

How to Be Free in an Unfree World

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by [Academy of Ideas](#)

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The following is a transcript of this video.

“In such epochs where the highest values of life—our peace, our independence, our basic rights, all that makes our existence more pure, more beautiful, all that justifies it—are sacrificed to the demon inhabiting a dozen fanatics and ideologues, all the problems of the man who fears for his humanity come down to the same question: how to remain free?”

[Stefan Zweig, Montaigne](#)

In our era of statism, a crisis is a dangerous time for those who value liberty. For with a society myopically focused on the nominal threat of a crisis, draconian bills that limit freedom are easily passed. What makes matters worse is that a

population consumed by fear will often voluntarily hand over their freedoms for the promise of a bit more safety. We merely need to look back to the crisis of 2001 to see this playbook in action. The falling of the towers marked the symbolic rise of the modern surveillance state and with it a death blow to many of our civil liberties. But the crisis that is playing out today has the potential to be far more damaging to our freedom. For governments across the globe have reacted in a way that has revealed a truth that many have long suspected: we live in turn-key tyrannies. The technical and socio-bureaucratic apparatus of most modern states is totalitarian ready. Restrictions of movement, limitations on social interaction, heavy-handed control of businesses, neighbors encouraged to snitch on each other, incessant paternalistic propaganda and all of this heaped on top of an already intrusive surveillance state and what we have is a form of totalitarianism in action.

Some may say that desperate times call for desperate measures, but all totalitarian regimes use the claim of desperate times to justify their heavy-handed measures. But even if this time is truly different and the fate of mankind somehow rests on the imposition of totalitarian rule, the question then becomes when, and to what degree, will we return to times not deemed desperate by the powers that be? Perhaps this threat will subside but what about the next threat, and what about the potential for crises that are manufactured to instill fear in us for the direct purpose of manipulating us? Are we as a society astute enough to tell the difference? Will the media alert us to this danger? For history is littered with examples of fear being weaponized and used to empower some by manipulating others, or as Joanna Bourke writes in her book *Fear: A Cultural History*:

“ . . . fear is manipulated by numerous organisations with a stake in creating fear while promising to eradicate it. Fear circulates within a wealthy economy of powerful interest

groups dependent upon ensuring that we remain scared. Theologians, politicians, the media, physicians and the psychological services depend on our fright. Despite the proliferation of discourses about fear, its eradication has never been seriously countenanced: substitution of fear-inspiring discourses, rather than obliteration, has been the goal."

[Joanna Bourke, Fear – A Cultural History](#)

But a crisis is both a time of danger and opportunity and while the danger side of this coin should be clear to those of us who cherish liberty, what is its opportunity? This taste of totalitarianism should serve as a much-needed wake up call. If we value freedom then it is at times when our social freedom is dying that it is crucial that we re-affirm the one type of freedom that is always under our control, our psychological freedom. Psychological freedom is a cognitive state that entails the recognition that one's government, or any other form of oppressor, can limit our ability to take certain physical actions, but they cannot rid us of our capacity to think for ourselves, to choose for ourselves what is right and what is wrong, and to whatever degree possible to act in accordance with our self-chosen beliefs.

"Me in chains? You may fetter my leg but my will, not even Zeus himself can overpower"

Epictetus

Or as Rudyard Kipling put it:

"The individual has always had to struggle to keep from being overwhelmed by the tribe. If you try it, you will be lonely often, and sometimes frightened. But no price is too high to pay for the privilege of owning yourself."

Rudyard Kipling, Interview with an Immortal

In a politically unfree world asserting our psychological freedom does not require that we openly flaunt the immoral laws of the state. For while civil disobedience can be an effective tool to counter tyranny, it must be done when the time is ripe. Rather what the assertion of psychological freedom amounts to is a commitment to cultivate what is called our moral autonomy, as a means to better ourselves as individuals and to help return freedom to an unfree world:

“Autonomy is an attribute of a person who engages with the world as an active, reasoning and conscious individual. The etymology of this word: autos (self) and nomos (rule of law) conveys the meaning of self-rule.”

[Frank Furedi, On Tolerance](#)

Or as Furedi further explains:

“. . .autonomy provides the means through which people realize their potential and character as human beings. The opportunity to act and express oneself in accordance with one’s inclination, experience and reasoning allows people to develop their sense of self and to gain understanding of where they stand in relation to their fellow human beings. It is through the ability to pursue autonomous decision making that individuals learn to take responsibility for their actions, and develop the capacity to assume a measure of responsibility for the well-being of their fellow citizens.”

[Frank Furedi, On Tolerance](#)

Moral autonomy is life promoting under any conditions but is especially important at times of social upheaval and rapid change. If this crisis proves significant enough to fundamentally re-order the structure of our society many of us will soon discover that the ways of life that supported us up until now have become obsolete. Change or perish is the motto

of a brave new world and unless we are willing to take responsibility for our own future, to act with autonomy and to cultivate the traits that autonomy necessitates, such as curiosity, self-directed learning, a willingness to take risks, and an openness to new experiences, then the only alternative is to place our life in the hands of another. As state power grows and as governments become increasingly paternalistic many people turn to politicians and bureaucrats to take care of them, but we take this step at our own peril, for as Jung explains:

“The increasing dependence on the State is anything but a healthy symptom, it means that the whole nation is in a fair way to becoming a herd of sheep, constantly relying on a shepherd to drive them into good pastures. The shepherd’s staff soon becomes a rod of iron, and the shepherds turn into wolves. . . Any man who still possesses the instinct of self-preservation knows perfectly well that only a swindler would relieve him of responsibility. . . [those] who promise everything are sure to fulfil nothing, and everyone who promises too much is in danger of using evil means in order to carry out his promises. . .”

[Carl Jung, Civilization in Transition](#)

Strengthening our moral autonomy is not only survival promoting in a rapidly changing world, but is also necessary if we are to take part in the task that many philosophers have deemed our highest end – namely self-creation. Self-creation, or what amounts to the unfolding of inner potentials as we strive to become a more whole version of ourselves, requires the exercise of our moral autonomy, for as Nietzsche wrote:

“Nobody can build the bridge for you to walk across the river of life, no one but you yourself alone. There are, to be sure, countless paths and bridges and demi-gods which would carry you across this river; but only at the cost of

yourself; you would pawn yourself and lose."

[Nietzsche, Untimely Meditations](#)

In a free society the task of self-creation is in many ways forced upon us, but as a society shifts ever closer to total state control, self-creation becomes much more challenging as our opportunities for both cultivating and expressing our potential diminishes. This truism is what led Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn to describe totalitarianism as a "land of smothered opportunities". ([Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, Gulag Archipelago Volume 3](#)) But even though self-creation proves harder in a condition of extensive state control, the size of the task must not be used as an excuse to avoid it, rather we should recognize the truth of Jung's words "that a man grows with the greatness of his task." ([Carl Jung, Collected Works Volume 9](#)) Becoming a man or woman who continues to self-create in the face of an increasingly regimented and conformist world is one of the greatest tasks we can commit to and is a task that can imbue our life with the meaning and purpose we need to flourish, for as Stefan Zweig put it:

"Only he whose soul is in turmoil, forced to live in an epoch where war, violence and ideological tyranny threaten the life of every individual, and the most precious substance in that life, the freedom of the soul, can know how much courage, sincerity and resolve are required to remain faithful to his inner self in these times of the herd's rampancy. Only he knows that no task on earth is more burdensome and difficult than to maintain one's intellectual and moral independence and preserve it unsullied through a mass cataclysm. Only once he has endured the necessary doubt and despair within himself can the individual play an exemplary role in standing firm amidst the world's pandemonium."

[Stefan Zweig, Montaigne](#)

Asserting our moral autonomy and doubling down on our psychological freedom has benefits that extend beyond the merely personal. For in choosing to retain our status as a free man or woman, and in striving to behave in ways that reflect this, we become a force that pushes the world back in the direction of freedom. For contrary to what statist propaganda teaches, freedom cannot be imposed on us from above, nor is it created or destroyed at the ballot box. Freedom emerges at a societal level when enough of us recognize its value and structure our lives accordingly, or as Butler Shaffer explains:

“You and I can bring civilization back into order neither by seizing political power, nor by attacking it, but by moving away from it, by diverting our focus from marbled temples and legislative halls to the conduct of our daily lives. The “order” of a creative civilization will emerge in much the same way that order manifests itself through the rest of nature: not from those who fashion themselves leaders of others, but from the inter-connectedness of individuals pursuing their respective self-interests.”

[Butler Shaffer, The Wizards of Ozymandias](#)

Fortunately, a shift in a society towards more freedom does not require that we wait around for a majority to recognize the value of liberty. As the study of spontaneous order and chaotic systems teaches, the emergence of a new form of order only requires a tipping point to be reached and this can be effectuated by a minority of the agents acting in any given system. In societal terms it can be thought of as follows: in the middle you have the great mass of men and women, such individuals do not cultivate their own worldview or critically evaluate their value systems, they merely adopt what they see as most expedient. On one side of this human herd you have those who wish to control them – the power hungry who thrive off the existence of the state and who are motivated to keep

people believing that state power is social progress and that state solutions are the only solutions. On the other side of the herd you have those who value freedom and who understand that human flourishing is intimately tied to freedom's presence. Currently the scale is heavily tipped toward the ideas of statism as most people have forgotten, or perhaps never been taught, the great value of freedom. But as history shows the tide can turn back toward freedom, but this will only occur if enough of us keep the flame of liberty burning at its darkest hours:

“The great events of world history are, at bottom, profoundly unimportant,” writes Jung. “In the last analysis the essential thing is the life of the individual. This alone makes history, here alone do the great transformations first take place, and the whole future, the whole history of the world, ultimately spring as a gigantic summation from these hidden sources in individuals. In our most private and most subjective lives we are not only the passive witnesses of our age, and its sufferers, but also its makers. We make our own epoch.”

[Carl Jung, The Meaning of Psychology for Modern Man](#)