

The dark side of freedom



Freedom is one of those words that are usually perceived as 100% positive. Who does not want to be free? Free from any form of outer coercion or restraint, free to do whatever we want. But is the concept of freedom really so simple? What if we don't use our freedom wisely?

Imagine a fridge full of things you like: you are free to choose to eat whatever you fancy. However, you are actually addicted to unhealthy food and binge eating. Are you therefore really free? Your outer freedom (i.e. lack of coercion) is not matched by inner freedom (i.e. free will). You are not free to choose what and how much you want to eat because inside you are driven by forces stronger than your rational mind. You know that eating too much of this kind of stuff is going to seriously affect your health in the long run, but you are a slave of your desires and no longer able to act in your own best interest.

There is another aspect of freedom: we will never be free from the consequences of our actions. We might have both inner and outer freedom to choose a career, for example. But whatever our choice, it will have consequences. Every action causes a reaction. Innocent ignorance will not protect us from having to reap what we have sown.

The problem with freedom is that, like power, it can be misused. Whether driven by irrational forces or simply because of a lack of wisdom, we can use our freedom in a way that can cause long-term consequences we do not want.

This is the 'dark side' of freedom and one of the biggest problems in modern democratic societies. There are thousands of things that are both legal and socially acceptable and yet in the long-term, they will have negative and destructive consequences and affect the future of humanity. If we only destroyed our own health most people would say 'fair enough, it's your



choice'. But if we seriously harm our planet and all that lives on it, if the exercise of our individual freedom causes collective destruction – do we still have a right to 'do whatever we want'?

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