

Freedom

UPLB Heliiaia 7 May 2022

I have **six questions**, philosophical questions, about freedom. I can't attempt to answer them, especially in 15 minutes. I hope some of the other talks make some progress.

1. The **first** question about freedom is, is there any? That is, do we have free will?

There's not much point debating about how to enhance our freedoms or political questions unless we do have free will – the ability to choose for ourselves whether to do this or that.

Actually that question was my introduction to philosophy over 50 years ago. I had to choose an extra first year university subject and I chose Philosophy I because I thought, I don't know what philosophy is. I know what mathematics or biology or French is about, but I don't see anything left over for philosophy to be about. What is it?

The course was given by one of the greats of Australian philosophy, Graham Nerlich, who died only a few weeks ago.

So the first topic was, do we **have** free will? An interesting topic, and subject to a lot of philosophical argument, but hard to resolve. On the one hand, you wake up and it seems to you that you can easily decide to get up immediately, or leave it till later. You feel absolutely free to do one or the other. On the other hand, you can think that science shows that everything is causally determined by the past. (Or maybe assumes it does.) In that case, your belief that you can decide when to get up is an illusion. It seems that looking into the brain or scanning brainwaves is not going to resolve the question. My Philosophy I course looked at the arguments on both sides and failed to reach a convincing answer. That's philosophy for you.

There has been one major development since then. In the 1980s the psychologist Benjamin Libet performed experiments that seemed to show that the conscious feeling of deciding to move a limb happened **later than** the initial brain activity causing the movement. That would mean that the conscious decision **is too late** to be the real cause of the movement, so the decision cannot be free in the sense of chosen with deliberation. However, the experiments are not easy to interpret and

need some philosophical skill to see what they mean. It's a good example of a case where philosophical skills help to avoid simplistic interpretations.

2. The **second** question about freedom is, is it a good thing, and if so why?

It really is obvious that freedom or liberty is a good thing. Most people think it is among the things most worth having for us humans. Sayings like "Give me liberty or give me death" may be more than **some** people would take literally, but some do. Many countries rightly remember those in their history who gave their lives to fight for the political freedoms that we enjoy today. Imprisonment for a long time is a much-feared punishment, because severe restrictions on freedom are perceived to be terrible. Even more feared are paralyzing diseases that deprive you of your freedom to do almost anything.

So why exactly **is** freedom such an important good? To answer that you need some theory about the nature of humans. The most applicable one is Kant's, building on Aristotle's saying that "man is a rational animal". Kant says that the crucial aspect of human rationality is the ability to act freely for reasons. The absolutely central aspect of being human, according to Kant, is the ability to understand **reasons** for action and to decide freely on the basis of the reasons. Reasons are not the same thing as causes – your brain chemistry may **cause** you to do something but it is not a reason. A reason for action is something like my duty to be well-informed before voting: I ought to do that, so my knowing I ought to do it is a reason for me to do it. Knowing the reason, I ought to follow it. Rocks can't do that, cats can't do it, it's something that distinguishes humans. Thus thinking about freedom leads into the deepest questions about the nature of humans.

3. The **third** question concerns what kind of freedom is important, or how should you use your freedom. Freedom **from** or freedom **to** (or as it's sometimes called, negative or positive freedom)? That is, if you are able to make your own decisions free of restraints, should you still regard yourself as restricted by an absolute moral law? Or can you choose your own values? Some people find the idea of an external moral standard to which they ought to conform to be an intolerable restriction on their freedom; others think that the whole **point** of freedom is to be able to follow your duty. Lord Acton, an expert on the history of liberty, expressed the latter view by saying "Liberty is not the power of doing what we like, but the right of being able

to do what we ought. Liberty enables us to do our duty unhindered by the state, by society, by ignorance and error.” Well, the power to do what we like is a basic aspect of liberty, but there is still the question of how we ought to exercise that power. We can choose our values, but we can’t choose to make them the **right** ones to choose, any more than we can choose the sum of 2 + 2.

4. The **fourth** question is, what are the main **threats** to freedom? Given we’re concerned about freedom and want to preserve and extend it, what threats to it do we need to be on our guard against? It’s usual to distinguish external and internal threats. External ones mean those outside a person that prevent them doing what they want to do, such as political repression or poverty. Vladimir Putin and other dictators have reminded us this year that political repression is still a major threat internationally. Internal threats like addictions and vices are more insidious because they act on your wants and desires. In smoking a cigarette you may be doing what you want, but is your want itself under your control or do you have an addiction that restricts your freedom? Philosophers in past centuries talked a lot about the threat of being a slave to the passions. Training in virtue is needed to give people the skills to exercise their freedom.

A major threat that is somewhere between internal and external is the threat from ignorance and misinformation. What you want depends on what you believe, but what you believe depends on what you’ve been taught and/or what you chose to look at on social media. You have a duty to inform yourself and think critically about the information and misinformation that comes in. One of the most memorable sayings of Jesus was “You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”

Knowledge does increase freedom, ignorance restricts it.

There is one emerging threat to freedom that is a **new** one and I am sure will need to be thought about a lot more in **your** lifetimes. So far, political repression can control people’s bodies, but not their minds. A rousing nineteenth-century Catholic hymn, Faith of Our Fathers, said

“Our fathers, chained in prisons dark,
Were still in heart and conscience free.”

Although political repression can work through censorship and propaganda, it cannot **directly** control heart, mind or conscience. But maybe it will soon. Work is

advanced on artificial intelligence for **mind-reading**, and if minds can be read by the state, they can be controlled by the state. Or eliminated. I believe it's a serious threat.

5. A **fifth** question concerns the balance between freedom, and necessary restraints on freedom. For example, free speech is an important political good, but where does it need to be restricted so that powerful people cannot abuse the less powerful through speech? Where does people's autonomy in accepting risks of getting COVID need to be restricted in the interests of the rights of people who might get COVID from them? Does freedom of religion need to be restricted in any way so as to prevent religions imposing their views on the unwilling? These are perennial problems, where a sober philosophical examination of competing interests in each case can help make reasonable decisions. There should be a strong bias towards freedom, but it can be outweighed by good reasons.
6. The **sixth** question, one of the most basic and most difficult in political philosophy, is how to secure political freedom? Hobbes, in the seventeenth century, posed the problem this way: it's essential to avoid anarchy, which is a war of all against all with the strong oppressing the weak. The way to do that, he said, is for everyone to grant power to the strongest ruler, who will impose order and suppress violence. But then how do you prevent the supreme ruler being a source of oppression themselves? Hobbes says, in effect, that it's impossible. But it's observed that some countries **have** managed to restrain the arbitrary exercise of power by their rulers, by means of a tradition of the rule of law, largely non-corrupt politics and government limited by a constitution. The problem is to understand how to reach that state and maintain it. One pessimistic philosopher of law said that maybe you have to sign Magna Carta and wait five centuries. But that can't be right. Some east Asian countries like Japan, South Korea and Taiwan have achieved that without any long tradition of constitutional democracy. It remains something of a mystery how to transition to that state. It's a major issue, perhaps **the** major issue, in political philosophy.

That's plenty of questions about freedom, but not many answers. Over to you.