

# The Nature of Freedom

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## A Christian Perspective

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Freedom is the word used everyday in America to describe its culture. America calls itself “land of the free” in its national anthem. Politicians lace their speeches with the word. Young people in search of meaning are told they are free to accomplish anything. It is a word intended to communicate positive affirmation, and American idealism. It literally means to be without restraint . . . to move mentally or physically without restraint. Yet in spite of the idyllic language contradictions abound. Individuals are not free to be economically dependent upon the government. People who are dependent on the government, such as welfare recipients and the homeless, are treated with scorn. To be independent and self-sufficient requires the individual to earn their own living and provide for their own children, and that means participation in the economic subculture which makes no pretense of offering freedom. Successful participation in that economic subculture means acting out the prescriptive behavior established by the employer, the profession, or the customer. The loss of freedom necessitated by the appropriation of the prescriptive behavior required in the economic subculture is masked by constant advertisement of the rewards of competition. Those who act out the requisite competitive behavior most successfully, such as professional athletes, business entrepreneurs, and scientists, are rewarded with prosperity and social significance.

All persons in the American culture must also submit to the rule of the majority. That rule may be sanguine or tyrannical, but it is always absolute. Acting through its handmaiden, the governmental infrastructure, it can take away private property and civil liberties at will, regulate the daily function of the populace, and require the citizen to give his or her life in military action. The true depth and power of that rule can best be illustrated by the infamous research of Stanley Milgram.<sup>1</sup> Milgram set up a laboratory at Yale University for the expressed purpose of testing people’s obedience to authority. The lab consisted of two rooms separated by a wall with a window which the subject of the experiment was told was one-way glass. In the other room was a person strapped into a chair with electrodes attached. The subject of the experiment was told the purpose was

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<sup>1</sup>Milgram, Stanley, Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View, Harper & Row, New York, 1973.

to determine the effect of punishment on learning. The subject would ask the “learner” to remember word pairs, and was instructed to apply an increasingly severe shock with each successive mistake by flipping a switch on the control panel in front of the subject. The switches ranged in voltage from 15 volts to 450 volts, and the corresponding label above the switch ranged from “slight shock” at the low end to “danger - severe shock” at the high end. The subject was further told that the learner had a heart condition, but that the shock would not be dangerous. The purpose of the experiment was to determine how far the subject would go in administering pain to the learner when instructed to do so by an authority figure.

Student subjects were first recruited through the Yale University student newspaper with an invitation to participate in a psychological experiment. All of the first group of subjects applied shocks all the way up to and including 450 volts, “danger - severe shock.” The results were so dramatic and surprising that Milgram modified the experiment by adding tape recorded messages from the learner which were intended to communicate to the subject the degree of pain they were administering to the learner. At 125 volts the learner shouted “I can’t stand it.” At 195 volts the learner complained of heart trouble, and at 270 volts the response was a horrible scream. After 270 volts there was only silence. Sixty-five percent of the subjects in that later study pulled the switches all the way up to 450 volts.

The results of Milgram’s study confirms the existence and power of an authority that is rarely given conscious acknowledgment in the American culture. It also establishes that the culture is not an amalgamation of “free” individuals, but rather people who have a deep inner bond with American values, and therefore accept the institutional manifestation of those values as authoritative for all. The derogatory language many use in describing the role of the majority in the American culture are working from the assumption that individuals want to be free, but are denied that freedom by a sinister majority, or a sinister group of powerful people who control the majority. That assumption is exposed as false by the research of Solomon Asch.<sup>2</sup>

Asch assembled eighteen groups of seven to nine college students each, and told the group the purpose of experiment was to test visual discrimination. Actually all the students except for one in each group were accomplices of Asch. The real purpose of the experiment was to test the degree to which the one test subject would be influenced by the judgement of the others in the group even when that judgement was obviously wrong. Two cards were passed from one to another in the group. One card had one line on it of a specified length, and the second card had three lines, one of the same exact length as the line on the first card, and two lines that were obviously a different length than the line on the first card. When the person received the cards they were asked to state out loud which of the lines on the second card matched the line on the first card. The group was arranged so that most of the accomplices spoke before the test subject. After several rounds in which the accomplices made the correct judgement, and some group bonding had formed, the accomplices would assert that one the lines that was obviously a different length was in fact the correct match. About one third of the test subjects publicly yielded to the position of the majority, even though in a later interview with Asch they said they knew the group choice was wrong but did not want to appear

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<sup>2</sup>Asch, Solomon, “Opinions and social pressure,” Scientific American, Volume 195, 1955, pages 51-55.

to be out of step with the group.

Actually, Asch's study was a formal verification of the obvious. Any socially aware observer knows that people are willing to significantly modify their behavior in order to win peer group acceptance. And it was made clear during the Vietnam War that America demanded obedience to institutional authority. Observations of the culture, and the research of Asch and Milgram's establishes that freedom is not the most basic of human desires. Indeed people will assist in the cruel administration of authority, engage in denial, and significantly modify their behavior in order to retain their membership in a group. The apparent contradiction between documented human behavior and the ideal of freedom derives from a definition of freedom that is impossible. "To move mentally, or physically without restraint," is a condition that can only exist if there is never any consequence to any individual decision or action. A person may be free to marry whomever they please, but once married there are consequences such as debt, and children that restrain future decisions and actions. A person maybe be able to aspire to any occupation, but once a commitment is made, education and experience acquired, future decisions and/or actions are significantly restrained. A flow of consequences are set in motion with the first decision or action made in that life, and the person will never again be free of consequences until death. People do sacrifice their freedom in the hope of future need satisfaction, and are most likely to pine for freedom when they feel trapped by the consequences of previous decisions that proved to be unsatisfactory . . . they long for a more satisfying marriage, or a more rewarding career . . . they nurse the conviction that they could achieve significance if they only had the requisite support.

Jesus addressed this dilemma when he said:

"If you make my word your home  
you will indeed be my disciples,  
you will learn the truth  
and the truth shall make you free."

*(John 8:31-32, Jerusalem Bible)*

A person is free to actualize the deepest potential of their being only after their need for love, significance and belonging are fulfilled. People can only experience freedom when their decisions and actions are derived from vision and inspiration sufficient to avoid becoming trapped by negative consequence.