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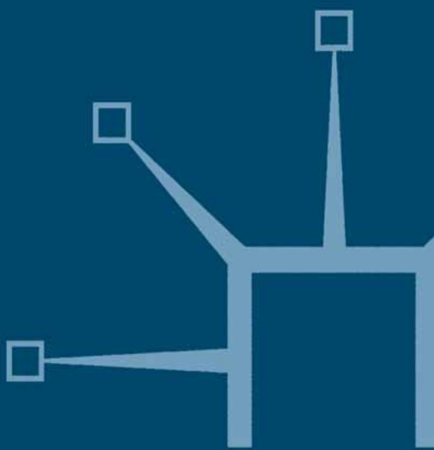
RETHINKING FREEDOM

WHY FREEDOM HAS LOST ITS MEANING AND WHAT CAN BE DONE TO SAVE IT

C. Fred Alford



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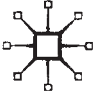

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To all those who talked with me about freedom

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Preface

Almost every day the term “freedom” loses a little more of its meaning, becoming an all purpose word for everything that is good about our way of life. I think that is why I wrote this book. Or rather, it is why I went through the process of writing this book, which involved going around asking people what they thought freedom meant, comparing their answers to the answers of some of the great philosophers of freedom. Though it took me several years, I learned a lot in the process, and I think I now understand not only what the term “freedom” means but why it is so hard to get a grip on the term. Not only that, but I think I better understand the strange affinity of freedom for constraint: why so many people are willing to cover their chains with garlands of flowers, so as to call them signs of their freedom. About freedom there are daily a dozen permutations, and seldom anything new under the sun.

I think it is my friend and colleague Roger Lewin who came up with the term “freedom with,” but it could have been me in discussion with him. That’s the way it works with “freedom with.”

From my wife Elly, I’ve learned about the freedom that comes from fully investing oneself in an artistic performance.

Sean Eudaily taught me about the freedom of jazz, the freedom of “in the groove.”

Victor Wolfenstein taught me what Donovan had to say about freedom in his lovely song “Colours.”

Lynne Layton made a number of helpful comments. I remember particularly her remark that Alasdair MacIntyre should not get all the credit for recognizing human dependence; this has been a leading theme of many feminists for several decades now.

Sam Brown directed me to “Eye Promise,” but would not want to be associated with its project in any way.

Jeffrey Stepnisky told me about the General Social Survey’s freedom module, and helped me gain access to the data.

Chapter 1
Freedom or Power?

Over the last several years, I've been talking with people about freedom. It seems like an important topic. The United States claims to be fighting for freedom all over the world. "Freedom is the president's favorite foreign policy term these days," says *The Washington Post* (June 23, 2002, B1). "Freedom is an all-purpose word he employs to define a high purpose, defend action on the ground or parry awkward questions." "Freedom itself is under attack," President George W. Bush declared in the terrible days after September 11. If the people I talked with care relatively little for freedom, and hardly at all for the political freedom about which the president of the United States is so passionate, then there is much to wonder and worry about.

Most people I spoke with informally define freedom as the possession of money and power, or they devalued freedom compared to money and power. The term "informally define" means that this is how they responded to my first question, "What's freedom?" This question was designed to elicit an informant's working definition of freedom without appearing to call for a formal definition. To be sure, money and power are not most people's last words on the subject, just the first; in one way or another, most of them who answered in this fashion said they regretted having to do so. But they did.

"Maybe money can't buy happiness, but money buys freedom. Freedom means having enough money to do what I want," said one young woman, who was echoed by many others. It was the leading theme.

"You've got to have the resources if you want to be free," said another.

What resources, I asked? Money?

"No, not just money, but education, a decent job. Freedom takes power. No one is going to give it to you."

Most talked in these terms. Freedom is not about being left alone by others; nor is freedom about such effete rights as free speech. Many disparaged the concept. Partly because they took it for granted, but also

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because it doesn't matter if you can say what you want if you can't do what you want.

"Of course I can say anything I want," said John, one of my informants. "I have the freedom to say what I want, and you have the freedom to ignore me. So does everyone else. So what's the point? I don't want freedom to say what I want. I want freedom to do what I want."

Doesn't freedom of speech mean anything, I asked?

"Not really. It's just a symbol."

It is in this context that the comment by Anita, another of my informants, should be understood. "I've got all the freedom I need," she said. "I don't need any more freedom. What I need is some control over my own life."

What do you mean "all the freedom you need," I asked in genuine puzzlement.

"I mean that I can say what I want and nobody is going to put me in jail. But what I really need is a job that pays enough so I can work part-time and still go to school. Now that would be real freedom."

It is hard for me to convey the tone of dismissal, often bordering on contempt, with which many people spoke about what, for now, I will call formal freedom, the freedoms enshrined in the Bill of Rights for example. Nor is it a matter of a relatively privileged group of Americans (especially when compared to their beleaguered counterparts all over the world) simply assuming formal freedom as their birthright. Most did, but it would be more accurate to say that for most people I spoke with, formal freedom has been rendered meaningless by overuse and abuse of the term.

One might conclude from all this that teachers and other cultural workers should define and use the terms associated with formal freedom more precisely, so that freedom itself regains something of its original aura. My research suggests that the problem is more complex, rooted in a psychological and material reality that will not readily surrender to sound intellectual hygiene. In any case, mine is not a philosophical study of the true meaning of a term that is at risk of losing all meaning. Mine is a social, political, and psychological account of why freedom seems to have lost its meaning, and what might be done to restore it. The answer (to jump ahead to the last two chapters) has more to do with politics than philosophy.

One reason freedom has lost its meaning is because the term has become a cudgel with which to pummel political opponents. On the Diane Rheem National Public Radio talk show (February 15, 2001), a lobbyist for the assisted living industry said that what seniors want most

is "freedom of choice." They hate to have their "freedom taken away," but long to have "all their options open," so that they can remain "independent and free." Sure seniors want this. We all do. But, seniors also want to be taken care of, not just to have someone there if they fall or become sick; they want to have their needs anticipated, to be comforted, to live in a predictable and secure environment, and so forth. I interviewed several seniors about freedom, and this—no surprise—is what they said. "I'm not free if I have to worry about falling or getting sick, and lying on the bathroom floor for hours. What kind of freedom is that?" is how one senior put it. Something about freedom blinds us to the otherwise obvious fact that it is the balance between autonomy and care that constitutes the experience of freedom. Characterizing this blinding "something" is the topic of my manuscript.

To be sure, the lobbyist was using the term "freedom" as former House Majority Leader Richard Armey recommends. "No matter what cause you advocate, you must sell it in the language of freedom" (Foner, 1998, 324–325). In other words, the lobbyist was using the term "freedom" in a political battle against laws regulating the quality of care in assisted living facilities. But there is something about the term, the concept, and even the experience of freedom that lends itself to this misuse. This stems, I believe, from the fact that the experience of freedom depends upon our not being constantly reminded of how dependent we are on others in virtually every aspect of our lives. Trouble is, not being reminded of this fact makes it easier to deny how much we depend on others for our freedom, indeed for our lives. In one way or another, this is the theme of my manuscript.

In *Moral Freedom*, Alan Wolfe (2001, 100, 226) writes, "the twenty-first century will be the century of moral freedom." With the term "moral freedom," he means the liberty of the individual to determine for him or herself what is right and good, not just to listen to God, but to talk back, as Wolfe puts it. Toward moral freedom, Wolfe (2001, 231) takes up an attitude like that of Alexis de Tocqueville toward democracy in *Democracy in America*, written in the 1830s to explain how democracy might be made safe for the rest of the world, especially France. Like Tocqueville on democracy, Wolfe holds that moral freedom may not be a good thing, but it's the coming thing, so we had better get used to it.

Perhaps, but it turns out that we shall have to live with more than moral freedom. We shall have to live with its counterpart, moral fear. Wolfe does not appreciate this point. Neither did I until I had completed my research and begun to think about the implications. If one value is as good as another, or at least there is no one in authority to say otherwise, not even God, then, not just moral freedom but moral fear is the outcome.

The reason, people tell me (though of course I must interpret their answers in order to reach this conclusion), is that when all values are equal, the power to get what one wants becomes the only standard. Moral freedom turns into the devaluation of freedom in the name of power, as power is the only value one can count on, the universal medium of moral exchange in a world in which all values are equal. In other words, freedom becomes a luxury. What is desired above all else is the power to protect oneself against the incursions of others. Insulation becomes freedom. Anyone familiar with Thomas Hobbes's account of the state of nature in *Leviathan*, where life is nasty, brutish, and short, will recognize the reasoning. It is surprising, however, that one finds similar reasoning among civilized citizens of a civilized society.

Moral freedom, as Wolfe calls it, leads directly to a moral fear that renders freedom largely irrelevant to people's lives. This is the unhappy conclusion to which my data have driven me. My data *are* the people I talked with. Occasionally I refer to them as informants, a term popular in the anthropological literature. The term seems appropriate. Often I felt as though I was studying a strange new tribe—American young people—comparing and contrasting their views of freedom with that of a more familiar tribe (at least to me)—middle-aged and older Americans.[1]

How strange was this tribe? The question may be read in several ways, one suggesting that the people I spoke with were atypical. True enough: my informants were younger than average, and more diverse than average. They were, in other words, no random sample of the population. Nevertheless, there was not much difference between what the people I spoke with said about freedom on a forced-choice questionnaire and what a large group of randomly selected subjects said about freedom on the General Social Survey (GSS), "generally considered the premier social science instrument for monitoring social life and trends in the United States," according to its own modest self-description. The real difference is between answering questions on a survey, many of which seem to have an ideologically correct answer, and talking about freedom in an unstructured interview. (See the Research Appendix for details of this comparison, in which I asked about 50 people—including a number who went on to talk with me about freedom, and all of whom fit the profile of the average younger informant—to answer the same questions as those on the GSS "freedom module.")

Though I spoke with people of all ages, I ended up talking with about twice as many younger informants (18–30 years) as older ones (31–74 years). One reason I focus on young people is that it was they who

said the most fascinating and disturbing things about freedom. The other reason is that young people are the future. Though aspects of their views of freedom will surely mellow as they grow older, I argue (but cannot prove) that the difference between younger and older is not just a consequence of maturation. The difference has to do with the world that young people have grown up in.

Many of the young people interviewed attend, or attended, the state university where I teach. Most of them are putting or put themselves through school, and the reader should not imagine that they are students of a couple of generations ago. A number are married; quite a few have children. None are poor, but they are not well-off, and few come from wealthy families. This influences what they think about freedom. Several spoke of making decisions that revealed real economic pressure, such as being unable to have a car repaired and so taking the bus.

When I refer to "young people," I mean the young people I spoke with. While mine is a diverse sample, it is not random, and so generalizations must be made with caution. When I refer to "people," I mean all the people I spoke with, older as well as younger. Again, generalizations must be made with caution, but there is no reason to think this was an especially odd lot, and good reason to think it was not: above all the similarity between the answers of those I interviewed on the GSS and the answers of a large randomly chosen sample on the GSS.

Race is a complicated category these days. The men and women I spoke with identified themselves with half a dozen "racial" groups: white, black, Indians, Hispanics, Asians, and mixed. Cosmopolitan, with family connections all over the world, this is probably the most unusual quality of this diverse but nonrandom sample. About 70 percent were self-identified white. All but two are American citizens. Christian, Jew, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, and Confucian: this list does not exhaust the religious diversity of the people I talked with. Though race and ethnicity seemed to influence people's responses, the sample was not large enough to draw any conclusions. Remarkable is how similar diverse people sounded, not how different. (The Research Appendix contains more demographic details.)

The image that comes to mind is Tocqueville's fable of the forest, his account of how Americans from different walks of life seem to end up thinking and believing the same thing, even as they live in isolation from one another, at least compared to the feudal order with which Tocqueville was familiar in France. Tocqueville called this isolation "individualism." The term was not a compliment. In my version of Tocqueville's fable,

the denizens of the forest are each of a different race and religion, but they all end up at the same spot, or want to.

> Variety is disappearing from within the human species. They . . . become more alike even though they have not imitated each other. They are like travelers dispersed in a great forest in which all the paths end at the same point. If all perceive the central point at once and direct their steps in this direction, they are insensibly brought nearer to one another without seeking each other, without perceiving and without knowing each other, and they will finally be surprised to see themselves gathered in the same place. (Tocqueville, 2000, 588)

This place is the possession of enough money and power to protect oneself from the will of others.

Among academics with whom I have shared my results, this conclusion seems to be the most surprising: that diverse people see freedom in the same way. Aren't race, sex, and ethnicity the leading categories of existence, the experience that structures everything we hold dear? Perhaps, but not as far as freedom is concerned. In half a dozen different accents, American freedom sounds much the same. I do not know if this implies that academics should rethink the centrality of race, sex, and ethnicity. Freedom is only one dimension of experience, albeit an important one. In any case, the single most important demographic variable turns out to be age, a category not quite so popular with (aging?) academics. The second most important variable seems to be income, but there were not enough wealthy young people to draw any firm conclusions.

Most of the interviews were conducted before the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, but over a third were conducted afterward. That terrible event didn't seem to make much difference in how people talked about freedom. Though I didn't ask people about the terrorist attacks, there was plenty of opportunity for them to bring up the topic had they wanted to; few did. Probably because my questions were designed to evoke more personal experiences of freedom. Nothing is more important than an individual's everyday life in influencing his or her views about freedom. Even in our anxious age, everyday life for most people is dominated by such mundane concerns as making a living. This turns out to be important in understanding how people experience freedom—not as a political ideal, but as a presence or absence in their daily lives.

Perusing dozens of Internet websites devoted to freedom, I reached the same conclusion as Eric Foner (1998, 330–332) in *The Story of American Freedom*. The vast majority of sites are concerned with what can only be called paranoid freedom: the government is coming to take

away your guns, your rights, your property. We enlightened few must get together to stop them. Some of these sites espoused views I agree with, such as the danger to civil liberties posed by antiterrorist legislation and the like, but that does not make these sites any less paranoid in the casual sense in which I use the term here, the world divided into those who would attack freedom and those proud few who would protect it.

All in all, the paranoid freedom into which the experience of freedom can degenerate, including the freedom to give up one's self to the latest cult, is not something that most Americans need worry about in themselves or their neighbors. About this my research is reassuring. Not a single person I spoke with even hinted at the satisfaction of giving oneself up to the cult, group, or leader. This statement requires qualification. Two anarchists I interviewed found satisfaction in losing themselves in a lawless group for a little while. But, the very nature of anarchism sets limits on that experience, and it was my impression that both informants were relieved that it did.

The freedom to give oneself over to a cult or to a charismatic leader is not something we need to worry about very much these days, at least among the mainstream population. That concern belongs to an earlier era, still horrified by Hitler and Stalin (Bay, 1970; Fromm, 1969). Today (and I am talking here only about the Western democracies), we should be more concerned with the rise of anomie and isolation associated with the belief that only individual mastery, generally equated with money, can protect the self against the intrusions of others. The danger today is that freedom will come to be equated with, or rather reduced to, power. Not even Hobbes held to such a harshly individualistic and competitive view of freedom. Or rather, he held that such a harshly individualistic and competitive view belongs to life in the state of nature. Why young people, especially, see civilized society in the terms, if not the extremes, of Hobbes's state of nature is a puzzle worth solving. Whether young people's vision is itself paranoid is also worth considering.

What Freedom?

> No idea is so generally recognized as indefinite, ambiguous, and open to the greatest misconceptions . . . as the idea of Freedom: none in the common currency with so little appreciation of its meaning.
>
> (Hegel, 1971, 239)

On occasion Hegel is truly wise, and this is one of those occasions. The question is what to do about it. I have chosen to focus on the experiences of freedom and on the constraints faced by the men and women I spoke

with, letting their narrative frame my own, which runs from an analysis of what people said in this first chapter, to a diagnosis of an illness of the culture in the second.

I name this illness after a psychoanalytic category—borderline personality disorder. I do so not in order to diagnose informants, but to characterize the world they live in, much as Christopher Lasch (1979) used a psychoanalytic term, narcissism, to characterize the North American culture of the 1970s. If the 1970s was the culture of narcissism, then the 1980s and beyond might best be characterized as a culture on the borderline.

Chapters 3 through 5 weave together what people say about freedom with the sayings of several famous philosophers of freedom. Overall, this manuscript is a long, surprised reaction to what the people I talked with did and didn't say about freedom.

Jean-Paul Sartre was a French philosopher who said that I am absolutely free. No matter what happens to me, I always have a choice about how to interpret my experience, and so give it the meaning I choose. One man sent to prison will experience himself as having lost his freedom. Another may experience himself as having found his freedom there, perhaps because it is in prison that he first learned to cultivate his mind. This, at least, is what Malcolm X said. For Sartre, the problem is not that people need to be liberated; the problem is that most people fail to recognize the freedom they already have, the freedom to imagine any situation as otherwise. Sartre called this failure "bad faith." Many of the people I talked with seem to suffer from bad faith, though Sartre could learn a thing or two from them as well.

Herbert Marcuse, a philosopher who fled Germany for the United States during the Nazi era, became famous during the 1960s for his radicalism. I bought his most famous book, *One-Dimensional Man* (1964), at an airport bookshop on my way back to college in 1968. Freedom, argues Marcuse, is not about mastering my world. Freedom means abandoning myself to the claims of Orpheus and Narcissus, the charms of silence, sleep, night, and a passivity that comes close to death. One of the most fascinating aspects of listening to young people muse about freedom is the frequency with which Marcuse's themes come up, as though the desires Marcuse writes of live an underground existence in the lives of many young people. Chapter 4 is devoted to the clandestine connection between Marcuse and the younger informants.

If Sartre and Marcuse are well known, Iris Murdoch is not, at least in the United States. Murdoch, British philosopher and novelist, holds that freedom is seeing reality clearly, liberated from the claims of narcissism and convention. Why this is freedom, and not something else, such as