What Kind of Magnet Is Freedom?

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Introduction

Freedom is a magnet. Ask any teen chomping at the bit under adult rules. Ask any entrepreneur entangled in endless government regulation. Ask any child in a war zone who longs for freedom from fear.

This "will to freedom" is an appetitive stimulus for us all; a stimulus more foundational than the "will to power" (Nietzsche 1895/1992), which is merely instrumentally valuable for the pursuit of freedom. Freedom, however, is not a one-stop shop. One individual's freedom magnet might be freedom of action, another's freedom from judgement, another's freedom to participate, another's freedom from want, another's freedom from oppression, and another's freedom of sexual expression.

Given that, on the surface, this looks like a mass love affair with freedom, it is critical to see that this magnet can also do great harm. The pull of such a magnet might render a person cynically impotent in the face of what seems to be an ever-receding target. As well, the power of a freedom magnet can blind those in its capture to the havoc created by, on the one hand, too much of one kind of freedom (the proverbial kid in the candy shop) and on the other, the harm created within the social system of which the individual is a part. Popper refers to this ripple effect of personal freedom to other parts of the social net as the "paradox of freedom" (1945, p. 330); an increase in freedom in one part of a social system can seriously decrease freedom in another part.

This paradox of freedom becomes more obviously evident by returning to our original examples. A freedom-seeking rebellious teen can massively decrease the freedom from worry of her parents; unfettered entrepreneurial freedom can decrease the freedom from concern over environmental health for the wider population; a war that ends too soon can establish a tyrant, and so decrease the freedom of future generations, despite allaying the present fear of local children.

Given freedom's radiating net, an argument can be made that for a claim for some kind of freedom to be legitimate, it ought always to be accompanied by a corresponding recognition and willingness to shoulder the responsibility of the decrease in freedom that potentially accompanies it. This will be the focus of what is to follow. Ultimately, the message that will emerge is that, under the spell of any one kind of freedom, we ought always to look at its potential harm, and try to create *a reasoned path* through these bewitching sirens. The corollary of that message will be that this is inevitably an unending endeavor; that we ought never to expect a utopian stopping point, or hope that, one day, freedom will have been secured, and so we can all relax from a job well done. Precisely because increasing freedom in any part of the system implies decreasing freedom in another, we will always have to work for a fine balance.

One exception to this balancing act is the freedom to control one's attraction to freedom. This *self-focused freedom*, or what Kant referred to as autonomy, carries with it the possibility of promoting both the welfare of the individual *and* the social system within which the agent functions. That is, unlike the call of the freedom magnets outside the self, this self-freedom does not create a zero-sum situation. It is for that reason that it will be argued that promoting this self-focused freedom ought to be the ultimate goal of any educational initiative, as indeed it is for most practitioners of Philosophy for/with Children (see e.g., https://www.montclair.edu/iapc/ or http://icpic.org/ and many others). Looking more closely at self-focused freedom will be the second major focus of this paper.

Freedom Within a Social System

In his article entitled "Marx's Theory of the State" (1945/1985), Popper endorses the Marxian assumption that formal freedom (in the sense of the rule of law) does not necessarily translate into material or economic freedom. Thus, Popper says

> I believe that the injustice and inhumanity of the unrestrained 'capitalist system' described by Marx cannot be questioned: but it can be interpreted by what we called the *paradox of freedom.* Freedom, we have seen, defeats itself if it is unlimited. Unlimited freedom means a strong man is free to bully a weak man if he is weak and to rob him of his freedom (p. 330).

Popper goes on to say that just as the state protects its citizens from physical violence, it is the responsibility of the state to protect its citizens from the misuse of economic power. "The state must see to it that nobody need enter into an inequitable arrangement out of fear of starvation, or economic ruin" (p. 331).

But why, then, should we not endorse a Marxist solution, the end point of which is a classless society and the withering away of the state? The answer is that the freedom/power magnet inherent in all of us ensures that there is little possibility of humans living together in an end-state of frozen equilibrium (an imaginary Kingdom of Ends). The tug to acquire more freedom, which translates into the will to acquire more power, will inevitably result in disequilibrium, so that some have more freedom than others. And once the tipping starts, there will be nothing to stop it from continuing to tip, unless a countervailing force nudges it in the other direction.

What is particularly interesting about looking honestly at the inevitable demise of utopian end-states is that it reminds us of a tendency of which we are all guilty. Those of us who are liberals wish fervently for liberals to be forever in power, and we become mightily annoyed when we are forced to deal with those damn right-wing self-serving capitalists. On the other hand, those of us who are conservatives wish fervently for conservatives to be forever in power, and we become mightily annoyed when we have to deal with those demented unrealistic commies. Both sides are guilty of misguided wishes. Unfettered capitalism will, for sure, institute economic servitude on masses of people. On the other hand, legislation that allows for state intervention to mitigate this consequence will also inevitably increase state power —something always to be wary of in juxtaposition to the pint-sized liberty of individuals. So either magnet, on either side, functioning at full velocity, will ultimate destroy freedom. The take-home message of all of this is that we all need to get comfortable with valuing the tension between the countervailing magnets of freedom, and we all of us need to find a

reasoned path within this inter-magnetic space so that we may maximize freedom within the entire system in light of forever changing circumstances.

Reasoning toward Freedom Versus mere Compromise

It is important to note at this juncture, though, that finding a path between two opposing forces should not be understood as forever seeking compromise —something Joshua Greene (2014) demonstrates by asking us to imagine the following:

> Suppose two children are fighting over cake. One wants to split it down the middle. The other wants it all for himself. Then along comes the "pragmatist," ever the catalyst of compromise. "There, there, children. Let's be reasonable now. You get three quarters and you get one quarter" (p. 292).

And moving to the adult arena, Greene asks

> …should grown-up liberals, in the spirit of compromise, favor *more* civil rights for gay couples, but not full civil rights? Should open-minded liberals fight for environmental regulations that are strong but not quite strong enough to stave all global warming? (p. 336)

Since some simple mathematical computation, or what in critical thinking circles is called resorting to the "fallacy of the golden mean" (Gardner 2009, pp. 98-99) is a non-starter, what ought to be our strategy when faced with inter-magnetic conflict? According to Greene, who presents extensive evidence that evolutionary biology ensures that we all inevitably find ourselves within competing tribes that are anchored in different value sets, our goal ought to be the Utilitarian one; that we use our reasoning capacity to maximize happiness.

Given the tangles that Utilitarianism has gotten itself into since its inception, this suggestion doesn't seem particularly helpful. And Greene provides little additional guidance except to say that the ultimate goal ought to be the use of reasoning to help persuade ourselves and others to be less tribalistic (p. 340). He says that this capacity to reason our way above selfish and tribal claims is a meta-moral ideal that "is a distinctly human invention, a product of abstract reasoning. Were we limited to our selfish and tribal instincts, we would be stuck" (p. 345).

Since the kind of reasoning that would keep our selfish and tribal claims at bay requires the onerous, ponderous, time-consuming task of slow thinking (Kahneman 2013), this suggestion may be viewed by some as exhausting and disheartening. And the fact Utilitarianism has been around for over 200 years and yet we still haven't been able to "get it right," is the source of much cynicism and disengagement in many of our youth. It is for that reason that we must spread the good news: not getting it *statically right* is the whole point! As long as we maintain the formal freedom to toss "the bums out" so as to short-circuit a potential cascade into tyranny (Popper, p. 333), our job is to get stuck in there and keep this forever flopping freedom-circle afloat by engaging in slow, non-tribalistic, i.e., unbiased, reasoning as best we can. In so doing, we do our part in helping to maximize the potential freedom of all.

Adam Gopnick (2019), in defending what he refers to as Darwinian liberalism (p. 57), makes a similar claim when he says that "one of the things that distinguishes liberalism is the readiness to accept that social reform is *always* going to be essential. Each time we alter a society, new inequalities and injustices appear and are in need to remedy (p. 45); no sane society reaches a secure balance point" (p. 47).

Freedom Within the Self

Self-focused freedom has been referred to by many names: authenticity, self-legislation, agency, and autonomy are the most common. The philosopher most obviously associated with the notion of autonomy is Immanuel Kant, the same philosopher also associated with promoting reason as the highest good. We should all be like Data, the android on Star Trek, and then we would be autonomous —completely cut off from the pull of our annoying freedom-destroying appetites— or so a not-uncommon interpretation of Kant goes.

But surely, goes the answering critique, Kant must be wrong by suggesting that reason is the pinnacle to which humans ought to strive. According to Hume, reason can only ever have instrumental value; it is inevitably the slave of the passions. And according to findings in contemporary neuroscience (Damasio 2010, p. 175), animate action is always and only instigated by "somatic marking," or what might otherwise be called the pings of emotion.

But if this is true, if reason has no intrinsic value, then the question arises as to why any of us ought ever to attempt to be reasonable? This was a question that Kant took seriously and his answer can be articulated as follows: we ought to be reasonable so that we can maneuver around the forces of the various freedom magnets to which we are subject, and thereby gain the freedom to be in charge of our own freedom. This is valuable because, for self-conscious symbol-using entities, there are two kinds of survival: biological survival, and the survival of the identity of self-conscious self to whom various predicates may or may not stick. In other words, *survival energizes qualitatively different kinds of freedom magnets*: the freedom to *do* what your body (emotions) tells you to do, and the freedom to *be* whom you want to become.

From the point of view of these two kinds of magnets, it can be suggested that the difference between Hume and Kant is not so much centered on the role of reason, but rather with regard to the freedom magnet on which they focus. In reading Hume, one assumes (at least on first reading) that the passions to which he refers are those of the body; in reading Kant, one assumes that the passion that creates a sense of duty is in service of ensuring the survival of the self as a self-legislator.

The difference between these two kinds of freedom magnets is also interestingly in line with contemporary psychological studies done on the difference between seeking happiness versus seeking meaning[1] (Baumeister 2018). Baumeister notes that while meaning and happiness often overlap, they are not the same, and indeed, often compete (p. 21). Baumeister says of happiness that presumably it "began in evolution when organisms felt pleasure in connection with having their needs satisfied" (p. 21). Meaningfulness, however, has to do with judgements about the self; it is tied to earning the respect of one's peers or even from imagined posterity (p. 21). Studies have shown that the higher importance people assigned to identity issues, the more meaningful they considered their lives (p. 29). Other differences included the fact that people who judge themselves as "takers" tend to score high on happiness, while people who judge themselves as "givers" tend to score high on meaning (p. 26); people who had high scores on happiness tended to live in "the now," while people who had high

scores on meaning tended to view their lives from a more temporal spread (pp. 24-26); and people who focused on happiness were less focused on self-control (with some even viewing self-control as self-harming (p. 31)), while self-control was absolutely critical for enhancing meaning.

In summarizing these findings, Baumeister concludes that "The happy life is one of ease and enjoyment, focused on taking pleasures in the present. The meaningful life is oriented toward the future, concerned with constructing and expressing the self, and heavily involved in sociocultural activities" (p. 32). He adds that we should assume that a meaningful life will include stress and struggle, failures and disappointments; but that these *unhappy* phases ought to be seen as part of parcel of a highly *meaningful* life.

What is particularly interesting about this body/happiness versus self/meaning distinction is that it beckons us to have another look at Utilitarianism: In particular, Mill's attempt to differentiate between what he refers to as lower and higher pleasures which suggests that he would concur with Baumeister's happiness/meaning distinction (though he would refer to both as happiness). Thus, Mill (1962) says that human beings have faculties more elevated than the animal appetites, and when once made conscious of them, do not regard anything as happiness which does not include their gratification (p. 258). And that there is no known Epicurean theory of life which does not assign to the pleasures of the intellect, of the feelings and imagination, and of moral sentiments, a much higher value as pleasures than to those of mere sensation (p. 258). And we may attribute this to a sense of *dignity* which all human beings possess in proportion to their higher faculties (p. 260). And, most famously, that surely "it is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be a Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied. And if the fool or the pig are of a different opinion, it is because they only know their own side of the question. The other party to the comparison knows both sides" (p. 260).

It is of note that Mill's use of the term "dignity" above is very much an echo of Kant. In explaining why we should obey our own reasoning that tells us, for example, that fairness requires that I do the housework this weekend in opposition to the pleasure-pull of going out with my pals, Kant (1964) says we should do so "not because of any further motive of future advantage, but from the idea of the *dignity* of a rational being who obeys no law other than that which he at the same time enacts himself" (p. 102). And he goes on to say

> Reason must look upon itself as the author of its own principles independently of any alien influences. Therefore, as practical reason or as the will of a rational being, it must be regarded by itself as free; that is, the will of a rational being can be a will of his own only under the Idea of freedom, ... (p. 116).

In more contemporary terms, the above can be translated as follows: even if I am free to go out with my pals, I would know full well that it is my various bodily appetites that are in the driver's seat. By contrast, if I reason that I should not go out because it would be "unfair," since I am the one doing the reasoning, I am the one in the driver's seat. It is in this sense that self-legislation, or self-focused freedom, according to Kant, is the ultimate of all freedom magnets; it is the source of dignity.[2]

Nurturing the Magnet of Self-Creation

If we suppose that self-legislation, or autonomy, or the seeking of meaning, or the seeking of higher pleasures, is the ultimate of all freedom magnets, then the question arises as to why is it not more pervasive?

An answer can be found in Mill's assertion that "if the fool or the pig are of a different opinion, it is because they only know their own side of the question. The other party to the comparison knows both sides" (p. 260). What this quote suggests is that, while all animate beings are inevitably subject to bodily appetites and hence know that side of the equation, they either cannot or may not be aware of the possibility and importance of the other side of the equation, i.e., self-creation.

This would be in line with Charles Taylor's view (2003) that, in earlier times, self-creation was never on the menu, as identity was predetermined and fixed by social structures such as class, gender, ethnicity, etc. Since the possibility of self-creation in more contemporary times is the new kid on the block, it is usually ignored, and so results in what Taylor calls "malaise of modernity"; a pervasive sense of alienation and a lack of orientation as to who one is and how to become who one wants to be. This, then, according to Taylor, is the challenge of our age (p. 72); we all must get involved in formulating a far more precise and hence demanding notion of what the ideal of authentic self-creation requires of us.

Taylor's challenge is a daunting one in light of the fact that our young people are subject, as never before, to enormous pig-pressures; they are endlessly bombarded with marketing forces, the goal of which is to ramp up the chatter of their appetites to buy, buy, buy so that they can have fun, fun, fun; as well as being non-stop exposed to social media that ramps up the envy of all the pleasures that other folks are enjoying. In Mill's terms, this is all one-sided experience. Making visible the possibility and existential importance of self-creation is thus an educational imperative. How do we do that? How do we nurture the magnet of self-creation?

It would seem that there are at least two necessary components (both of which are central to the practice of Philosophy for/with Children): (1) that aside from the topics that are the traditional fare in academia, students should also be required to seriously focus on topics that are relevant to the students' lives and day-to-day decision-making, and (2) that students learn how to think impartially when considering the potential answers to these highly contentious issues. Let us deal with these in turn.

Relevant Topics

With regard to relevant topics, it is imperative that we first understand that if we want to get students to see that it *matters* what and how much they buy, what they ingest, who they sleep with, how they interact with social media, what they say and don't say, what they do and don't do, etc., then education clearly must focus on precisely the sorts of situations that students, in fact, find themselves in, and in which they will, in fact, have to make self-defining decisions. Gardner (2017) refers to this as nurturing a "gathering glance" (p. 209).

This notion of "a gathering glance"—of gathering up the fragments of one's daily life and having a good hard look —is in step with Pierre Hadot (2002) who recognizes that wisdom, i.e., how an individual acts in the world, must be engendered by the individual herself focusing on her own value judgments (p. 102). Hadot goes on to say that discourse is only truly philosophical if it transforms into a way of life (p. 173), and that risk of the philosopher is that s/he will turn love of wisdom into love of words.

Despairing of the present state of philosophical education, Hadot says:

> It must be admitted that there is a radical opposition between the ancient philosophical school, which address individuals in order to transform their entire personality, and the university, whose mission is to give out a diploma which corresponds to a certain level of objective knowledge. (p. 260).

He goes on to say that the goal of philosophy should be to train people for careers as human beings (p, 260); that the practice of philosophy should be essentially "an effort to become aware of ourselves, our being-in-the world, and our being-with-others" (p. 276).

Learning to Think Impartially

Impartiality requires, referring again to Hadot (2002), that one seek to attain a universal vision by putting ourselves in the place of others and transcending our own partiality (p. 276) —a state that pre-exists egotism and egocentricity (p. 279). With regard to agency in the sense of being in charge of the definition of who one is, clearly impartial reasoning (Gardner 2017) or what Darwell calls "second personal" dialogue, is critical because it is the strongest kind of glue to keep what Gardner and Anderson (2015) refer to as "self-descriptives" in place. This is so because biased self-definitions are inherently unstable: if one is constantly having to defend whether or not, for example, one is courageous by focusing solely on one's biased definition, as Garcin did in Sartre's play *No Exit* (1989), one's view of oneself will be worryingly precarious, as it was for Garcin, particularly when challenged by an opposing viewpoint.

Freedom within the Self and (Not Versus) the Social System

If the above is true, if impartial thinking on relevant topics is a necessary condition of self-creation, then the startling implication that we come to is that this sort of objective (non-tribalistic) second-personal, impartial reasoning with regard to every day ordinary issues is exactly the *same* sort of reasoning that is necessary to keep the forever flopping circle of *inter*personal freedom afloat. That is, this sort of reasoning not only secures one's self descriptives, it is also the foundation for creating a reasoned path between one's own freedom-claims and their inevitable accompanying decrease in freedom elsewhere in the social system. As it turns out, then, focusing on one's own welfare and focusing on the welfare of society of which one is a part are not antagonistic concerns: They are one and the same. Maximizing the freedom of the self maximizes the freedom of the social system of which one is apart.

Happiness versus Autonomy

We are not brains in a vat —though some readings of Kant might hint that that is his ideal. But that cannot be his ideal, because if we were brains in a vat, we would have no identifiable self. Identity is a product of impartially working through our passions in such a way that we know that that configuration, that is always in flux, is, as far as possible, justified from the point of view of an impartial spectator. Our passions are what make up the original marble out of which reason can continuously sculpt an ever-evolving identity.

So we should celebrate the passions: the love we have for our significant others, the glass of wine with a friend, the exhilaration of visiting new places, the joy of playing with a puppy. Autonomy does not demand misanthropy, nor an austere unhappy life, nor that we pull away from all the ups and downs of life's roller coaster. Quite the contrary. We can create who it is that we want to become only out of the material we have, and that, importantly, includes all the varying magnet-contexts in which we find ourselves.

In his book *Man's Search for Meaning* (1984), Victor Frankl emphasizes this very point when he says that it is worse than useless to think that we can construct an identity though armchair philosophizing about what kind of person we want to become.

> One should not search for an abstract meaning in life —it is like asking what is the best chess move in the world. Each person is questioned by his life. He can only answer to life by answering for his own life. To life, he can only respond by being responsible (p. 131). Life ultimately means taking responsibility to find the right answer to its problems and to fulfill the tasks which it constantly sets for each individual (p. 98).

But, then, one might ask, what happens when the context is barren? How can one create a self when the context is such that one looks upon it with distain, even horror? Even then, Frankl argues (and as a prisoner in a Nazi concentration camp he should know), one nonetheless is responsible for choosing one's attitude (p. 86) toward the circumstances over which one has no control. All our appetitive freedom magnets can be crushed, yet the freedom to be who it is that we choose to be *in the circumstances that we find ourselves in* —even if the only choice is how to bare our own suffering (p. 87)— is always ours.

Of course, a rich environment is often preferable, as it activates all kinds of appetites, which, in turn, will provide the raw material for the creation of a solid self. On the other hand, one must beware that a rich environment can also throw the hedonist drive into full throttle —a tactic that Frankl says is inevitably self-defeating (p. 162). This fact, that pursuing happiness can actually decrease happiness is supported by the findings of a recent study (Fritz and Lyubomirsky 2018) that notes that

> *over*valuing happiness (i.e., strongly agreeing with statements like, 'How happy I am in any given moment says a lot about how worthwhile my life is') may be linked with lower well-being. In clinical populations, overvaluing happiness is associated with both self-reported and clinical-related depressive symptoms (p. 106).

Fritz and Lyubomirsky conclude that, in combination with other studies, these findings suggest that "individuals who are too highly motivated to become happier —those who are

preoccupied with being happy and who seek happiness too often and too directly— may find themselves counterintuitively thwarting their own happiness" (pp. 106-7).

Thus, instead of chasing after all the goodies that life might have to offer, Frankl suggests instead that we pursue a course that we think will make us *worthy of being happy* (p. 162), a comment that interestingly echoes Kant, who says that "a good will seems to constitute the indispensable condition of our very worthiness to be happy" (p. 61).

Conclusion

Freedom is a magnet.

Those of us in the field of education ought to be acutely aware that not only are young people driven to be free to do what they want to do, they are also subject to enormous corporate and social media pressures that ramp up those magnetic forces. Despite our worries, we need to assiduously askew the tendency to engage in puritanical finger-wagging in an effort to get in the way of this pursuit of narcissistic hedonism.

As Frankl has pointed out, no one can tell another what their purpose in life ought to be (p. 11). Each of us lives a unique life in unique circumstances, so each of us must take responsibility for carving out ourselves, given the raw material of our talents, our history, our opportunities, and challenges.

Our job as educators, then, is to introduce our students to the possibility of experiencing what Mill referred to as higher pleasures, what Kant referred to as autonomy, what Frankl refers to as meaning and what is here referred to as the freedom to get in control of one's own freedom magnets. This kind of education, at least initially, can appear to students in search of happiness as the antithesis of what they seek. This is so because this kind of education can be extremely disquieting, in that it necessitates an exposure to the tension between who it is that they are and who they ought to become, even from their own standpoint (Frankl, p. 127). Still, Frankl says, we should not be hesitant about challenging others with a potential meaning for them to fulfil (p. 127).

We need to be courageous in avoiding the not uncommon dangerous misconception of mental hygiene; that what humans need is equilibrium or, as it is called in biology, "homeostasis"; the tensionless state of a happy pig. What humans really need is the striving and struggling for a worthwhile goal, a freely chosen task (Frankl, p. 127). What humans need is to be prepared for a fall, and then another fall, as these are inevitably part and parcel of the never-ending road to autonomy and meaning.

So, ultimately, Kant was right. Being free to be in charge of our freedom magnets is the highest good, and the only road to that goal is to be prepared to engage in impartial reasoning with regard to all the every-day mundane decisions that forever challenge us —to try to imagine what a Kingdom of Ends would decide in the various situations one finds oneself in.

And to the degree that Kant was also right that this sort reasoning is the source of moral judgment, and to the degree that moral reasoning, in turn, enhances societal wellbeing (as Greene suggests), it seems to follow that the best way to promote ethical interaction, or societal wellbeing, is, paradoxically, to encourage our youth to pursue their own highest good. And to the degree that

educational initiatives such as Philosophy for/with Children engage participants in dialogical impartial reasoning that focuses on issues that are *relevant* to self-creation (such as what counts as courage in situation x), to that degree such initiatives are doing double duty with regard to freedom: by promoting freedom within the self, they are also promoting freedom within the social system of which the agent is a part.

With this insight in mind, it may be that

> [W]e can go forward with renewed enthusiasm, and perhaps succeed where Dewey failed a hundred years ago, convincing those mired in educational bureaucracy that the payoff of embracing a process with a clear vision for educating thought that guides behavior is one that can no longer be responsibly ignored. Whether we like it or not, our kids are in charge of their own actions; for God's sake let us give them the tools to do so wisely (Gardner, 2011, p.80).

Endnotes

[1] In terms of measurement, the 3 happiness items were "In general, I consider myself happy," "Taking all things together, I feel I am happy," and "Compared to most of my peers, I consider myself happy." The 3 meaning items were "In general, I consider my life to be meaningful," "Taking all things together, I feel my life is meaningful," and "Compared to most of my peers, my life is meaningful."

[2] In contrast to the potential for self-contempt and inward abhorrence if the demands of objective reason are ignored (p. 93).

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