* just might foil the busybodies’ nefarious efforts. People won’t welcome an immigrant who says he hated his country of birth. But they will smile upon an immigrant who earnestly avows that he came for “freedom.” If you’re caught breaking a stupid law, you won’t escape a guilty verdict by conclusively showing that the law is stupid. You might, though, if you stand up for your “freedom.” A rich man who wants to keep what he’s earned won’t win much sympathy by lecturing the world about economics. His better bet, rather, is to raise the banner of “*Freedom!*”

None of this means that appeals to freedom are – or should be – insincere. Pursuit of convenience and fun, fleeing your hellhole of birth, breaking stupid laws, and working your way to wealth are all bona fide expressions of freedom. My point, rather, is about marketing. Directly defying Social Desirability Bias is ever-tempting, but usually fruitless. If you want to defend good things that sound bad, your best bet is to reframe the debate.

Want to stand up for business and the rich? Your best bet is to change the subject. What were we talking about again? Oh, that's right: *Freedom!*

Isn't this precisely what critics accuse libertarians of doing all the time? Pretty much. What I'm saying is that their accusations are unfair, but we should strive to make them true. Mainstream political thinkers are too wrapped up in their own irrational demagoguery to even acknowledge the existence of Social Desirability Bias. Once you fully absorb the distinction between what *sounds* good and what *is* good, however, the implied political danger will weigh upon your mind. What can rational human beings do in the face of such mindless emotionalism? Wave the flag of freedom. Wave it habitually. Wave it proudly. Even then, you'll probably lose the war of words, but at least you'll have a fighting chance.