

Two Ideas of Freedom¹⁰

An American author, George Weigel, popularized the idea of two ideas of freedom, even though the concept of different types of freedom dates back much further in history. The first idea of freedom was championed by William of Ockham in the 13th century, and it is very popular still today. In this understanding, to be free simply means that I should be able to do whatever I want. I am free as long as I have the power to choose. Whether I make a good or a bad choice, it does not really make a difference. According to this view, the choice itself does not matter so much as the fact that I have the ability to make that choice. Freedom is considered to be the mere capacity to choose. Choice can be anything, good or bad, excellent or non-excellent. This idea can be called freedom of indifference.

We know from experience that it is possible to use freedom to make both good and bad choices. It is true that people have the power to choose the good and the bad, but are they truly free if they make bad choices? Weigel, following the tradition of another 13th century thinker, St. Thomas Aquinas, argues that they are not.

“Freedom, for St. Thomas, is a means to human excellence, to human happiness, to the fulfillment of human destiny. Freedom is the capacity to choose wisely and to act well as a matter of habit...”

In other words, true freedom is the means to achieve human excellence. This means that I can only be truly free when I learn to choose what is true and good, and even more, what is excellent. Personal choices matter and each person should develop the habit of considering what is the excellent choice in each situation. Every day is full of opportunities to choose between excellent and non-excellent choices. For example, if someone has the choice to either read a book and go to bed early or to stay up late drinking alcohol, choosing the latter will not make them free in the long-term. In fact, it could end up making that person addicted and miserable. People can achieve true freedom only if they make good choices. Weigel calls this type of freedom “freedom for excellence.”

Freedom of indifference claims that people are free if they have the ability to choose any option they want while freedom for excellence claims that people are truly free if they choose what is excellent.

¹⁰ A Better Concept of Freedom by George Weigel, available at <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2002/03/a-better-concept-of-freedom> (last visited Dec 2, 2022).

Now, it is clear that choosing the good is not always easy. It often requires sacrifice and self-determination. Because of the challenge involved, freedom for excellence can only be achieved if people educate themselves in freedom and develop habits of excellence, or as Weigel calls them, virtues:

“Thus virtue and the virtues are crucial elements of freedom rightly understood... It’s a bit like learning to play a musical instrument. Anyone can bang away on a piano; but that is to make noise, not music, and it’s a barbaric, not humanistic, expression of freedom. At first, learning to play the piano is a matter of some drudgery as we toil over exercises that seem like a constraint, a burden. But as our mastery grows, we discover a new, richer dimension of freedom: we can play the music we like, we can even create music on our own. Freedom, in other words, is a matter of gradually acquiring the capacity to choose the good and to do what we choose with perfection.”

An important aspect of human actions is that they, so to speak, remain in the person who performs them. If people make bad choices, they make themselves worse (remember the example of addiction). On the other hand, if people make good choices, they become better versions of themselves and if they persist in making excellent choices, they can become excellent! Just as the person who practices playing the piano regularly can eventually become a great pianist, the person who makes excellent choices in important situations in life can achieve greatness as a person.

Thus, only the freedom for excellence can satisfy the deepest yearnings of the human heart, can make people truly free, and can help them to become the best version of themselves.

QUESTIONS FOR A DISCUSSION:

What is the difference between freedom for excellence and freedom of indifference? Give an example to illustrate this difference.

How is freedom for excellence connected to developing habits of excellence or virtues? Give an example.