

To be free: beliefs, identities, and actions

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The fundamental sense of freedom is freedom from chains, from imprisonment, from enslavement by others. The rest is extension of this sense, or else metaphor.

— Isaiah Berlin, *Four Essays on Liberty* (1969)

On the one hand, there are words whose original meanings came from the natural world and which had no cultural connotations: atom, sun, light, and energy, may be such natural words. Some of these natural words were then applied, metaphorically, to social affairs: for example, “Now is the winter of our discontent/Made glorious summer by this sun of York;” (William Shakespeare, *Richard III* 1:1, 1593). On the other hand, there are words whose original meanings came from society with no physical connotations: slave, and free, may be such social words. Some social words are then applied, metaphorically, to non-social topics: for example, there are bus slave devices in computing, degrees of freedom in statistics, free radicals in chemistry, and free-flowing rivers.

This is a gross oversimplification because there must be many interactions between the physical and the cultural, and in any case many words have origins that precede written records so that we cannot be sure of those origins. Some, such as Noam Chomsky, think that in many cases the origin is nowhere on the continuum from physical to cultural, but that the idea of a triangle, say, is innate to humans and does not originate from the physical or the cultural. Others such as Abraham Seidenberg think that the idea of triangle was invented in one society and then spread by cultural diffusion to other societies. Even if mathematical ideas such as triangle are innate, which is debatable, there are many ideas that are not innate, and I feel sure that “free” is such a word – it is not innate, it is

learned. The idea we call by the name “freedom” in English is cultural in origin, with the idea predating even early forms of English, and it has remained a crucial cultural idea in different ways for different societies (freedom being understood by contrast to those who were in bondage).

Take, for example, the US national anthem, with its refrain:

O’er the land of the free, and the home of the brave.
— Francis Scott Key, *The Star-Spangled Banner* (1814)

Given that Francis Scott Key was a slave owner, “the land of the free” is shorthand for “the land of the free white people”, and “the brave” were those superior people who had no owners to fear - they were not slaves. Free, freedom, and allied notions are defined by contrast to the dire state of slaves, as is shown clearly by the third stanza of the anthem:

...
No refuge could save the hireling and slave
From the terror of flight, or the gloom of the grave:
And the star-spangled banner, in triumph doth wave
O’er the land of the free and the home of the brave.
— Francis Scott Key, *The Star-Spangled Banner* (1814)

This stanza is not often sung - because of its off-colour sentiments? - and it seems fairly terrified and gloomy. Perhaps Toni Morrison was right:

For a people who made much of the ‘newness’ - their potential, freedom, and innocence - it is striking how dour, how troubled, how frightened and haunted our early and founding literature truly is.
— Toni Morrison, *Playing in the dark: Whiteness and the literary imagination* (1992)

Freedom has become applied to many aspects of human social life as has the word free, and it cannot be emphasized enough that freedom is essentially a social construct, deriving from not being enslaved. The construct then becomes metaphorically applied to other notions, such as free will - are our ideas and

behaviours our own, or are we slaves to some deterministic master? The subject of much debate in philosophy, definitions of free will are difficult to give without appeal to a slave-like situation. At a less aetherial level “the ability to act or make choices as a free and autonomous being and not solely as a result of compulsion or predestination” (*MSN encarta*) gives the sense, as does Octavia’s claim that “To come thus was I not constrain'd, but did/On my free will” (William Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra* 3:6, 1623).

People live in society, in interaction with other people, and I want look at three different aspects of freedom with respect to people in society:

- free expression of a person’s *thoughts* (say, religious beliefs),
- free expression of a person’s *identities* in relation other people (say, being a Jehovah’s Witness), and
- free expression of a person’s *actions* (say, obscuring a offensive message on your number plate).

Though there are overlaps between these aspects they can be sufficiently distinguished to help us obtain more traction. Simplistically, these aspects are studied in the fields of psychology, social psychology, and sociology.

A fourth aspect is studied in many fields, and is not directly connected to free expression as such: that is, the promotion of freedom as an ideology – ideologies that underpin such statements as “Land of the free”, “We love freedom”, or “Live free or die”. An ideology of freedom is not necessarily connected with free expression, for it is an *ideology* and can be interpreted in many ways (often it is difficult to give any clear idea of an ideology’s content).

An illuminating example on freedom having many different interpretations is from the US state of New Hampshire. US states have mottos, and those mottos appear in many places, including car number plates. The mottos range from simple assertions such as “The crossroads of America” (Indiana) to ideological declarations such as “Live free or die” (New Hampshire). New Hampshire’s almost suicidal motto is taken from a letter by John Stark in 1809 to a revolutionary war reunion – “Live free or die: Death is not the worst of evils”, probably referring to

freedom from (British) bondage. As is often the case, people in New Hampshire had a flexible idea of freedom, and six years after the reunion (1815) New Hampshire's rulers passed a law stipulating that only free white citizens could be enrolled in the state militia. This law was important enough to be noted in the majority opinion in (Dred) *Scott v Sandford* (US Supreme Court, 1856) in support for white people's view of the lower mentality of Negroes:

By the laws of New Hampshire, collected and finally passed in 1815, no one was permitted to be enrolled in the militia of the State, but free white citizens; and the same provision is found in a subsequent collection of the laws, made in 1855. *Nothing could more strongly mark the entire repudiation of the African race.*

— US Supreme Court, *Scott v Sandford* (1856) [My emphasis.]

Many years later (1945) the New Hampshire legislature adopted a variant of Stark's statement as the state motto (without death and evil), and in 1969 the motto became a slogan - "Live free or die" was mandatory on private car number plates in New Hampshire. The impetus came from Governor Meldrim Thomson, a conservative ideologue who believed freedom was for him and his ideas - but not necessarily for other people. To give some idea of how right-wing were his conservative views, Thomson believed that Martin Luther King was a "man of immoral character whose frequent associations with leading agents of communism is well established." (*Letter* to President Ronald Reagan about why not to establish Martin Luther King day, 1983).

George Maynard (a Jehovah's Witness) received a citation (1974) for covering the slogan on his number plate with tape. Maynard thought the slogan implied he should give his life to the state and not to God: "I refuse to be coerced by the State into advertising a slogan which I find morally, ethically, religiously and politically abhorrent." He refused to pay the fine of \$25 and was sent to jail. A Federal court reversed the decision, and said Maynard was free to cover up the slogan. Thomson of live-free New Hampshire appealed to the US Supreme Court, asking the justices for freedom to restrict Maynard's freedom of action (*Wooley v*

Maynard, 1977) in order to promote the state's live-free ideology. In his autobiography Thomson (*Live free or die*, 1979) wrote "I have fought the holy cause of liberty against the sinister encroachments of the federal government", but he was personally responsible for many encroachments on personal freedom by the state's government

Freedom (or living free) did not play a great part in the state's case, and the emphasis was on more insubstantial interests such as helping distinguish private vehicles from commercial vehicles, or promoting appreciation of state history, individualism, and state pride. The final court opinion included:

The State's second claimed interest is not ideologically neutral. The State is seeking to communicate to others an official view as to proper appreciation of history, state pride, and individualism. Of course, the State may legitimately pursue such interests in any number of ways. However, where the State's interest is to disseminate an ideology, no matter how acceptable to some, such interest cannot outweigh an individual's First Amendment right to avoid becoming the courier for such message.

— US Supreme Court, *Wooley v Maynard* (1977)

In an affidavit to the court (quoted in a footnote to the opinion) Maynard wrote:

[B]y religious training and belief, I believe my 'government' - Jehovah's Kingdom - offers everlasting life. It would be contrary to that belief to give up my life for the state, even if it meant living in bondage. Although I obey all laws of the State not in conflict with my conscience, this slogan is directly at odds with my deeply held religious convictions. ... I also disagree with the motto on political grounds. I believe that life is more precious than freedom.

— US Supreme Court, *Wooley v Maynard* (1977)

["[B]y" and "... " appear in the original footnote.]

The original live-free slogan is about freedom from bondage, and to protect the slogan, law officers were willing to put a man in bondage. The purpose behind the prosecution is most troubling: attacking personal freedom to protect a state's ideology of freedom means the idea of personal freedom is considered unimpor-

tant.

If only it were true:

Be who you are and say what you feel, because those who mind don't matter
and those who matter don't mind.

— Dr Seuss (attributed)

It is possible to conceal either beliefs or identities, but actions are less likely to be concealed. Therefore actions can be punished by the rulers, whereas beliefs and identities (being in the mind) cannot be punished by the rulers unless revealed by actions.