

Why Freedom Without Virtue is a Dangerous Thing

At the heart of all politics is the conflict or at least the tension between individual liberty and the common good. This conflict or tension gives rise to an array of paradoxical questions. To what extent, for instance, does my taking of liberties for myself lead to the taking of liberty from others? Do my rights wrong others? If so, are my rights wrong? These paradoxes present a conundrum that we must answer if we are to find the healthy balance between my rights as an individual and the rights of others. It is the paradox encapsulated by Oscar Wilde when he insisted that anarchy is “freedom’s own Judas,” or the paradox summarized by Edmund Burke in the maxim that liberty must be limited in order to be possessed, or the paradox insisted upon by Alexander Solzhenitsyn that self-limitation is the heart of all true freedom.

Let’s put these paradoxes and these wise men to the test. Does the libertine really enjoy liberty? Is “free love” really free or does it come at a terribly high price?

These questions came to my mind this week during a visit to Rome, when I found myself confronted by a young woman, attired punkishly and clearly out of her mind on booze or drugs, or both. She lurched towards me begging aggressively for money while her accomplice, a man slightly older and similarly attired, sprawled swayingly against the wall. They had presumably chosen the path of least resistance, which they would no doubt call freedom, and had done what they wanted and not what they should. They are now addicted to their “freedoms”— the booze, the drugs, and the sex. But for all their proclamations of their “right” to be “free,” they are less free than the rest of us. The truth is that bad habits become an addiction, and those suffering from addiction are

not free. In a perverse paradox, they have enslaved themselves in the name of freedom.

Worse, or at least as bad, they have taken liberties with others in their taking of liberties for themselves. How many naïve young people have been seduced into this life of slavery? How many have been ensnared by these addictive bad habits in the name of an illusory “freedom”? How many owe their slavery to their being abused by those promising them liberty? How many people living vicious and pathetic lives are doing so because they were abused by vicious and pathetic parents or friends?

Having put the three wise men—Wilde, Burke and Solzhenitsyn—to the test, we can perhaps agree that the libertine is not only taking liberties from others but is actually taking liberties from himself when he takes such liberties. It’s a lose-lose situation. He makes his own life miserable in making the lives of his neighbors miserable. There are no winners in this economy of self-gratification.

Perhaps we should end by reminding ourselves that vice leads to viciousness because viciousness is simply the outward manifestation of vice. The opposite of vice is virtue, the latter of which is the free choice to limit our liberty that we might possess it. It is choosing self-limitation as the path of freedom. It is, therefore, a tragedy for both individual freedom and the common good that the word “virtue” has been banished from our vocabulary and curriculum. This bodes ill for the future. A society without virtue will be vicious, and a vicious society will care as little about authentic freedom as it cares about virtue. Can freedom lead to slavery? You better believe it.

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